

# The WØRD: Fearless Speech and the Politics of Language

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Does *The Colbert Report* promote democratic values in American political dialogue? If so, does it encourage substantive criticism of political orthodoxy? Or does it just encourage the politics of cynicism, like so many other cable news shows?

We're going to show you that Stephen Colbert's style of political satire actually *promotes* democratic values of free, open, and critical speech. Colbert's satire reflects an ethical commitment that evokes the earlier spirit of criticism embodied by the ancient Greek philosophical tradition of *parrhesia*, or "speaking the truth" fearlessly in public.

## "The WØRD": *Parrhesia*

The ancient Greek ideal of free speech, "*parrhesia*," focused on promoting criticism of political orthodoxy. We think this notion promotes values important to contemporary democracy. We also think that Stephen Colbert's style of satire promotes these values in something like the *parrhesiastic* tradition. So what is *parrhesia*?

*Parrhesia* is not just saying what is true; it is saying it *because it is true*. This notion of free speech promotes democratic values, in part, by defining the proper means of critiquing political orthodoxy. There are three conditions of *parrhesia* to consider independently when reconstructing its traditional relationship to the practice of democracy: (1) *speaking* the truth freely, (2) *criticism*, and (3) the *duty* to speak the truth.<sup>1</sup> These three aspects capture

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<sup>1</sup> This division of ideas is based on Foucault's lectures on *parrhesia*. Michel

the external, interpersonal, and internal conditions of free speech that give content to the idea that *parrhesia* is the purview of responsible democratic citizenship. Thought of this way, *parrhesia* is a central ideal of freedom that democratic institutions intend to support, but might rarely achieve.

### **Free Speech Means Never Having to Say You're Sorry**

*Speaking* the truth freely refers to the external conditions in which individuals engage in political dialogue with one another. Freedom to speak is obviously threatened by direct prohibitions like state censorship, suppression of free press, and threats of violence against those speaking out. Such restrictions may be explicitly articulated by the state, but they may also be implicit to an ethical way of life in which social norms encourage complicity and acquiescence. An example of this would be a deeply entrenched caste system that denies some people access to political dialogue, thereby restricting their ability to speak freely about conditions within the caste system. This doesn't mean *parrhesia* can't be practiced at all in such a society, because privileged classes might not face such restrictions on their ability to speak. So while *parrhesia* is contextual with respect to the conditions under which individuals may speak freely, it makes no claims about who has this power or why. The concept itself is not committed to any particular viewpoint or political interest.<sup>2</sup>

The relationship of the speaker to the truth is another external condition of *parrhesia*. Individuals fail to be *parrhesiastes*, truth-speakers, when they lack sufficient access to the truth, or are otherwise provided with false information. The fact that this external condition is an obstacle to free speech suggests that *parrhesia* might be thought of as positive freedom, requiring more than negative liberty.<sup>3</sup> Rather than protecting individuals from obstacles to

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Foucault, *Fearless Speech* (Semiotext(e), 2001).

<sup>2</sup> Even though the notion is not committed to any particular political order, the centrality of *parrhesia* in democracy is more pronounced than in other forms of political organization. To borrow a term from John Rawls, *parrhesia* is the "first virtue" of democratic institutions. It is not so for other types of political organization.

<sup>3</sup> See Isaiah Berlin, "Two Concepts of Liberty," in *Four Essays on Liberty* (Oxford University Press, 1969). Negative liberty is basically the absence of

speak freely, *parrhesia* implies that they actually have something to speak about.

The ancient Greeks believe that proof of access to the truth is provided, in part, by possession of a good moral character. This presupposes a relationship between knowledge and virtue that is not widely accepted in the modern scientific worldview, where facts and values are distinct. Like the Greeks, we believe that free speech requires more than just being allowed to speak. But modern speakers see access to information, from multiple reliable sources, as a credential for truth speaking. How much access to good information one requires (and what counts as good information) is not always clear. But individuals who “speak freely” might be doing so without certainty, or they might be offering an opinion freely without being properly informed of the subject matter. Thus, *parrhesia* requires that some external conditions obtain, such as individuals not being physically prevented from speaking or otherwise denied reasonable access to facts. However, as the next few conditions of *parrhesia* make clear, access to “the Truth” is not always necessary to fulfill the obligation to engage in substantive criticism of political orthodoxy.

### Talking Is a Gateway to Thinking

The second condition of *parrhesiastic* speech is its function as a form of criticism aimed at political authority or majority sentiment. French philosopher, sociologist, and social critic Michel Foucault (1926–1984) claims that

The function of *parrhesia* is not to demonstrate the truth to someone else, but has the function of *criticism*: criticism of the interlocutor or the speaker himself. ‘This is what you do and this is what you think; but this is what you should not do or should not think’. (*Fearless Speech*, p. 17)

Such criticism is frequently associated with democracy and challenge to political authority. However, there’s more to *parrhesia*

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constraint (“freedom from”), while positive liberty includes the freedom to achieve relevant goals and purposes (“freedom to”). Positive freedom may require substantial material support in order to provide people with the power or ability to speak freely.

than simply pointing out deficiencies of the status quo. *Parrhesiastic* criticism challenges majority opinion, but is also *dialogical* and *risky*. It requires dialogue with or about political authority. In particular, the social role of a *parrhesiastes* requires engaging in a “game” where one positions oneself with respect to others in an argumentative space. While this space is primarily conceived as oppositional, not all critiques of authority are instances of “fearless speech.”

Bumper stickers that criticize the president may be a kind of critique, but they are not necessarily *parrhesiastic*. This is because the function of a bumper sticker is to state one’s position *without* entering into dialogue with others. Our modern concept of “free speech” is thus wider than that of *parrhesia*, but the latter, contextual, kind of dialogic speech is more suited to promote democratic values. Anyone can slap bumper stickers on their car affirming their own beliefs, but *parrhesia* requires individuals to engage in a certain kind of relationship between themselves and the objects of their critique.

In addition to this dialogical engagement with authority, *parrhesia* emphasizes the risks involved in speaking freely. In his discussion of the “riskiness” of this kind of speaking, Foucault focuses on how such criticism of authority can lead to marginalization and even execution. In modern democracies this risk in speaking freely is rarely as explicit as the threat against Socrates during his trial and execution in ancient Athens. However, it’s simply wrong to say that it’s never risky to speak freely in modern democracies. Obvious and recent examples from America’s political history include controversial figures like Martin Luther King, Robert Kennedy, and former U.S. Surgeon General Joycelyn Elders.

*Parrhesiastic* speech is risky by its very nature, not simply because of the historical circumstances surrounding the speaker. These risks may come in a variety of forms. In the context of American political dialogue, for instance, individuals take a special kind of risk when criticizing political orthodoxy publicly. They take the risk of having their fundamental views challenged, and perhaps openly defeated, by others. Genuine dialogue thus requires being open to challenge and possibly to being convinced that one is wrong. This arises naturally out of the *parrhesiastic* idea that people engaging in discussion are *talking to* one another rather than *at* one another. In doing so, there’s always the risk of discovering that the opposing view is more convincing. It’s the fact that one takes this risk that makes democratic dialogue valuable, for without it

even individuals who are speaking the truth are either shouting into the void or being shouted down.

### Speaking from the Gut

The final aspect of “fearless speech” concerns the relationship of the truth-speaker to moral *duty*. Foucault uses the example of a criminal forced to confess as an example of someone who does not speak *parrhesiastically*, even though he is speaking the truth in admitting his crime. By contrast, *parrhesiastic* speech arises from the obligations of moral conscience. The conception of freedom embodied by practices of *parrhesia* is more than the freedom to do what one wants. Instead, it is the power to act for reasons that one knows are right. For some, the concept of “duty” calls up images of authoritarian obligation, not images of freedom. However, the possibility of democratic discussion depends on individuals viewing themselves as duty-bound to act from their well-considered values as best they can. This ethical commitment to the *truth* as well as the *duty* of truth-telling constitutes part of what it means to speak *parrhesiastically*. The duty to speak freely defines the relationship the speaker must have to herself: she must speak from well-considered values for the purpose of speaking the truth as well as discharging her civic duty.

### American Democracy, Mass Media, and the Politics of Language

Does contemporary media exclude “speaking truthfully,” *parrhesiastically*, in American politics?

The manipulation of language in political dialogue is an obvious obstacle to substantive criticism of political orthodoxy. Part of the power of Colbert’s style of political satire is contextual; it relies on the general dissatisfaction of voters with contemporary media and politics. *The Colbert Report* is modeled on the cable news show with disaffected “talking heads” slanting the news in a partisan direction. This kind of cynical dissatisfaction is expressed on cable news programs that engage their viewers with news “analysis” already constructed for partisan audiences. These pundits represent the worst excesses of partisanship, “framing” information in ways that reinforce such dissatisfaction and detract from informed political dialogue.

In journalism, this practice is called “slanting,” while in politics it’s called “spinning.” Framing, via slanting and spinning, is standard operating procedure in media presentations of information. And it severely inhibits critical and substantive analysis of the status quo. Since both media practitioners and politicians frame political issues in language that promotes affective, emotional, or otherwise irrational analysis for its audience, this tends to promote dissatisfaction with both media and American politics. The excessive reliance on framing, spinning, and slanting information on cable news networks and by politicians is the primary target of Colbert’s political satire.

This “politics of language” controls the outcome of communication between media, politicians, viewers, and voters. For example, media practitioners and politicians rely extensively on sound bites developed for popular consumption by political marketers using focus groups. Individuals participate in such focus groups with the good intentions of civic-minded voters, but the outcome of this market-driven political medium is the self-fulfilling prophecy of an impoverished political dialogue.

Both media practitioners and politicians engage in the manipulation of language in order to emphasize particular controversies that highlight strengths, downplay weaknesses, and castigate the opposition. Media-driven politics elicits information from viewers and voters alike, but closer analysis reveals that manipulation, distortion, and outright falsification actually describes the relationship between media and its representation of public sentiment. Voters often provide feedback to both media and politicians through focus groups that allow political marketers to develop a “language” that connects politicians with the interests and attitudes expressed by their constituents.

Political marketers create the language of politicians from the very words used by voters in these focus groups.<sup>4</sup> Yet voters consistently complain that politicians cannot be trusted because they say only what they think will be popular with voters. They call politicians “flip-floppers” but themselves rely on the very same sound bites and slogans given to them by media practitioners and politicians. Either voters are “flip-floppers” and politicians merely

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<sup>4</sup> Frank Luntz, *Words that Work: It's Not What You Say, It's What People Hear* (Hyperion, 2006).

reflect their inconsistencies, or politicians “flip-flop” because they want to engage different voters who want different things at different times, or even incompatible things at the same time! Either way, the relationship between media practices and American democracy suffers from inconsistency, incoherence, and intellectual schizophrenia.

### **Media Culpa**

Substantive criticism of political orthodoxy is increasingly frustrated by the material conditions of late capitalism, which create a monopoly of information providers. The more media is concentrated in the hands of fewer and fewer owners, the easier it is to control and manipulate the language that is used to describe and evaluate political reality. Since there are fewer owners of media outlets, pundits and politicians are more easily able to frame political reality in ways that favor their view, while excluding real criticism. By extension, mainstream viewers and voters are less able to think critically about the status quo and, more importantly, to think beyond it. In the last twenty years, globalization has strengthened this monopoly on information and, by extension, on American political dialogue.

The majority of media sources are currently corporate-owned. The concentration and accumulation of capital in larger firms has been deleterious to competition among different media sources.<sup>5</sup> The more corporations have consolidated, the more formerly competing media outlets have become owned by the same parent corporations. Although the exact ratio of media outlets to corporate ownership is disputed, it is clear that several corporations, including General Electric, Viacom, News Corporation, and Time-Warner, own the majority of cable news networks and newspaper syndicates.

One consequence of this consolidation is that the monopoly of the market correlates with the “monopoly of meaning” so to speak. The less diversified the sources of news are, the less diversified the language for describing and evaluating news events and politics becomes. Media practitioners, especially “talking heads” and partisan pundits, frame information in almost identical ways

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<sup>5</sup> C. Edwin Baker, *Media Concentration and Democracy: Why Ownership Matters* (Cambridge University Press, 2007).

as fewer news wire services limit the terminology reproduced by subscribers. News agencies and reporters then repeat this language over and over, and thus fewer and fewer critical alternatives exist for describing and evaluating these events. The result is that you can hear the same discussion in nearly the same words wherever you look. This encourages the belief that what you're hearing is the *authoritative* view, even if it's just the most repeated one.

Another consequence of corporate consolidation of media is the intensification of the news cycle, so that all media outlets simultaneously and continuously report on events. This inevitably frames events in ways that restrict alternative perspectives from being introduced to viewers. A widely discussed example in studies of media and cognition is the so-called "crack" crisis of the 1980s, which was perpetuated by media relying on false and falsified information.

Where was the press's information coming from? Surveys of media's report on crack reveal that the vast majority of experts cited in news reports of the drug were taken from law-enforcement communities and politicians, followed by interviews from punters on the street. The single *least*-cited sources were academics—the people who had actually studied the drug. The reason? Academics tend to be less sensational and more circumspect. They don't launch into vitriolic condemnations of crack the way police and politicians do. In short, their sound bites aren't as good.<sup>6</sup>

More recently, the ubiquitous phrase "weapons of mass destruction," which was used by the Bush Administration in the build up to the invasion of Iraq in 2002, led the American Dialect Society to vote "WMD" as "Word of the Year." Such examples demonstrate that the "bottleneck" of corporate ownership over media outlets has immense influence over the meaning of news events, in effect controlling the political impact of these events through sensational language, repetition, and selective use of sources. Furthermore, there is increasing evidence that information also has to be approved for audiences in advance, further restricting the diverse dissemination of transparent information. Whistle-blowers point out instances of

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<sup>6</sup> Dominic Streatfield, *Cocaine: An Unauthorized Biography* (Macmillan, 2003), p. 309.



ensorship inside newspapers and cable news programs in an effort to expose the fact that partisan politics increasingly influences the dissemination of information.<sup>7</sup>

Finally, the “loyal opposition” has largely failed to appreciate that the battle of ideas is covertly influenced by the politics of language, and therefore have come late on the scene to counter the language of political orthodoxy with alternative formulations. They have relied on the naive view that “good” ideas eventually replace “bad” ideas in the free marketplace of ideas. Not true. Herbert Marcuse (1898–1979) used the phrase “one-dimensional” thought to describe the assimilation of organized opposition, even formerly “critical” ideas, in ways that support the reproduction of status quo politics.

The result is the familiar Orwellian language (“peace is war” and “war is peace,” etc.), which is by no means that of terroristic totalitarianism only . . . Relatively new is the general acceptance of these lies by private and public opinion, the suppression of their monstrous content. The spread and effectiveness of this language testify to the triumph of society over the contradictions which it contains; they are reproduced without exploding the social system. And it is the outspoken, blatant, contradiction which is made into a device of speech and publicity. The syntax of abridgement proclaims the reconciliation of opposites by welding them together in a firm and familiar structure. . . . the “clean bomb” and the “harmless fall-out” are only the extreme creations of a normal style.<sup>8</sup>

Even as early as the 1950s, it was apparent to Marcuse that the rise of mass media in the context of the growing collusion between politics and corporate ownership would lead to decreasing substantive criticism of political orthodoxy. The very idea of “one dimensional thought” for Marcuse is that political dialogue lacks the “fearless speech” characteristic of *parrhesia*. Between the material conditions of late capitalism—media consolidation and expansion—substantive criticism and opposition to political orthodoxy have been made largely ineffective.

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<sup>7</sup> See the recent documentary *Outfoxed: Rupert Murdoch's War on Journalism*, which exposes the politics of language inevitably involved in corporate-owned media outlets like that of the Fox News Network.

<sup>8</sup> Herbert Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man* (Beacon Press, 1964/1991), p. 89. Contemporary examples are abundant: “clean coal,” “energy independence,” “market correction,” and “war on terror.”

Given that particular words like “flip-flopper” and “evil-doer,” as well even such seemingly innocuous words like “freedom” and “marriage,” increasingly influence the interpretation of political events and figures, linguist George Lakoff recommends a principled approach when engaging in political debate with the opposition: “Do not use their language.”<sup>9</sup> However, it’s precisely Colbert’s capacity for appropriating the dominant rhetoric of political orthodoxy that makes his style of political satire a contribution to democratic political dialogue. Colbert uses the language of media practitioners and politicians to subvert many of their core beliefs. He engages in framing, spinning, and slanting all the time. But viewers are in on the joke, which exposes such practices for what they are, and brings to light the ways that they undermine democratic values of free, open, and critical speech.

Much of the power of Colbert’s humor lies in the fact that contemporary media and politics, especially on the cable news networks, are failing to address substantive issues in favor of preserving preposterous language-games. These language-games of weak and duplicitous reasoning provide a target-rich environment for Colbert’s political satire.

### **“The WØRD”: Reading Between the Lines**

In the recurring segment “The WØRD,” Colbert satirizes contemporary news analysis through a familiar visual presentation employed by cable news shows. These shows place the face of the “talking head” next to a panel of text, which outlines, emphasizes, and even highlights the content of the analysis being presented. Mimicking not only the visual style of this cable news staple, Colbert takes up their way of talking as well. He speaks in the language of political orthodoxy, and repeats its main points in the terms that they have chosen to frame them. Colbert happily throws around terms like “flip-flopper” and never misses an opportunity to discuss the most recent “number one threat facing America.” Meanwhile, the bullet points beside him visually lay out the critical viewpoint, which is aimed squarely at viewers and voters.

Beyond its comedic value, the segment is also quite effective as *parrhesiastic* speech, and not just to the extent that it works as a

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<sup>9</sup> George Lakoff, *Don’t Think of an Elephant: Know Your Values and Frame the Debate—The Essential Guide for Progressives* (Chelsea Green, 2004).

critique of conservative “talking heads.” The WØRD segment is just as much a critique of the current role of TV in political dialogue. To see what we mean, consider that, for better or for worse, TV is where most of the public dialogue about American politics takes place. The news media’s presentation of political arguments is meant to supplant our own participation in such discussions. They carry on these discussions for our sake, and with the help of expert guests, data, polls, and staged arguments between representatives of different viewpoints. The result is a kind of play-argument where the critical political speech is acted out for us, leaving us the passive role of viewing the discussion.

Contrary to this kind of presentation, Colbert enters a critical dialogue with the news media itself by explicitly mimicking, and implicitly mocking, this form of presentation. Colbert tells us “this is what they say and think,” while the bullet points tell us “this is what they should not say or should not think.” To this extent, the segment models a critical form of dialogue by individuals who present different viewpoints to us, but the point is to call into question the language that is used to articulate and defend these viewpoints. The bullet points provide viewers with a critical subtext that challenges what is being spoken. Thus, the satirical presentation of political dialogue in “The WØRD” segment in fact suggests the form of political speech we should strive for: *active* criticism of political viewpoints and the language used to articulate and defend them.

### **An Out of Control “Fact Insurgency”**

The idea of truthiness is particularly relevant here since, all too often it seems, the goal of speakers in media and politics is to *appear parrhesiastic*, rather than actually to be so. As Colbert demonstrates time and again, truthiness often comes in the form of language designed to avoid critique by making it hard to deny, or even understand, the claims made by the speaker. Colbert recently exposed such a strategy in Republican presidential candidate John McCain’s attempts to separate himself from President Bush’s war doctrine, in spite of McCain’s ongoing public support for both Bush and the War in Iraq. Where President Bush has previously used words like “existential threat” to talk about international terrorism, McCain chooses the word “transcendental” to emphasize the importance of the conflict. Colbert analyzes this contrast of termi-

nology in “The WØRD” segment (the bullet-point critique is emphasized in brackets).

Folks, language is very important in politics, particularly when it comes to war. [Weapons of mass description.] For years the Bush Administration used the phrase “war on terror” which was replaced with the phrase “the global war on terror.” [Bush loves nicknames.] Then it was “the global struggle against extremism,” then briefly it was “the long war” before they settled on the new name, “hey, maybe we should bomb Iraq.” [The “Maybe” proves they’re diplomats.]<sup>10</sup>

On McCain’s new word for describing the conflict, Colbert has this to say:

That’s right. The war is now ‘transcendental.’ [Transcends voter approval]. No surprise. After all, Toby Keith’s anti-terrorist lyric ‘We’ll put a boot up your ass. It’s the American Way’ originally appeared in Henry David Thoreau’s *Walden*. (Episode 4081)

He goes on to show that this word makes little sense in the context, which suggests that it may have been chosen merely to sound impressive, or perhaps to make it impossible to pin down McCain’s actual view.

Does he mean “transcendent,” which according to *Webster’s* means “exceeding usual limits”? Because the war has certainly exceeded the time limit. [And the constitution] Or, is he intentionally using the word “transcendental,” which is defined by *Webster’s* as “of or relating to experience as determined by the mind’s makeup,” in which case he’s saying the war on terror is all in our heads? [Along with Cheney’s buckshot.] (Episode 4081)

Colbert makes the criticism explicit by changing other ways President Bush has described his policies into other religious-sounding plays on words. This rephrasing tactic doesn’t just color the arguments of politicians. It’s done to disengage them altogether from responding to and accepting criticism. Rather than engage in real dialogue about their (lack of) substantive disagreement, McCain’s strategy is to linguistically reframe his views so that they

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<sup>10</sup> Episode 4081, originally aired June 18th, 2008. The WØRD was “Lexicon Artist.”

no longer look similar to Bush's. Of course, this is not real democratic speech, as Colbert points out, in what he presents as a winking *endorsement* of McCain's tactics: "Using language to turn failed policies into ideals that transcend debate is the best way to get people to think of you as 'transcen-presidential'."

Sometimes the suppression of criticism is not done by using opaque language, but by distorting the relative importance of the claims being made. As Colbert so often shows, media cover non-stories with the same kind of seriousness that they cover important news topics. When these less serious issues get serious attention, they appear to be more significant than they are. Thus, they take on an air of "factiness" as Colbert says.

In a recent episode, Colbert discussed a CNN story about Democratic presidential candidate Barack Obama, which compared Obama's style of dress (collared shirt, no tie, dark blazer) with that of Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. He criticizes both the reasoning of the story and its representation as information that is *factual* and therefore news worthy.

It is a *fact* that Barack Obama dresses like Mahmoud "Ahmedinefrere-jacqueijad." It is also a *fact* that Mr. Obama is a carbon-based life form. Just like Osama bin Laden. If Obama *really* wanted to separate himself from our enemies, wouldn't he try to be one of those sulfur-based tubeworms that live in the volcanic vents off the coast of Chile?<sup>11</sup>

These things are true statements or "facts," but the implied conclusion is absurd nonetheless. The very presentation of such "facts" by a credible news source misrepresents the relative significance of *all* the claims being made. Is Barack Obama intellectually, politically, or religiously like President Ahmadinejad simply because they both eschew ties? Distorting the relative importance of a claim is often as effective as obscuring access to the truth itself, because the former blocks one's access to dialogue about substantive political issues that matter to democracy. Colbert calls this common strategy of treating all "facts" as equally important "fighting facts with 'facts.'":

Until now, folks, my job has been to protect you from the facts. Now my job is to bring you the *selected* facts that will protect you. These

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<sup>11</sup> Episode 3001, originally aired January 8th, 2007. The WØRD WAS "FACTS".

will be real facts that I can prove, or you can't disprove. To give you the real sense, the "factiness" if you will, of what's going on in Washington. (Episode 3001)

Framing, slanting, and spinning further predispose viewers to respond favorably to the claims of purported truth-speakers. Use of affective language in particular reduces complex arguments to simplistic and emotionally-charged caricatures. If all terms of debate are reduced to emotional reactions rather than judgments informed by critical reasoning, then real debate cannot exist. These emotions may be powerful, filling viewers with fear or nationalistic pride. But under these conditions, the best we can do when confronted with others who disagree is assert opposed emotions, shame them, or otherwise terrorize them into agreement. To the extent that the news media adopts these argumentative tactics they stifle free debate.

If real, *parrhesiastic* criticism of political orthodoxy requires reliable access to good information and open discussion, then it is clear that media and political control over language frustrate this access. Either this control obscures the meaning of terms, misrepresents their relative importance, or cloaks them in affective language. This encourages the presentation of claims as "facts" when they are merely "factly." Colbert's critique in "The WØRD" amounts to pointing out that media and politicians alike undermine reasonable access to the truth and diminish the democratic values of free, open, and critical speech through the manipulation of language.

Finally, Colbert uses "The WØRD" segment to critique the media's self-perception that they are dutiful speakers of the truth for their viewers. Media sources work very hard to suggest that they can be trusted to present accurate information and representative, balanced debates about issues. Such claims depend on the authority of the news reporter or visual graphics suggesting both authority and truthfulness. The intense graphics and music which open news programs, and often punctuate segments within them, are meant to reinforce the authority of the news source while invoking a particular emotional reaction in the viewer. Colbert mocks this strategy directly by pushing it to absurdity in the beginning of his show. Both the opening credits and the set are saturated with stars, flags, bald eagles, and other totems of American patriotism.

Media practitioners do more than just suggest their truthfulness through their visual graphics, however. They must show that they

have special access to the truth which, as we suggested above, means presenting themselves as authoritative and unbiased, with a kind of “duty” to bring out the truth. But for all the reasons we have discussed so far, this can only rise to the level of appearances, a kind of fake-dutifulness. Colbert points this out by frequently mentioning his “duty” to “protect” his viewers from information that challenges beliefs they already have. He is simultaneously and ironically claiming to be impartial and biased. This is, of course, the position of all news analysts, and Colbert’s critique lies in making this conflict conspicuous.

### **But Does Political Satire Promote Democratic Values?**

There’s no more clear evidence that Colbert’s style of political satire promotes democratic values, including criticism of status quo politics, than “The WØRD” segment. It attacks both the content and the visual format of American political discourse, and it raises substantial challenges to media, politics, and the claim that any one of its defenders speaks truthfully in support of free, open, and critical political dialogue.

Colbert’s satire succeeds because it models substantive critique in the media’s own language. He exposes the failure of the media to support democratic values allowing criticism of political orthodoxy by identifying the ways framing obstructs or altogether evades critique and debate, and he derides the efforts of both media and politicians to appear engaged in real debate. In this respect, by speaking in the very words of political orthodoxy, then ridiculing them with bullet points and ironic commentary, Colbert shows how political satire can act in the service of promoting democratic values in political dialogue.

But is Colbert’s style of political satire sufficiently similar to the practice of *parrhesia* to justify our claim that it promotes substantive criticism of political orthodoxy? Or is it just the politics of cynicism played out as satire? One objection to the point we have been making is that Colbert’s political satire is ill-suited to promote informed political dialogue. Even though he criticizes media and politicians, it can be objected that this doesn’t mean that Colbert himself promotes either democratic values or *substantive* kinds of criticism. After all, a major goal of the show is poking fun at the status quo and making his audience laugh, not improving political

dialogue. While we acknowledge the limitations of both television and satire for improving the impoverished dialogue of American politics, there are still features of Colbert's style that are uniquely *parrhesiastic* in their criticism of political orthodoxy.

Colbert's focus on the dominant rhetoric of media practitioners and politicians, the demands he makes on his audience, as well as the risks he takes as a commentator all work to qualify his speech as "fearless." His satire is aimed at media as well as viewers, who are complicit in the poor quality of political dialogue in America. This is the kind of critique that makes it nearly impossible to view "actual" news media in the same way ever again. In this respect Colbert's style of political satire has the *function* of critique. "The WØRD" segment makes this clear: Colbert exposes the collusion between media practitioners and politicians who frame news and information in ways that subverts access to truth in politics. Colbert forcefully exposes viewers' and voters' responsibility to critically assess the quality, sources, and motivations of media practitioners and politicians.

And that's "The WØRD."