

Stephen Colbert's Press Corps Video and the Continued Implosion of Meaning in the Media
Joseph Faina
Arizona State University

In April of 2006, comedian Stephen Colbert, host of Comedy Central's *The Colbert Report*, appeared at the White House Press Correspondent's Dinner. Though not widely watched during its original broadcast on C-SPAN, Colbert's performance was rebroadcast on YouTube and Google Video, becoming one of the most popular videos on both sites within a week. With this newfound visibility Colbert's performance highlighted the lack of accountability by the fourth estate in their specious relationship with the Bush Administration. However, since corporate interests control media outlets, Colbert's viral video may be less about lambasting the media, instead functioning as a strategy to provide the illusion of media criticism. This dialectical relationship provides a unique opportunity to discuss the implications of relying on viral videos to provide new outlets for resisting faulty media practices in the hopes of fostering political participation in the wider public.

Specifically, I argue that the impacts Colbert's performance have on the mass mediated public sphere are twofold and dialectical in nature. First, the video of Colbert's performance retained a remarkable resilience to attempts by the mainstream media to criticize his performance as "inappropriate" and "not funny." This is due primarily to the speed at which the video disseminated throughout the Internet via YouTube and Google. This dissemination indicates what Baudrillard would term a simulation, creating an implosion of meaning. In other words, any attempts to make sense and interpret the video by the press were dismantled by the constant reproduction of video clips that were similar but not the same as the original C-SPAN broadcast. The media were attempting to control the damage wrought by the Colbert situation by immediately dismissing or chastising Colbert. However, the number of online views of video *clips* of Colbert's performance indicated that this interpretation ultimately had no teeth, as viewers obviously did not agree with the press reaction that Colbert was out of line. Apparently neither did the audience in attendance, who can be seen laughing, albeit uncomfortably, during Colbert's performance. With regards to the effects of online circulation practices, a consideration of the effects of speed on interpretation is crucial. Gane, expanding upon Baudrillard's notion of the simulacra, asserts that the information age has rendered traditional sense making nearly impossible. With so much information spread so quickly through cyberspace making sense is a particularly daunting task. The ultimate goal for effective sense making is to slow down thought to correspond with the speed up of information. Thus the difficulties faced by the media in their attempts to control the story are due to their need to provide an immediate response to Colbert's performance, rather than waiting for the interpretation to emerge from the dissemination. Therefore on some level Colbert's video indicates the possibility of viral videos to resist a major tenet of mass mediated control: the ability to control the story and hence public discourse.

However, this potential for effective political resistance through viral videos is tempered by the increasing complexities of corporate control of new media outlets. YouTube and Google are controlled by many of the same media conglomerates as control more traditional outlets. Therefore, the increased popularity of Colbert's video may ultimately serve to further strengthen their control over public discourse. Colbert's performance blatantly critiques the media and their lack of accountability in questioning the Bush Administration. That much is crystal clear. However, it is worth noting that not all of the reports of Colbert's performance were negative.

Some members of the press, *The New York Times* in particular, supported Colbert's performance. However, what would seem like a healthy dose of genuine media self-criticism, a call so desperately called for by many who study media practices (Robinson, 2005; Haas, 2005) may in fact only be an illusion. At the 2007 White House Press Correspondent's Dinner, many media outlets, *The New York Times* in particular...again, opted not to attend as a direct consequence of Colbert's performance. But as long as there are articles "Critiquing Stephen Colbert and the Press" (Lawson, 2006) the press can appear as though they engage in self-criticism without the troublesome notion of actually practicing it.

So where does that leave us? The dialectical nature of the impact of Colbert's viral video would indicate a both/and situation. As this instance highlights viral videos have the ability to simultaneously enable political resistance to dominant mainstream media practices while at the same time allowing the mainstream media to have the last laugh. It is worth noting a previous panel discussion regarding a similar question concluded that the reaction to Colbert's performance was a predominately progressive one. In light of this, the purpose of this response was not to necessarily disagree or paint a harrowing picture of our current media environment. Rather, my goal has been to remain weary of a wholehearted embrace of the democratization potential of new media, one in which many, including past FLOW participants, may have been too quick to embrace.

References

- Gane, N. (2006). Speed up or slow down? social theory in the information age. *Information Communication and Society*, 9(1), 20-38.
- Haas, T. (2005). Mainstream news media self-criticism: A proposal for future research. *Critical Studies in Media Communication*, 23(4), 350-355.
- Lawson, M. (2006, May 9). Critiquing Stephen Colbert and the press [editorial]. *Washington Post*, pp. A 22.
- Robinson, P. (2005). The CNN effect revisited. *Critical Studies in Media Communication*, 22(4), 344-349.