Humor, Controversy, and Power in *South Park*

Using Theory To Understand Animated Television Shows And Their Role Today

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Introduction

This study takes an extensive look at today's animated television shows and the power they possess over their audience. There is limited research that explores the role modern cartoons play in creating social norms, swaying political campaigns and the limitations of content. In order to break down the content animation creators put out, I choose to apply existing communication theories to the television series *South Park* with references to — and discussion with — *Family Guy*. These three animated cartoons have dominated its market in television with crude, line-crossing comedy and generating weekly relevant content. In an industry that feeds on creating controversy, they are susceptible to critics and regulation backlash. In this article, existing literature of multiple communications theories are analyzed and applied to television's top influencers in the media and society: cartoons. American network television is one of the most far-reaching communications apparatuses and information entertainment transmitters that has ever existed. However, little to no theoretical analysis of the American broadcasting system is present. Of all major contemporary institutions — such as education, family, and state — network television is the most neglected.

Literature Review
Careful Creation

Animated shows have an uncanny ability to get away with inappropriate content. Whether it is showing nudity, explicit violence, or altering grotesque physical appearances, shows are always pushing the FCC boundaries and exercising their right to the first amendment. Cartoons have infinite power to control each and every frame in its feature presentation, and manipulate even the smallest of details to effectively relay one's message. Today, there are videos where YouTubers recap episodes of a show with their own interpretations of such hidden

messages and "easter eggs" that are planted by the producers. Every episode is carefully curated, and even the smallest details about a particular topic could drastically formulate a circumstantial reaction.

One may look at this simply as the producers seeking out a couple laughs from his or her audience. However, what they fail to see is that the show may have direct intentions in the way they present their content. Even the choice of television as the most useful form of distribution relays McLuhan's *media ecology theory*, which states that "medium is the message." It is a media professional's job to ensure that transmitted messages are designed in the easiest possible way to digest, and it is very much plausible that a hidden agenda lies beneath each carefully manipulated animation. It is ultimately the audience or receiver of a message that determines how a message is interpreted and what actual function the humor serves.

The most successful television comedies create buzz in their target communities and have an actively engaged community. There is a direct correlation between the understanding of content, the level of emotional reaction, and opinion formation. Subsequently, a message may not effectively portray a specific message or sway the viewer to a particular side, but it always functions as a platform of discussion and provides an opportunity for a targeted message to be spotlighted in the media. Satirizing one's own culture is popularly dangerous because people assume a negative reaction will be the end result, but the maturing and desensitizing of television's audience has eventually allowed this dark humor to become socially accepted.

Functions of Humor

In the case of *South Park*, satirically mocking contemporary issues initiates laughter through outrageous incongruities, creating purpose for laughter. (Meyer) The receiver to television's message actively engages in interpreting and forming opinions of their own. Therefore, in order to reach one's target audience, television shows prefer to use a consumer-first approach to its content. It is ultimately the audience or receiver of a message that determines how a message is interpreted and what actual function the humor serves.

Laughter is a critical gateway toward creating long-lasting effects in the media and gain traction and popularity. Humor unites communicators with their audience through mutual identification and clarification of position and values, while dividing them through enforcement of norms and differentiation of acceptable vs unacceptable behaviors or people. (See Figure 2) *South Park* delineates social boundaries with humor and functions as both a unifier and divider of interpretation.

South Park's newest development with Mr. Garrison has been a major contributor to the shows success. He becomes the show's recurrent representation of Donald Trump when he takes office as the President of the United States. Mr. Garrison's appearance is changed entirely for the role. A ridiculous orange tint is smothered on his face and a blonde slicked-back wig is placed on his head to imitate the the audience's popular, negative outlook on Trump. The show further voices their opinions upon our nation's highest political figure through parodied campaigns involving unpopular stances on border security and racism, telling immigrants to "fuck right on out of my country." This is our first prime example of framing.

Framing Theory

The concept of framing branches from its origins in agenda-setting theory and became its own field of study entirely. Framing explains that the media focuses attention on certain events and places them within a field of meaning. While literature exists on how audiences perceive issues once they've been exposed to media messages, Alex Dejean examines satirical criticism on the social issue of political correctness. In the episode "Stunning and Brave" Cartman attempts to blackmail PC Principal by falsely accusing the man for raping his friend in the bathroom, but in return is attacked for using politically incorrect grammar. (See Figure 1) Here, Cartman's absurd accusation is elevated when PC Principal responds aggressively at his unintentional marginalization of historically oppressed groups. Segments like such not only reveal some areas for social discourse, but also achieves the primary goal of being funny. It is this process that allows the show's producer to alleviate extremely sensitive topics — like child molestation — with layered humor. The episode goes on to bring to light political issues including fraternity hazing, micro-aggressions, ethnic marginalization, suppression of unpopular ideas, oppression through justification, equal rights and more.

The media is a force that shapes our lives and it is hardly in our control whether or not we allow it to; the only thing we can do as viewers is actively participate with the content and form opinions of our own.

Living in the World of Television

Cultivation theory examines long-term effects of television on one's viewers. Its primary proposition states that the more time people spend in the television world, the more likely they

are to believe society reality aligns with reality portrayed on television. The theory holds three

core assumptions: television is fundamentally different from other forms of mass media, television

shapes the way individuals within society think and relate to each other, and television's effects

are limited. With these, we are allowed to analyze television's media effects and apply the theory

accordingly.

"Television is the source of the most broadly shared images and messages in history."

(Gerbner) With the only form of television consumption being visual and auditory, the content is

released uninterrupted and can be decoded by anybody able to view a broadcast. Additionally,

television shows like *South Park* follow a specific formula that cultivate basic assumptions about

facts of life and standards of judgement rather than specific attitudes and opinions.

Television cultivates people in two ways: mainstreaming and resonance. Mainstreaming

develops a common outlook on the world through constant exposure to the same images and

labels on TV. For example, a frequently recurring character on the show is Saddam Hussein, who

is viewed as perhaps the most dangerous person in the world to American interests, is a prime

example of mainstreaming. The character is generally paired and associated with the devil and

spends the majority of his feature appearances trying to rule the world and hell. Resonance

occurs when a television show's content is congruent with the viewer's reality. This is used to base

new understanding on current edifices rather than constructing new ideas on scratch. These two

entities utilize both the consumer's direct and indirect experiences to generate the most relatable

content.

In *South Park,* each episode is "conveived just six days before it airs," (Bedford) allowing the

show to stay more topical and respond quickly to current events. Therefore, each episode is a

form of documented history and the writers response to major events. What is aired on *South Park*

is a direct reflection of what is accepted in society itself. In turn, the show's most crucial asset is this ability to allow the public eye to essentially write their content.

Regulations and Human Development

Adult animators are constantly challenging the normative standards of American culture, providing a public sphere of critical theory discussion. (Reynolds) *Family Guy* is largely responsible for challenging these boundaries of what can slip through regulations and air on television. Feature episode "PTV" responds to difficulties the show faces by the Federal Communications Commission with a musical composition insulting indecency enforcement, fines, and complaints. TV ratings protect those not mature enough to view and warn those who are of the content to be displayed. This can be extremely frustrating for a show that's success rides upon messages other programs wouldn't dare air on television. Television is one of the strongest media influencers and while watching it doesn't directly cause a specific behavior, it shapes one's perception of the world.

A study by Riddle directly correlates a positive relationship between television viewing levels and the social reality beliefs in young adulthood. Early exposure to adult-content may create unrealistic and unwanted views of reality for the children of some parents. South Park features sarcasm, dirty, words, and importer content that could easily be misunderstood by children. In "With Apologies to Jesse Jackson" the word "nigger" was used 43 times. The purpose of the episode was not to humiliate black people and was commonly accepted by blacks. The episode was actually praised as a good example of word's impact on individuals. However, children may misconstrue the purpose of this cartoon and learn a new word to abuse.Television

regulations support cultivation theory and generates further conversation on adolescent susceptibility to aired indecency.

In a study done by Barry Hollander, younger citizens with exposure to late-night television were more likely to have a biased affiliation due to the views of their favorite television shows. Research proved that consumption of content from such programs is more associated with recognition of campaign information rather than with actual recall. The article goes on to explain that younger people seek out news media information through humorous content like *Saturday Night Live, South Park,* and more. They are able to recognize figures in the media that they have seen in their favorite television shows, and their opinions are typically swayed toward the positive or negative way the social figure is depicted. South Park portrays the darkest of human character in modern pop culture and the success of the show results in the mass dispersion of these affiliated depictions. *South Park's* greatest attribute is that no subject is safe from being scrutinized. Rather than taking sides in controversy, the satire is a collection of making fun of both sides. In Mr. Garrison's election against Hillary Clinton in the 19th season, both the Republican and Democratic Parties were attacked.

Formula Adjustments

Starting in 2013, *South Park* began to reevaluate their formulated script template. Originally, the show used to be anti-continuity due to its week-by-week nature. Every episode would typically kill Kenny, only to have everything back to normal the following week. This way, unlike other television shows, *South Park* never needed to run into repercussions for any action committed in any episode. Now, the producers decided to shift toward serial stories that continue through seasons, a tactic that is used for several reasons.

First, this shifts the viewer's relationship from the characters to the story. To elaborate, *South Park*'s initial formula disabled the consumer's yearning for a greater plot line and focused on character development. Now, episodes are beginning to blend together and seasons are beginning to turn into feature-length films, split up over the course of ten episodes, and each new season moving forward are sequels. After 17 seasons of lack of character development and maturity (aside from a graduation from third to fourth grade in season four), the show now has the ability to change the internal structure of how certain characters act and behave. Cartman develops and unexpected relationship with Wendy in season 13 which continues until the end of season 15. Over the course of three calendar years, you see how the relationship changes each of the characters over time. Additionally, foreshadowing can be further applied in these episodes, allowing stronger urges of anticipation for the upcoming episodes. With continuity, consumers are eager to see how a particular story will unfold or how a change in a character will affect future episodes. These weapons were underutilized in their previous scripting construct.

What is misunderstood, however, is why *South Park* changed something that seemed to work. Why, after 17 years of doing the same thing, did the producers decide to change the grounds upon the show is founded? I suggest that the producers primarily decided on the switch to be more deeply involved with issues they believe need to be addressed.

It was rare for the show to bring in new characters and establishments into the week-to-week schedule. PC Principal replaced Principal Victoria recently and has remained on the show, along with Mr. Garrison's new role as President Trump and Whole Foods's invasion into a newly gentrified side of *South Park*. I believe the creators utilized agenda-setting theory in categorizing the importance of particular topics. The framework of a season layers week-to-week trends and fads underneath an overarching story line that ultimately focuses on what the producers believe is

the biggest area of concern in America at the time. This is a direct application of such and claims the use of the communication theory in the created structure of *South Park*.

Further Critique

With animated shows pushing the limits of what can be said on television, the question comes to mind whether or not they should be monitored and regulated. FCC sanctions are constantly dealt with by Fox and ABC but it seems like the standards for acceptable content is frequently changing. Therefore, further discussion needs to be held in regards to television's impact on social norms as well as society's role in content formation. Literature today focuses primarily on direct links between the two entities, but could further delve into how shows like the one's discussed here have come to revolutionize television's reach. *South Park* is now closing in on its 300th episode and has yet to stop pushing the limits of broadcasting. Researching the effects *South Park* has on its viewers proves to be difficult due to the limitations data collection has on its viewers. There are countless variables that form and manipulate media's effect on its audience, some of which would be helpful in future research.

First, the way in which the viewer consumes the content has recently become a hub of discussion in relaying effective communication. Multiple streaming options are available as well as user-made highlight clips and cable television. The atmosphere in which the viewer is in also needs to be accounted for. For example, messages taken in by a sole viewer may be misconstrued and the message will be misrepresented. While being surrounded by friends may help you understand a reference, they may also contribute toward how you view said reference. Lastly, analyzing one's participation with a television show is difficult to analyze. Certainly one can analyze the engagement the community has with the show, but there is no way to separate passive

and active viewers in one's research. The purpose of the television in one's home may serve as background noise while another household may use a showtime as a bonding event.

Research Questions

Based on what I found, I believe that more research needs to be done in understanding the development of televised content over a large period of time. While my research was focused on a singular show, I believe that *South Park* can be compared and analyzed alongside other program genres. A comparison of genres could also help better understand which form of content will best execute certain messaging as well as predicting future trends in society. Thirdly, I believe that integration of the psychological response of laughter paired with communication theories may present the target consumer-group an understanding as to the extent in which these television shows are affecting one's social development.

Appendix

<u>Figure 1</u>

> **Cartman**: PC Principal, you have Butters' underwear, and now (drops underwear into the urinal to soak in urine) Oh my gosh, it's got your DNA all over it. This certainly doesn't look good for you. I don't need to tell anyone about this. No, I think we have an understanding. Capisce?
> **PC Principal**: What did you just say?
> **Cartman**: You mean about keeping your dick out?
> **PC Principal**: "Capisce?!" You're associating Italian-Americans to intimidation tactics?! You'd better watch your micro-aggressions, bro!
> **Cartman**: Oh-kay. Look, you don't want to end up like the spokesman for Subway, do you?
> **PC Principal**: Did you just use a term that excludes women from an occupation?! (picks up Cartman and slams him against bathroom stall) Did you just say "spokesman" instead of "spokesperson?!" When women are just as capable at selling sandwiches as anyone?! (slams Cartman against bathroom mirror, shattering it) Are you purposely trying to use words that assert your male privilege?!
> **Cartman**: No, I'm sorry! I was just trying to frame you for raping Butters!
> **PC Principal**: Do you think Italian-Americans and women are less important?! (pins Cartman to the floor and beats him) You dare use words that alienate two communities of people who have to deal with biases like yours on a daily basis?!

Figure 2

Humor function	Target person's position on issue	Target's familiarity with issue
Identification	++	++
Clarification	+	+
Enforcement	—	+
Differentiation	—	++

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