

“Factually Inaccurate, Morally Correct”: How *The Babylon Bee* Brings News Satire to the Right

Parker James Bach
Cincinnati, OH

B.A. Media Studies, University of Virginia, 2020

A Thesis presented to the Graduate Faculty
Of the University of Virginia in Candidacy for the Degree of
Master of Arts

Department of Media Studies

University of Virginia
May 2021

Acknowledgements

I first pitched a project examining the news satire of *The Babylon Bee* as an undergraduate Distinguished Majors Program student. Without a doubt, I could not have produced then what I was ultimately able to accomplish in this thesis. I am proud of what I have written here, but I am also aware that this work and my growth as a scholar rests upon the contributions of others to whom I am deeply grateful.

First, thank you to my advisor, Lana Swartz, for pushing me to produce work which is engaging and consequential while also reminding me that this thesis represents the beginning and not the end of my contribution to scholarly knowledge. In the last two years, Lana has gone from an undergraduate instructor to a trusted mentor for my research, writing, and plans for a longer academic career – during which I know I will stay in touch. She also made note of the potentially excessive number of bee-based puns in this thesis but did not explicitly ask me to remove them, for which I am grateful.

Second, thank you to Christopher Ali and Bruce Williams. Both have served as invaluable mentors to me throughout my time in Charlottesville and have consistently welcomed me with open office doors and lively conversation – scholarly and otherwise. I aspire to one day lead classes and provide mentorship with the same wisdom and warmth both have consistently shown me.

Thank you also to my parents, Beth and Greg Bach, who have let me talk at them for hours about *The Babylon Bee* and for sending me the articles they have found funniest... and explaining why that is. I am immensely grateful for the last two decades of their support and encouragement as I have committed myself to my education. I consider myself lucky to know with certainty that this support will continue long after I leave the University of Virginia.

I also owe immense thanks to Liz Ellcessor, who spent years answering my incessant questions about the potential for an M.A. program in media studies at UVA, and who made that dream a reality for me and others.

Thank you to the Deliberative Media Lab for funding my access to *The Babylon Bee* premium subscription. This subscription was necessary for my research, but it also came with a “Fake News You Can Trust” mug which I have kept at my desk as both a vehicle for caffeine and a sort of trophy of war.

Finally, thank you to the Yellow Journal, the I.M.P. Society, the cast of Voices of the Class, and especially the Whethermen for allowing me the chance to laugh with them and to spur others to do the same.

Table of Contents

Introduction: From “Slow Torture” to the “Conservative <i>Onion</i> ”	1
The definition and ideology of satire	3
<i>The Babylon Bee</i> takes flight.....	7
Researching in <i>Bee</i> -wilderment	11
Chapter One: The Conservative Countersphere and the Quasi-Carnavalesque	17
Satiric discourse in the public sphere and counterpublics.....	19
Pleasure and the carnivalesque.....	23
Satire in <i>The Bee</i> ’s hive: adapting counterpublics and the carnivalesque to the Right.....	25
Chapter Two: Political <i>Bee</i> -conomy	31
Commodification in the digital age.....	32
Recursive commodification.....	37
Corpus	41
Reaching out: marketing resistance.....	45
Reaching in: constructing an echo chamber.....	51
No bad clicks, no bad comments.....	55
Chapter Three: Writing for the Right.....	57
Tactic 1: Riding irony’s edge	58
Tactic 2: Resisting “the liberal media” and other institutions.....	63
Tactic 3: Playing the victim	68
Tactic 4: Punching down.....	73
Tactic 5: Writing political satire “from a Christian worldview”	78
The trouble with Trump	82
Conclusion: Why the Buzz around <i>The Babylon Bee</i> ?	88
Suggestions for further research.....	93
“Factually Inaccurate, Morally Correct”	94
References.....	99

Introduction: From “Slow Torture” to the “Conservative Onion”

“Can conservatives be funny? Apparently not – if the measure is Fox News’ ‘The ½ Hour News Hour.’”

-Sacha Zimmerman (2007) for *The New Republic*

For fourteen years, *The ½ Hour News Hour* has bravely defended its title of the worst-rated television show on Metacritic. The show was envisioned as Fox News’s response to the perennially popular *The Daily Show*, helmed at the time by Jon Stewart; at last, Fox News promised, there would be news satire from and for the American Right. In many ways, the show seemed to be a safe bet, an ironclad combination of elements from existing televisual successes. *The ½ Hour News Hour* would capitalize on the frenzy for news satire surrounding *The Daily Show*, *The Colbert Report*, and even *Saturday Night Live*’s long-running “Weekend Update” segment. It would benefit from its home on Fox News, which had already cultivated a loyal and profitable audience devoted to news analysis rooted in conservative ideology. It would be helmed by Joel Surnow, co-creator of smash-hit TV drama *24*, which had taken American television by storm for the better part of a decade. What could go wrong?

Unfortunately, Surnow and Fox News quickly learned that despite their seemingly killer pitch, their show was missing an essential ingredient for a comedy show: a good sense of humor. Television critics were almost as unrelentingly brutal as the experience of sitting through an episode of *The ½ Hour News Hour*. While I cannot in good conscience recommend that any of my readers attempt such a feat, some selections from these reviews may provide a window into the experience. In the words of one critic, “It’s hard not to keep staring perplexed, squinting a little, and utter, ‘I don’t get it’ every few seconds” (Zimmerman 2007). Featuring “awkward jokes about executions and mass murder” (Boedecker 2007) and “scripts that bludgeon even the

easiest punch lines to death” (Weiss 2007), the show “is slow torture all by itself” (Storm 2007) and “feels like... the kind of thing enterprising high-school kids with a video camera could replicate” (Lowry 2007). Troy Patterson’s (2007) review for *Slate* might be the most damning: “The mind strains to conceive of political humor that might be less humorous – or, ultimately less political.” Even *Reason.com*, a staunchly conservative news site – tagline: “Free minds and free markets” – said the show had “basic comedy 101 problems” and was “set to become one of the worst pieces of television ever” (Weigel 2007). When the overwhelming response to *The ½ Hour News Hour* was not peals of triumphant laughter at the expense of the Left, but groans of pain heard across the ideological spectrum, Fox News had little choice but to cancel the show after only thirteen episodes. It has been relegated to infamy on Metacritic and in histories of TV programming ever since.

News satire has exploded in popularity in the past half-century and become an increasingly important means of political discourse. Foundations for the modern iterations of satiric news commentary were laid by the *That Was The Week That Was* in Britain, *This Hour Has Seven Days* in Canada, and *Saturday Night Live*’s “Weekend Update” in the United States, but its true power was ultimately realized by the meteoric rise of *The Daily Show* under Jon Stewart at the turn of the century. A slew of other cable news parodies quickly followed, helmed by Stephen Colbert, Samantha Bee, Larry Wilmore, John Oliver, and others. Also around the year 2000, a weekly print satire newspaper founded in Madison, Wisconsin moved online, using its parody of the AP style to draw ever-increasing web traffic to its website, *TheOnion.com*. As *The Daily Show* did for cable TV, *The Onion* inspired copycats with its parody of print and online journalism, including *ClickHole*, *Reductress*, and *The Hard Times*. In the form of news

parody, American political satire has proven both vibrant and consistently popular in the contemporary media ecosystem, thriving across media, creators, and styles.

However thriving and diverse the news satire scene has been, all of the satirical television programs and websites listed above have one thing in common: they approach political humor primarily from the Left. Conservative humor has been notably absent during the news satire gold rush of the last twenty years. *The 1/2 Hour News Hour* was the highest-profile effort to reverse this trend and bring satire to the Right, but it was a spectacular failure. This raises some obvious but important questions: Where is contemporary conservative satire? Is it even viable?

The definition and ideology of satire

This dearth of political satire from the Right has reignited a longstanding debate about the ideological leanings of satire and its underlying principle of irony. The simplest conclusion to draw from the lack of contemporary conservative political satire would be that satire lends itself best to progressivism. Common explanations for this pairing suggest that satire must have some established power to push against, inherently challenging the status quo, and that it is thus liberal or progressive by nature (Greenberg 2018, 24). A different explanation is provided by Dannagal Goldthwaite Young (2019), who uses psychological studies to argue that liberals are far more comfortable than conservatives with experiencing ambiguity, a phenomenon upon which irony depends.

This position stands in direct contradiction to some earlier theories of political satire which predate the ongoing liberal domination of the practice and posit that satire serves a conservative function insofar as it reinforces the status quo. This argument rests on the notion that political humor is enjoyable to its audience only because it is perceived as entertainment

rather than as a call to action, or because the laughter produced serves as a sort of safety valve, diverting political frustration into a not particularly efficacious form (Feinberg 1967, 259; Schutz 1977, 299). The traditional or canonical model of satire goes even further, suggesting that the purpose of satire is to “exercise moral judgment,” particularly against those violating norms already in place. In this model, the satirist censures and shames deviants and violators, inviting the audience to join in on the fun, and thus conservatively reinforces the existing social order more directly than in the “safety valve” theory of political humor (Greenberg 2018, 13).

The most nuanced position, and the one to which I subscribe, is that satire – like the irony upon which it frequently relies – is simply a mode of discourse, and as such it can be used to support a variety of ideologies and agendas, and are thus “transideological” (Hutcheon 1994, 15). There is an innate “tension within satire between enforcing norms and violating them, between restraint and license” (Greenberg 2018, 24) and, accordingly, between conservatism and progressivism. If satire is not a genre but a mode of discourse, and if it does not have an innate or preferred ideological lean, then what precisely *is* satire? As satire is a notoriously slippery term, many scholars have taken to offering ever-growing lists of what they perceive as the foundational elements of satire (see Greenberg 2018, 12 for an excellent compilation of these definitions), with recent scholars such as Kathryn Hume (2009) suggesting as many as *nine* constituting features or markers of satire (305). The difficulty of this task lies in creating a definition that encompasses the wide variety of texts throughout history that have been considered satire, from Classical Athenian theater (Greenberg 2018, 56), to George Orwell’s vision of a dark future in *1984*, to John Oliver (*Robocalls* 2019) simply calling Donald Trump a “shit weasel” while proposing stricter regulation on robocalls.

I could write hundreds of pages on the transideological politics of satire and its widely varied forms over its millennia-long history – and many others have actually done so. For now, suffice it to say that given the complexity and slipperiness of satire, I prefer a simpler definition and one which can be broadly applied: satire is playful commentary. While I will probe the complexities of this seemingly simple definition in the coming pages, my intent was also to provide such a simple solution in order to avoid the exhaustingly multipartite lists of elements in prior definitions, as well as to provide a definition flexible enough to encompass the wide array of texts which should be considered satirical.

The centrality of commentary to satire is evident enough. Even when satire rests on fiction, imagination, and fantastical elements – which is fairly frequently – these elements must remain rooted in the contexts of the real world (Greenberg 2018, 21) *and* have a point to make about these contexts. Jonathan Swift’s famous “A Modest Proposal” would not be satire if it were simply a call for more people to sell their children to be cannibalized, without any context; that would simply be troubling and bizarre. But there is context and commentary: the early eighteenth century when the essay was written featured raging Irish poverty and the failure of or lack of desire on behalf of the British government to effectively intervene. By exaggerating the callousness of the English aristocracy regarding the suffering of the Irish, Swift drew attention to this heartlessness, Swift effectively critiques real-world events with an absurd perspective.

Evidently, not all commentary is satire; this would be far too broad a definition. Some have pointed to humor or laughter as another defining characteristic of the satirical, and indeed much of satire does include such elements. However, while what qualifies as comic may be subjective, some of the most effective satire cannot be fairly considered comic – think again of Orwell’s *1984* or *Animal Farm*. Something very similar to the comic, however, seems to be at

play in satire, something related to wit or style or imagination. I argue that that something is play, particularly as described by Johan Huizinga (1955) in his foundational *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play Element in Culture*. Regarding my earlier point, Huizinga suggests that though play is frequently comic, it also has the capacity for great seriousness (5). Further, Huizinga argues for the voluntary quality of play, that it is not necessary but “something added thereto and spread out over it like a flowering, an ornament, a garment” (7). This element is critical and what separates satire from other forms of commentary – the extra work that the satire voluntarily applies to make their commentary in a playful way, one that is not straightforward. To return to Orwell, although it is not “funny,” *1984* plays with notions of authoritarianism to envision a world in which ongoing trends are taken to extreme, fantastical lengths. It is imaginative and even darkly fantastical, ornamenting its central points with exaggerative speculation rather than making them outright in an ideological screed.

Another crucial element of play, according to Huizinga, is the presence of rules. While it most often involves adherence to these rules, sometimes the evasion or subversion of rules may become a form of play unto itself. On this note, Huizinga suggests “The outlaw, the revolutionary, the cabbalist or member of a secret society, indeed heretics of all kinds... a certain element of play is prominent in all their doings” (12). To this list, I would add the satirist, who voluntarily adds new rules to the practice the practices of commentary and discourse to express things in an atypical manner, and one frequently shrouded in subversion and sometimes secrecy. Further confirmation for the notion of satirists as players of a peculiar game comes only slightly further on, in which Huizinga argues that play most often occurs as “a contest *for* something” or “a representation *of* something,” but can in “higher forms” of play combine these two modes and manifest as “a contest for the best representation of something” (13).

This last statement regarding a form of play presents a clearer definition of satire than do those theorists more explicitly aiming to define it: satire is a playful contest for the best representation of the topic which it comments upon or critiques. Moreover, this vision of satire includes the wide range of examples from Aristophanes to Orwell to Oliver *and* is innately transideological – who would deny that play is as natural to conservatives as it is to progressives? But if satire is so transideological, and can be so broadly defined – in short, if *The ½ Hour News Hour* floundered because it was bad television, not because it was conservative satire – where has the American Right been during the news satire boom of the twenty-first century? Enter *The Babylon Bee*.

The Babylon Bee takes flight

On February 7, 2016, *The Babylon Bee* published its first satirical article, headlined “Popular Internet Atheist Still Thinks Last Book Of Bible Is Called ‘Revelations’” (*Bee* 2016a).¹ Subsequent articles made clear that while the site would traffic in Christian humor – “Youth Leader Still Can’t Hear If Everyone Having A Good Time” (*Bee* 2016h) and “Holy Spirit Unable To Move Through Congregation As Fog Machine Breaks” (*Bee* 2016f), read two early headlines – it would also take a conservative lens on the ongoing “culture wars” as well as traditional politics, as in the articles titled “Man Holding Door For Woman Clearly Sexist Pig” (*Bee* 2016d) and “Hillary [Clinton] Turns To Husband For Advice On Attracting Young, Impressionable, Female Voters” (*Bee* 2016c). In early March, the site’s creator, Christian webcomic artist Adam Ford, released a statement to his own site, described as “*The Onion* or *SportsPickle*, but from a

¹ The joke is that the name of the book is “Revelation,” singular. I am a born-and-raised Christian and did not initially understand the headline, either. *The Bee* has certainly improved its humor since its very first article.

Christian worldview” (Ford 2016). An article similar to Ford’s post, though more satirical, also launched on *The Bee*’s website, suggesting that it was an answer to “news satire[’s]... long, storied history as an important and effective tool for articulating a specific brand of worldview: far-left, anti-religion, naturalist, nihilist” (*Bee* 2016e). Though *The Bee* has only explicitly billed itself as “Christian news satire,” making no mention of ideology, the mention of “far-left” and “anti-religion” in the same breath in this early article made the site’s ideological position fairly clear.² With this, *The Babylon Bee*’s Christian-conservative news satire was fully launched, ready to take its first steps in its attempt to succeed where *The ½ Hour News Hour* had failed: wresting news satire free from the seeming liberal vice grip in which it was held for decades.

While much of *The Babylon Bee*’s early content failed to make a splash, it had some early tastes of true virality with some articles like “Starbucks Unveils New Satanic Holiday Cups,” which in April 2021 has nearly two million shares (*Bee* 2016j). By 2018, however, *The Bee* was rapidly growing, having published its first book, *How to Be a Perfect Christian*, receiving more social media engagement than ever before, and growing its staff. Citing an aversion to the spotlight *The Bee* was now attracting, as well as a lack of interest in running a “growing company” instead of a simple satire site, Adam Ford stepped away from the site, selling the majority share to “Christian entrepreneur” Seth Dillon, and leaving longtime head writer Kyle Mann as editor in chief (Ford 2018). While *The Bee* was still penning a fair amount of Christianity-focused content, it was now comfortably ingrained as the premiere site for political news satire on the Right. In some ways, *The Babylon Bee* was starting to achieve its

² Throughout this thesis I will be focusing on the political satire of *The Babylon Bee* rather than its religiously focused satire. This is a choice on my end but also reflects *The Bee*’s priorities: Editor-in-Chief Kyle Mann (2020a) recently wrote that satire about “general church culture” is “filler jokes [that] provide the space and pacing we need between the day’s political material.” Of course, the political and religious are frequently intertwined: *The Bee*’s conflation of Christian religion with conservative politics will be further addressed in chapter three of this thesis.

goal of being like *The Onion*, but with a different worldview – despite the longer history and ongoing popularity of *The Onion*, *The Bee*'s likes and shares were starting to look competitive on some articles, at least on Facebook.³

Alongside the sale of *The Babylon Bee* and its burgeoning popularity came two other significant developments. First, *The Bee* had left behind its initial tendency to caustically criticize Donald Trump. When *The Bee* launched in 2016, Trump was still one of several contenders in the Republican presidential primary, and *The Bee* content involving Trump consistently painted him in an extremely negative light: one especially brutal article from the site's first month was headlined "Trump Claims To 'Know Nothing' About KKK Hat He Was Wearing During CNN Interview" (*Bee* 2016g). By 2018, however, Trump was midway through his term as President of the United States and widely supported by Republican voters. While *The Bee* still made some jests at the president's expense, they were much lighter, and the site much more frequently portrayed him as the hero than it did in its earliest days. No doubt, *The Bee*'s rising star, their more positive portrayal of Trump, and Trump's continued popularity in the American Right were correlated; indeed, *The Bee*'s editors refer to anti-Trump content as "writing in hard mode," as it guarantees less engagement and support from their typical audience (qtd in Goldberg 2020).

Also in 2018, *The Babylon Bee* faced its first charges of spreading misinformation and its first conflict with social media platforms. On March 1 of that year, *The Bee* published an article entitled "CNN Purchases Industrial-Sized Washing Machine To Spin News Before Publication" (*Bee* 2018b). Soon after, the fact-checking site Snopes.com ran an article rating this report "False," and claimed that some readers were mistaking it for real news (Mikkelson 2018). At the

³ Of course, Facebook's user demographics are also older, whiter, and more rural as compared to other platforms like Instagram and Twitter (Pew Research Center 2019), which tend to correlate to conservative politics.

time, Snopes was still a fact-checking partner for Facebook, and this “False” rating led the platform to threaten *The Bee* with demonetization. After *The Bee* contested this decision, Facebook ultimately apologized, and Snopes has since added the “Labelled Satire” rating to its site (Wemple 2018; Mims 2018). The feud was far from over, however. On several occasions in the last three years, Snopes, Facebook, and Twitter have given similar warnings of demonetization and deplatformation to *The Babylon Bee* for spreading its fake news. During a similar occurrence in 2019, Snopes has sought to justify its flagging practices by sharing a study conducted at The Ohio State University which suggested that *The Babylon Bee*’s satire was more likely to be considered real news than that of *The Onion*, especially by Republicans (Garrett et al. 2019). *The Bee* claims that these cases of flagging and threats of deplatformation are instances of ideological discrimination and liberal bias by the platforms, in op-eds and interviews by Kyle Mann and Seth Dillon in “real news,” and especially in its satire: Snopes, Facebook, and Twitter have all become regular targets of *The Bee*’s satiric ire. Such contestation has become a regular challenge to *The Bee*’s platform-based business model, but also something of an unexpected boon in terms of publicity and marketing, as I will discuss at greater length later in this thesis.

More recently, 2020 proved to be perhaps the most consequential year yet for *The Babylon Bee*. Its popularity steadily increasing since 2016, *The Bee* published some of its most popular articles ever, including one that reached nearly 10 million shares across platforms (*Bee* 2020q). According to its internal number *The Bee* was getting roughly 8 million visitors to its site each month, outpacing even *The Onion* (Goldberg 2020; Roose 2020). *The Bee* also made a number of expansions to its business model, offering an upgraded premium subscription editorial content, discussion threads, and commenting capability on its satire articles to subscribers, launching a sister-site and news-sharing platform called “Not the Bee,” and once more following

in the footsteps of *The Onion* and proving its popularity by publishing its first print compilation of its satire, *The Sacred Texts of The Babylon Bee, Vol. 1*. Furthermore, even while denying once more the ever-present allegations of spreading misinformation from social media platforms, *The Bee* had one of its articles retweeted by President Trump (2020), and it is not entirely clear whether or not even the president recognized the site as satirical.⁴

In short, after decades of a drought of conservative news satire, *The Babylon Bee* has proven it is possible, and that it even has the potential for great popularity. It has essentially realized its goal of becoming *The Onion* of the Right. For decades, political news satire has played a significant role in the political public sphere, engaging and informing audiences while casting a critical eye on American politics (Baym 2010; Jones 2011; Day 2011; Williams & Delli Carpini 2011). While the genre has been devoid of any successful examples of conservative satire operating in a similarly potent manner, *The Babylon Bee* has already begun to change that. Given the importance of liberal news satire to the public sphere in the last twenty years, if the success of *The Bee* portends a turning of the tide or a wave of conservative news satire to rival the existing liberal sources, it is crucial that media scholars begin to understand *The Bee* more fully. This thesis represents an attempt to do just that.

Researching in *Bee*-wilderment

Unfortunately, *The Bee* is not always so easily understood. I have been reading *The Babylon Bee*'s satire for years and have always felt that there is something new or different about the site as compared to other news satire I have encountered. Like one critic of *The 1/2 Hour News*

⁴ "He does know it's satire. We are assured," said Mann in an interview with *The New York Times* (Goldberg 2020). In *Bee* premium content, however, Mann (2020c) was less sure.

Hour above, I often found myself wondering simply, “What is the joke?” But where these critics asked this question of *News Hour* because there *was* no joke or it was simply not funny, I do find *The Babylon Bee* humorous, and frequently so. Recent attention from mainstream news organizations such as *The New York Times* both regarding the claims of misinformation on platforms and dealing with the site more broadly (see Goldberg 2020; Roose 2020; Isaac 2021) also suggest that others are similarly intrigued by *The Bee* and its satire. Love it or hate it, people seem to agree that there is something unique about *The Babylon Bee*, something strange. What is truly new or different about *The Bee*? Is it simply that news satire from a conservative perspective is uncommon? Or does rightward ideology somehow change the way satire manifests, even if the satiric mode itself is transideological?

One easy explanation for my confusion is that *The Bee* simply isn’t for me. I am a young progressive who moves primarily in Leftist academic circles, so it makes sense that I would not interact with conservative, reactionary political satire in the same way that I would with *Last Week Tonight* or *The Onion*. Furthermore, as I will discuss at greater length in this thesis, the interpretation of ironic satire – which is most satire – rests upon shared membership in a “discursive community,” essentially an in-group (Hutcheon 1991, 89). Even so, I am not as far off from *The Bee*’s target audience as I might appear on the basis of my ideology, as a lifelong Christian who grew up in largely conservative social circles in the Midwest. Furthermore, conversations with conservative friends and family and reference to online comments on *The Bee*’s satirical content suggests that even those in the same ideological space on the Right as *The Bee* do not always agree on how to interpret its satire.

Because commentary is critical to my definition of satire, it is of great importance that *The Bee*’s satire – to put it simply – has a point to make. Ambiguity is inherent to ironic satire

(Hutcheon 1991, 37, 68) and ambivalence is likewise central to Internet discourse (Phillips and Milner 2017, 10); but *The Bee* seems to feature such uncertainty and polysemy more prominently than other satire with which I am familiar. Though there are many *Bee* articles I find myself struggling to “get,” I can divide them into two broad and highly imprecise categories based on my level of confusion. In the first figurative bin of articles are those which seem to carry with them several “reasonable” interpretations, but these interpretations might conflict with one another and the text of the article does not offer a clear explanation to which is preferred.⁵

Take, for example, one of *The Babylon Bee*’s earliest viral articles, “Starbucks Unveils New Satanic Holiday Cups” (*Bee* 2016j). This article wades into the annual “war on Christmas” debate: since Starbucks chose to replace some of the traditionally Christian iconography of Christmas on their winter coffee cups, some American Christians – stereotypically, conservative ones – have suggested that similar shifts towards inclusivity are emblematic of an erasure of Christian beliefs in American culture (Sugar 2018). Others – stereotypically, liberals – argue that this is an absurd overreaction. In *The Bee*’s take on the annually irritating debate, Starbucks CEO Howard Schultz openly praises the devil, announcing “It is our company’s mission to destroy Christianity. We would like to see the dark lord Satan’s designs for this nation carried out, beginning with a holiday cup proclaiming our allegiance to the Prince of Darkness” (*Bee* 2016j). This could easily be interpreted as satirizing the extreme reaction from the Christian Right in response to simple red cups, e.g. “Take it easy, Jesus-freak, it’s not like Starbucks is pouring your chai soy latte into a cup that hails Lucifer.” Just as easily, the article could suggest that the red cups might seem an insignificant change but serve as a warning sign of greater anti-Christian

⁵ In *Irony’s Edge*, which I reference frequently throughout this thesis, Lisa Hutcheon (1991) usefully draws a comparison between such texts and the well-known optical illusion that could be seen either as the head of a duck or of a rabbit: though the two possibilities would seem to be mutually exclusive – in real life, something cannot be a rabbit head and a duck head – they appear in the text as coexisting or even oscillating interpretations (59-60).

sentiment among American culture and elites – the exact stance that started the asinine conflict in the first place. *Both* readings are equally supported by the text.

In *Bee* articles like this one, I see multiple possible dominant interpretations trapped in a paradoxical state of coexistence and competition with one another. In others, I don't see *any* readings that seem to make sense. Where precisely is the commentary in “20,000 Troops In D.C. Said To Not Be Enough To Stop Trump's Battlemech” (*Bee* 2021a), published just before the inauguration of Joe Biden? Who or what is being critiqued in “Op-Ed: What Will Get This Economy Going Again Is Child Labor” (*Bee* 2021d)? One commentor on the latter article neatly sums up my recurring confusion surrounding *The Bee*: “I have no idea what the point of this piece is, but I can't stop laughing!” While much of *The Babylon Bee*'s content features much more straightforward commentary, I am left stumped by *The Bee* on a regular basis.

I have been a frequent reader of *The Babylon Bee* since the summer of 2016, mere months after the site launched. In these last five years, two big questions about the site and its satire have plagued me, and as *The Bee* has risen in prominence and thus discursive power, the need for understanding has only increased. In this thesis, I examine *The Bee* more closely to gain that understanding. First, what is new or different about *The Bee* and its satire, if anything? Yes, it is a conservative content creator in a media niche that has been recently dominated by the Left. But, as I have suggested in the paragraphs above, there seems to be something unique or unusual about *The Bee* which fascinates readers on the Left and Right alike. Is the *The Bee* truly different from other sources of news satire?

My second question focuses on a more prominent and easily defined feature of *The Babylon Bee*: its ideology. One former Republican political advisor and current CNN editor recently told *Bee* editor Kyle Mann that until recently, conservative satire seemed an

impossibility: “It wasn’t that there wasn’t a conservative *Daily Show* or a conservative *Opinion*. It was that you couldn’t have one, because there wasn’t anything funny about liberals or the conservative side” (Isgur and French 2020). *The Babylon Bee* has evidently bucked this recent trend, bringing news satire to the Right with ever-growing popularity. This raises a question which can be addressed in two distinct but related manners, corresponding to what James Carey (2008) describes as the “transmission” and the “ritual” views of communication. The former “is defined by terms such as ‘imparting,’ ‘sending,’ ‘transmitting,’ or ‘giving information to others’” (12), whereas the latter focuses more on the creation of community, ‘linked to terms such as ‘sharing,’ ‘participation,’ ‘association,’ ‘fellowship,’ and ‘the possession of a common faith’” (15). Bringing these two views to the novelty of *The Bee* as conservative news satire leads to two interrelated questions regarding this union of satire and the Right: How does *The Babylon Bee* communicate conservatism in the satiric mode? Or, how does *The Babylon Bee*’s create a discursive space in which conservatism can be expressed through the satiric mode?

In the first chapter, I locate *The Babylon Bee* within the tradition and writings of cultural theory. I begin by situating *The Bee* within the political public sphere, then examine how *The Bee* and its satire might contribute to the discourse of a “conservative countersphere.” In the second half of the chapter, I apply traditional theories of pleasure and the carnivalesque to *The Bee* in order to determine what modification, if any, need to be made to these theories in order to bring them into the context of digital-age conservatism.

In my second chapter, I focus on *The Babylon Bee* as a for-profit corporation, examining its political economy. This chapter includes a description of *The Babylon Bee*’s business model: how it relies on the very social media platforms with which it constantly feuds for content distribution and engagement, how it supplements the traditional advertisement-based model of

websites with other sources of revenue, and how it markets its site and its brand in order to develop a loyal audience. I also contextualize these many pieces of *The Bee*'s business model alongside both Internet-based content producers and conservative news/opinion organizations across other media. I end the chapter by introducing the process of "recursive commodification," by which *The Bee* and other sites augment immanent commodification with free user labor online in order to create a feedback loop of profit.

Finally, in the third chapter of this thesis I address several discursive tactics frequently employed by *The Babylon Bee* which shape its uniquely conservative news satire. Some of these make use of the unique affordances of satire and irony, whereas others are already common in the present-day American Right, but all come together to make *The Bee*'s satire what *The ½ Hour News Hour* could only dream of: news satire from the Right that attracts a wide audience – and is actually funny.

Chapter One: The Conservative Countersphere and the Quasi-Carnavalesque

“I love satire; it’s as old as time and a much-needed social commentary – just think of *A Modest Proposal*, for example – but it has to be done just right. The way to really nail it is to critique only opinions and viewpoints that are not my own personal opinions and viewpoints, but those belonging to other people. It’s not easy to get it exactly right, but it can be done.”

-Amy Maxwell, fictional Florida resident (*Bee* 2016i)

Many people both fictional (like Amy Maxwell) and nonfictional (like the author of this thesis) consider Jonathan Swift’s “A Modest Proposal” the paragon of political satire; the essay not only remains humorous and entertaining nearly three hundred years after its original publication – no easy feat – but also serves as a truly biting critique of social attitudes and political policy. It is no wonder that it is a staple of high school literature classes. But even for a satirical text with the perennial renown of “A Modest Proposal,” there remains the question of precisely how satire moves beyond mere entertainment to affect political discourse, to make a difference, to matter.

Amber Day (2011) provides a likely explanation: satire may serve as a powerful means for attracting audiences into counterpublics insofar as it fosters and represents communities of discussion and opinion that are opposed to the dominant or hegemonic. In the first part of this chapter, I will further reinforce this claim by reviewing and applying theories of publics, pleasure, and the carnivalesque in order to theorize more specifically how satire discursively aids in counterpublic formation and operation. However, immediately after outlining my model for the satiric contribution to discourse in and through counterpublics, I introduce a potential disruption in the form of *The Babylon Bee*. Recent cultural studies literature on satire has focused on the overwhelmingly liberal satire of the last half-century, so *The Bee*’s satiric content

complicates this notion of satire attracting counterpublics with its characteristic conservatism. *The Bee*'s largely right-leaning audience and online community cannot be considered truly oppressed or subaltern in the way that counterpublics are typically described, although it perceives itself to be victimized in this way (Bebout 2020; Major 2020). Though it is pronounced in the case of satire and *The Babylon Bee*, this mismatch between the notion of subaltern counterpublics and the ideology of the present-day American Right extends far beyond satire. To remedy it, political scientist Mark Major (2020) has proposed the existence of a "conservative countersphere," which occupies a similar discursive role as subaltern counterpublics, with some important distinctions.

This chapter brings together the claims of Day and Major to provide a theoretical basis for my examination of *The Babylon Bee* and its place in the public sphere. First, I argue that satire provides experiences of pleasure for likeminded audiences and that this pleasure attracts them into subaltern counterpublics. Beyond this recruitment and persuasion, the pleasure inherent to satire simultaneously provides energy and motivation within a counterpublic to clarify points of contention with the dominant ideology and to communicate these resistive arguments with the broader public sphere in an engaging way. The satire of *The Babylon Bee* operates similarly, but to the benefit of the conservative countersphere rather than a subaltern counterpublic. The pleasure which *The Bee*'s satiric content engenders is genuinely felt and cannot be denied, even if its pretensions of counterhegemonic resistance are more dubious. However, I argue that though *The Babylon Bee*'s satire – serving as a case study for conservative satire more broadly – features the revelry and offensiveness innate to the carnivalesque, it ultimately supports rather than challenges dominant American ideology and thus should not be truly considered a true part of the carnivalesque tradition. Instead, it represents the "quasi-

carnavalesque” in that in functions similarly, but to the benefit not of the subaltern, but to those already in positions of relative privilege.

Satiric discourse in the public sphere and counterpublics

Before turning to *The Babylon Bee* and its conservative satire, it is necessary to review the existing theory related to the public sphere, as well as what has traditionally been considered the role of satire within it. The theory of the public sphere was originally conceived by Jürgen Habermas (1989a), who defines it most simply as a realm open to all citizens in which matters of general interest are discussed (136). Though Habermas (1989a, 1989b) describes the existence of one overarching public sphere, he recognizes that it may appear in segments or portions depending on which citizens gather and converse with one another, and also can be split by subject matter into the literary and political public spheres, for example. Furthermore, Habermas locates the origins of the phenomenon specifically in the flawed and exclusive “bourgeois public sphere” of Enlightenment France and recognizes that through the process of “refeudalization,” the current iteration of the public sphere may not live up to its idealized form (1989b).

Soon after Habermas’ writings on the public sphere were translated into English, Nancy Fraser (1990) responded with “Rethinking the Public Sphere,” taking issue with the imbalance of power in Habermas’ model, especially as regards the “bourgeois masculinist” public sphere (62), and arguing instead for a model which includes a number of coexisting but competing “subaltern counterpublics” (67), which specifically include members of subordinated social groups and which create discourses oppositional to the dominant, especially as regards interpretations of the identities, interest, and needs of the constitutive social groups. Furthermore, Fraser argues that these smaller, more specific arenas are still public in that they are not entirely enclaved from

interaction with the broader public. Even so, these spaces serve as “spaces of withdrawal and regroupment” as well as “bases and training grounds for agitational activities directed toward wider publics (Fraser 1990, 67-68). Building on Fraser’s definition, Michael Warner (2002) has seized upon the centrality of discourse to counterpublics, emphasizing that these are not mere demographic groups but imagined relationships between strangers based on active participation and discursive engagement with a shared corpus of interrelated texts (16). As Major (2020) suggests, these dual functions of counterpublics may be further explained by adapting Vivian A. Schmidt’s (2002, 2008) differentiation between “coordinative” and “communicative” discourse by policy actors, the former of which involves determining and reinforcing ideas between members of the same group and away from the public eye, and the latter of which is intentionally aimed at the public, frequently for purposes of persuasion.

The application of theories of coordinative and communicative discourse also provides further context to Day’s assertion that satire may play an important role in attracting members to counterpublics. Irony is frequently at the core of satire, and for ironic communication to function as intended – suggesting a particular message without stating it explicitly – it requires that the ironist/satirist and interpreter/audience already share membership in what Linda Hutcheon (1994) terms a “discursive community” (89). In other words, the proper functioning of satire relies upon the preexistence of shared understandings, experiences, or perspectives between members of its audience, creating an in-group of people who “get the joke.”⁶

A discursive community is not inherently a counterpublic, but an effective political satirist may draw attention to and build upon these common sensibilities to create a sense of community. The satirist may subsequently help politicize the group, especially in opposition to

⁶ This is at least true for *ironic* satire. While irony is very common and frequently foundational in satire, not all satire is ironic.

some existing power, and thus create a counterpublic (Day 2011, 182). As such, satire excels at not only forming realized counterpublics, but also in facilitating coordinative discourse: strengthening the counterpublic and its sense of community, engaging audiences as members of the counterpublic via satire's entertainment value, reinforcing their shared worldview, and providing an enjoyable means of conducting further discourse. One important finding from scholars studying satire in the last decade is that news satire has the ability to politically inform and engage audiences while also entertaining them, a claim which defends satire from critics who suggest that it is pure entertainment and inculcates cynicism in its audiences (Baym 2005; Baym 2009; Jones 2010; Day 2011; Williams and Delli Carpini 2012). Secondarily, satire may be used as a tool for the counterpublic's communicative discourse by attracting attention to the worldview of the counterpublic and influencing the central issues and framings of a topic in broader discourse, using the same three-pronged approach of entertainment, information, and engagement.

Satire is an apt tool for use by counterpublics because of its tendency towards oppositionality, and particularly resistance towards the dominant and hegemonic (Hutcheon 1994, 30), a trait central to *counterpublics* and reflected in the very term. Through use of parody and irony, satire especially excels at challenging manifestations of the hegemonic in mainstream journalism. The press has traditionally been considered a central body in spreading and reinforcing dominant ideologies (Gramsci 1985, 36; Althusser 1971, 80). Moreover, while the press tends towards the dominant ideology due to its ease of elite access and dependence on official framings, these hegemonic tendencies are obscured by journalism's professional code, which provides a veneer of autonomy from the dominant through a foregrounding of technical qualities and supposed professionalism and neutrality (Hall 1980, 143). By parodically

mimicking the professional code of journalism across media – apparent in *The Onion*'s adoption of AP style and the imitation of the trappings of a cable news set on *The Daily Show*, for example – news satire is extremely effective at drawing attention to the artificiality of the professional code, denaturalizing and destabilizing it, revealing its biases, and questioning its neutrality and legitimacy.

If journalists are meant to serve as watchdogs in the political public sphere, holding political elites to account for their words and actions, satirists frequently serve as watchdogs of the watchdogs, challenging the framing of current events by journalists and political elites alike (Achter 2008; Warner 2011; Day 2011; Williams and Delli Carpini 2012). In Robert Entman's (2003) "cascading activation" model of the spread of news frames, in which framing of events passes down from political elites to news media and ultimately to the public, satire might be said to sit between news frames and the public for its audiences, adding ideas about and challenges to these frames as they are interpreted by the public and offering resistance to media and political elites alike while encouraging the public to do the same.

In sum, satire plays many roles in the public sphere and in the overlapping counterpublics it comprises: it may facilitate community-building and the creation/adaptation of shared beliefs through coordinative discourse; it may educate audiences, attract new members to counterpublics, draw attention to topics and change their framings, and communicate a counterpublic's stances via communicative discourse; and it may and frequently does criticize dominant actors and hegemonic standards in the public sphere.

Pleasure and the carnivalesque

Parodic reversals and open challenges to the dominant are frequent in satire, as well as characteristic of the Bakhtinian carnivalesque. As such, this theory has become central to the academic literature on satire. In his description of the medieval carnival, Bakhtin argues that laughter, excessiveness, and bad taste were foregrounded in these festivals, as was a levelling or reversal of the typical social hierarchy, resulting in a “world upside down” that parodies typical life and its power structures (Bakhtin 1968; Fiske 2010, 67). The humorous play inherent to the carnivalesque provides an opportunity for participants – in the case of satire, both satirists and their audiences – to escape briefly from the hegemonic norms and power structures which typically rule their lives and even to challenge their very legitimacy, regaining some power from the dominant classes and actors by aiming scornful laughter at them (Gray, Jones, and Thompson 2009, 10).

Skeptics of the political power of the carnivalesque, such as Umberto Eco (1984), argue that this feeling of breaking free from repressive norms and oppressive power structures through participation in the carnivalesque is only that: a feeling. Ultimately, these critics propose, the carnivalesque is not true resistance but a mere safety valve which allows the masses to vent their accumulated frustration at their place in the social order without posing a true threat to that order. If the rebellious laughter of the carnivalesque is permitted by the dominant classes, such critics argue, how subversive or dangerous to their interests can it truly be? I argue that by aiding counterpublics in solidifying their points of contention with the dominant social order via coordinative discourse and through attracting new members to these counterpublics and

distributing their ideas to the broader public via communicative discourse, satire has the potential to contribute to and itself amount to counterhegemonic resistance.⁷

This claim is further clarified and supported by Roland Barthes' (1975) notions of *jouissance* and *plaisir*.⁸ Like the carnivalesque, *jouissance* foregrounds corporal sensations and pleasure as well as escape from repressive norms: Fiske (2010) describes it as an evasive bodily pleasure occurring “at the moment of the breakdown of culture into nature,” a loss of self and as a result the discipline and governance of the self that are manifested by ingrained ideology (41). Of the two forms of pleasure Barthes describes, *jouissance* is the more closely related to carnival, happening more rarely and involving a total – if brief – abandonment of the social order of everyday life. In contrast, *plaisir* derives not from abandoning the self and the social realm, but from understanding the self and its relation to the social world, including such pleasurable concepts as identity and meaning. Moreover, though *plaisir* frequently occurs through conforming with the dominant social order, understandings of identity and meaning may also be generated in opposition to the hegemonic. This oppositional *plaisir* fits more neatly with notions of counterpublics and satire than does its alternative of conforming. Finally, *jouissance* and *plaisir* may work in conjunction, with the orgasmic rush of brief moments of total escape from the social order (i.e. *jouissance*) providing energy and empowerment to fuel the production of meaning relative to that social order (i.e. *plaisir*) and ultimately active political resistance.

⁷ I specify that satire has the *potential* to serve counterhegemonic or resistive functions because it would be a significant overstatement to argue that all satire inherently functions in this way. Indeed, some of the most frivolous content from producers of news satire, such as *The Onion*'s recent article, “Smoke Alarm Sick Of Being Yelled At For Doing Its Job” (*Onion* 2020), are so mundane and uncritical that they should not be fairly considered satire at all, but pure entertainment rooted in news parody.

⁸ In translation, these terms are often translated as “bliss” and “pleasure” respectively, but many – myself included – prefer to keep these terms in their original French to avoid the loss of their original nuances.

This model of *jouissance* and *plaisir* working in tandem provides further clarity to the relationship between satire and resistive political engagement through counterpublics. I argue that the most successful satire is carnivalesque and produces a moment of *jouissance* in audiences as they laugh and are briefly granted escape from hegemonic ideology, which is destabilized by satire's use of irony and parody, though such liberating experiences are relatively rare. More commonly, satire provides audiences *plaisir* in the opportunity to look critically at the hegemonic society of which they are a part, including its social hierarchy and the norms which reinforce it, and to define themselves and their values in opposition to this dominant ideology. Through this self-defining *plaisir*, audience members may find or imagine a sense of community with others holding similar values, forming counterpublics. Within existing counterpublics, satire may be used as part of coordinative discourse to provide energy for political action through *jouissance* and to further define the contours and shared beliefs of the counterpublic through *plaisir*.

Satire in *The Bee's hive*: adapting counterpublics and the carnivalesque to the Right

The theories of subaltern counterpublics⁹ and the carnivalesque have one important feature in common: a presumed opposition to the dominant classes and their hegemonic ideology. The American conservatism which informs *The Babylon Bee's* satire may be oppositional and resistive, but it is not subversive in the traditional manner of counterpublics and the carnivalesque: the notion that conservatives are a marginalized or oppressed identity in the same way as those central to subaltern counterpublics is dubious. The particularities of satire in

⁹ From this point forward, I will refer specifically to "subaltern counterpublics," rather than the shorthand of simply "counterpublics," in order to avoid confusion by distinguishing the term visibly and semantically from the "conservative countersphere."

conservative contexts demand further examination in relation to the theories of counterpublics and the carnivalesque, with particular attention to how these ideas may require adjustment or further clarification when applied to the satire of *The Babylon Bee* and on the Right more broadly.

Just as subaltern counterpublics are recessed corners of the broader public sphere in which individuals may conduct discourse with other likeminded citizens of similar experiences and identities, a similar discursive space exists for conservatives. This space is centered around the “conservative media establishment” of Fox News, the opinion section of the *Wall Street Journal*, and *The Rush Limbaugh Show* and related talk radio (Jamieson and Cappella 2008, x) but extends across the Internet and one-to-one communication in addition to mass media – including extension, importantly for this thesis, to *The Babylon Bee*. This communicative space, like subaltern counterpublics, provides the opportunity for its members to find comfort, community, and ideological coherence through coordinative discourse, as well as to extend communicative discourse aimed at the broader public. To describe this phenomenon, Mark Major (2020) suggests the term “conservative countersphere,” and specifically differentiates it from subaltern counterpublics:

A unique characteristic of the conservative countersphere is that it operates in a contradictory space. As a privileged group, conservatives take their discourse for granted as they assume the universality and normalcy of their claims, similar to dominant publics (see Warner 2002). Moreover, whereas counterpublics maintain “an awareness of its subordinate status” (Warner 2002, 86), the conservative countersphere *assumes* a subordinate status as conservatives are aroused by a sense of loss (Robin 2018; Bebout, this volume). It is helpful to view the conservative countersphere as operating not below but parallel to dominant discursive spheres. (217).

Accordingly, I argue that rather than discursively reinforcing and attracting members to subaltern counterpublics, satire from the Right – best exemplified by *The Babylon Bee* – serves the conservative countersphere. This change of ideological context also raises the question of

whether similar modifications are required for theories of the carnivalesque, *jouissance*, and *plaisir*.

Before I discuss conservative satire in more detail, the conservative assumption of subordinate status referenced in Major's definition warrants further explanation. Conservative perceptions and claims of subordination are perhaps best clarified by Lee Bebout's (2020) term "weaponized victimhood," used to describe a pattern of rhetorical contestations which i) "deploy hyperbole," ii) "assert a moment of crisis," iii) "claim victimhood," and iv) "appear on the political right of the United States" (64). While not amounting to true oppression, these instances of supposed victimhood are sincerely felt via the experience of "aggrieved entitlement," which occurs when historical privilege that dominant classes *feel* they have earned by merit begins to erode as egalitarian reforms are carried out (Kimmel 2013, xiv, 24).¹⁰ The affective experience of this loss of privilege may be heartfelt, but the effect of the resulting weaponized victimhood discourse is to obscure *real* systems of oppression and social hierarchy by painting conservatives as "equally oppressed" as truly marginalized groups (Bebout 2020, 75-77). As such, weaponized victimhood ultimately serves as an obstructive and anti-progressive discursive force.

If the conservative countersphere views itself as oppressed, what supposedly more dominant societal power do its members perceive themselves as resisting? Frequently, the answers to this question include the "liberal media" and "PC culture." Since *National Review* was founded in 1955, the claim that mainstream media sources are unbalanced and nothing more than propagandists attempting to spread and reinforce liberal orthodoxy has been a rallying call which unifies diverse segments of the American Right through opposition (Lane 2020; Jamieson

¹⁰ It is important to note that privilege is both relative and not experienced by *all* members of the conservative countersphere. My claim – and Major's, Kimmel's, and Bebout's – is not that all members of the conservative countersphere are innately privileged, but that the conservative countersphere on average occupies a more privileged position than do subaltern counterpublics.

and Cappella 2008; Major 2020). Relatedly, for decades American conservatives have united against the notion of political correctness, motivated its central paradox of being “liberal in its aims but often illiberal in its practices” (Hughes 2009, 4) viewing it as a restriction on free speech and especially against conservatives speaking their minds. In short, the American conservative movement tends to perceive the “liberal media establishment” and its purveyance of restrictive “PC culture” as the dominant ideological force of the modern-day United States, and one that must be resisted on the grounds of political equality and freedom of speech.

Fortunately for *The Babylon Bee* and other conservative humorists, satire is well-suited to combatting political correctness. The central concern of political correctness is defining what is offensive and off-limits. Norms of political correctness in the United States are typically founded upon progressive and egalitarian principles, but the restrictions on public discourse they impose trigger an affect of aggrieved entitlement in many conservatives as they lose access to previously socially acceptable language and attitudes which have historically reinforced their privileged position. The pleasure of *jouissance* is one of breaking free from restrictive norms, recognizing them as artificially constructed and briefly returning to a freer, more natural state; thus, I contend that this term can be reasonably applied to the pleasurable sensation experienced by audiences of conservative satire that defies standards of political correctness, as they audience is made temporarily freer, told it is acceptable to laugh at what is typically off-limits. Similarly, audiences may experience *plaisir* by defining themselves and their values in opposition to these and through allegiance with others who share these values in the conservative countersphere, regardless of whether they experience *jouissance* by feeling they have broken free. In other words, because through aggrieved entitlement many conservatives genuinely perceive themselves as being oppressed by a liberal orthodoxy, and because *jouissance* and *plaisir* are

similarly purely affective sensations, these types of pleasure occur as a result of satire in the conservative countersphere just as they do in truly subaltern counterpublics.

Where Barthes' *jouissance* and *plaisir* are limited to individual experience, the Bakhtinian carnivalesque is defined socially, particularly in the mass inversion of the typical social hierarchy (Fiske 2010, 42). This raises important questions about the applicability of the carnivalesque to conservative satire, which acts in opposition to *perceived* or *felt* oppression, rather than true marginalization apparent in the real-world social order. On the one hand, a core characteristic of the carnivalesque is reveling in offensiveness and bad taste and flagrantly transgressing societal norms, and thus it is well-suited to smashing through the boundaries set by notions of political correctness.¹¹ Furthermore, conservative news satire is just as rooted in laughter and the parody of the typically serious practice of journalism as its liberal counterpart. On the other hand, can satire based upon resisting the diminishment of privileges for traditionally dominant groups be fairly considered "liberation from the prevailing truth and from the established order" (Bakhtin 1968, 10)?

Though *The Babylon Bee*'s satire certainly bears the carnivalesque elements of parody and taking pleasure in offensiveness and bad taste,¹² the notion that it inverts and challenges the dominant ideology in the traditional manner of the carnivalesque is far more dubious. The interpretation most generous to *The Bee* would be that this is simply a case of the "ambigramic carnivalesque," in which the question of whether *The Bee* adheres to the ethics of the carnivalesque by challenging the status quo or violates these ethics by punching down and reinforcing existing hierarchies is and open one; in the ambigramic carnivalesque, the answer for

¹¹ Indeed, political correctness is so antithetical to the envelope-pushing transgression central to the carnivalesque that even famously liberal comedians such as Bill Maher, Patton Oswalt, and Dave Chappelle have publicly railed against such norms in their comedy (Jones 2010, 68; Krefting 2019, 252-259).

¹² A more in-depth analysis of *Bee* articles including common themes follows in the third chapter.

each reader depends on their perspective and the discursive community to which they belong (Sienkiewicz 2018), echoing the process of interpreting irony described by Hutcheon (1994). However, I argue the benefit of the doubt provided by applying the ambigramic carnivalesque is *too* generous and borders on false balance or both-sides-ism.

Instead, *The Babylon Bee*'s satire from the Right represents yet another instance of weaponized victimhood in conservative media, obscuring and fortifying existing systems of inequality and hegemony. Though parody and transgressions are central to *The Bee*'s satire, and one cannot deny the felt *jouissance* and *plaisir* resulting from breaking free from and defining oneself in opposition to perceived restriction and oppression, *The Bee* crucially defends rather than attacks existing social hierarchies and accordingly cannot be considered truly carnivalesque satire. Thus, I will refer to the conservative satire of *The Babylon Bee* as “quasi-carnavalesque” – it bears many essential markers of the carnivalesque described above, but not its spirit of inverting social hierarchies. “True” instances of the carnivalesque – at least according to the traditional scholarly literature, which tends to feature a strong progressive bent – make such inversions, but *The Bee*'s quasi-carnavalesque satire inverts this inversion, conjuring not a *mundus inversus*, or “world upside down,” but a *mundus reinversus*, a world turned right side up again,¹³ with the top and bottom where they have always been.

¹³ Or, perhaps, “turned Right side up again.”

Chapter Two: Political *Bee*-conomy

“The best part about subscribing to The Bee is you get to do our jobs for us for a low monthly fee. From pitching us headlines to pointing out typos in the comments, your job is pretty amazing, isn’t it? Totally worth the few bucks a month.”

-Kyle Mann, Editor in Chief of *The Babylon Bee* (Mann 2020b).

As communication has come to be dominated by the Internet in the 21st century, journalism has faced an existential threat to its traditional models of financing. Print newspaper circulation has dropped off, TV news viewership has stagnated, and ad dollars are harder to come by in the online ecosystem. With “real” news organizations struggling to make the transition to digital, how could news satire hope to profit online?

Where the last chapter examines the cultural and political dynamics of conservative news satire broadly, this chapter homes in on the political economy of *The Babylon Bee* specifically, investigating how the site attains its unprecedented success as a purveyor of digital, conservative news satire. Though it makes contributions to the conservative countersphere and public sphere that are worthy of note, *The Bee* is first and foremost a for-profit company. How does *The Bee* generate profits from and distribute its satiric content? What sources of revenue does *The Bee* rely upon, and how are they interconnected? How does the site’s business model support its quasi-carnavalesque discourse and place in the conservative countersphere? To answer these questions, I introduce the theory and perspectives of the critical political economy of communication and particularly the process of commodification.

To begin this chapter, I review existing political economy literature on the commodification of media content and audiences, arguing that both forms of commodification are at play in the operations of *The Bee*. Next, I introduce my model of “recursive

commodification,” which builds on Mosco’s (2009) notion of immanent commodification. In immanent commodification, one form of commodity creates another, as in the classic example of television ratings (Mosco 2009, 141). With the addition of free user labor afforded by Internet interactivity, new content is created for sites and platforms which itself can lead to immanent commodification and further inspire other users to create more content, creating a feedback loop of profits in which one commodity creates another. I argue that with its premium subscription, *The Babylon Bee* adopts such a model, allowing users to contribute free labor in headline forums, discussion threads, and comments sections. In so doing, *Bee* premium subscribers are literally paying to create content for *The Bee*.

In the final sections of this paper, I describe two broad strategies that *The Bee* uses to persuade users to contribute their time, money, and labor to keeping the site’s cycle of recursive commodification going. I first provide a description of the corpus I constructed to serve as the basis for this research, and then describe these strategies: marketing resistance and constructing an echo chamber. Finally, I end with a reflection on how even negative attention to or engagement with *The Bee*’s content drives its bottom line.

Commodification in the digital age

The process of commodification lies at the very heart of political economy. Any understanding of commodification relies upon first understanding Marxian concepts of the commodity, use value, and exchange value. Commodities are products of human labor with both use and exchange values. The use value of a commodity refers to its usefulness in meeting any of a wide variety of human needs, whereas exchange value derives from the relative value of a commodity’s use value as compared to the use value of other commodities (Marx 1976). As

explained by Vincent Mosco (2009, 111), the process of that transformation from use to exchange value is the definition of commodification. Inherent to capitalism is the exploitation in the form of commodification of workers' labor itself into "labor power," a commodity used towards the production of other commodities, by which means capitalists extract surplus value and collect it as accumulated wealth (Marx 1976; Mosco 2009, 131). Because of this, exploitation is always at the heart of both commodification and capitalism more broadly.

At its simplest, the question of commodification can be boiled down to two questions: What is being sold? How is it being sold? In communication and media, there are two primary forms of commodity: content and audience. A given business venture may choose either path or find some combination of the two.

The commodification of media content is perhaps the more straightforward: content is produced by laborers in the media industry, creating products with a variety of use values (entertainment, information, meaning etc.) for audiences/users and selling them accordingly. Any surplus value created as part of this exchange is directed to the capitalists in control of the means of production of this media content, while much less valuable wages are paid to the laborers producing the content itself.

However, this commodification is more complicated for media content than for material goods like food or appliances. Because much media content is non-material and might be considered public goods in some cases – when its consumption does not prevent future use, frequently the case with digital content especially – commodification of media content may present problems for capitalists in extracting surplus value for each use (Marx 1976; Garnham 1979). In response to this problem, capitalists in the media industries turn to such solutions as copyright, time-sensitivity and built-in obsolescence, and control of distribution and access via

such practices as box-offices and subscriptions (Garnham 1979). *The Babylon Bee* commodifies some of its content with the latter of these strategies, gating access to its premium content and community forums to those who pay for premium subscriptions. However, the main content produced by *The Bee*, its satire, is free to access. What explains this arrangement?

First, it is worth noting that media content creates more surplus value than many material goods due to its carriage of ideological messages and reinforcements which strengthen the social system of capitalism and help ensure and increase the number of ongoing and future market transactions which create surplus value (Mosco 2009, 134). The ability of media content to distribute and reinforce broadly capitalist ideology along with more specific ideological positions, and the willingness of media sources to prioritize profits from this process over facilitating discourse most beneficial to the public sphere has led to the commodification of public discourse itself, an important development in an examination of political media such as *The Babylon Bee* (Habermas 1989; Scannell 2007). In short, *The Bee's* satire creates some value for its owners by advancing ideas favorable to them in the public sphere and conservative countersphere. But this value is not monetary.

The primary commodity of *The Babylon Bee*, then, is not its media content but the *audience* for that content, whose attention are sold to advertisers. Thus, the process of audience commodification in media content is as old as advertising itself, with origins in the print age, but it has been especially prevalent in the broadcast and now the digital age. Dallas Smythe (1977) envisions the sale of the audience to advertisers as the primary process of commodification in the communications industry: media companies produce audiences through their labor and extract surplus value through the exchange of these audiences to other companies through advertisement (Smythe 1977; Mosco 2009, 137). The attention of these audiences is a form of off-the-job labor

power for advertisers, who use it to aid in the creation of surplus value from their own commodities through marketing. Content, meanwhile, simply serves the function of creating these audiences (Smythe 1977).

Though news satire sites like *The Bee* frequently have some aims of creating ideological surplus value with their content, in some cases this is outweighed by the profits to be made from audience commodification and especially maximizing engagement at all costs. This is demonstrated perfectly Amber Day's (2018) political economic analysis of *ClickHole*, *The Onion*'s sister site and a parody of clickbait news sites like *Buzzfeed* which aim to maximize engagement and thus profit through platforms like Facebook at the expense of any meaningful content. Featuring sensational and absurd parodic content in an effort to drive engagement and through practices like native advertising, *ClickHole* ultimately profits off of and reinforces commodification of informationally empty content more than it critiques it (Day 2018). As I argue later in the chapter, *The Babylon Bee* too sometimes chooses wider audiences and greater profits over its initial ideological or political inclinations.

Nonetheless, digital media companies like *The Bee* do have the capacity to blend the commodification of their content and their audiences, even if one outweighs the other. I differ from Smythe on his view that the audience commodity is the *sole* commodity of mass communication and that content itself is a mere means to this end. Instead, I support the more pluralistic model advanced by Garnham (1979), which argues that audience commodification is but one means of commodifying media – albeit an important one. This is especially relevant to *The Bee*, which gains revenue not only from the audience commodity (i.e. through clicks, engagement, and ad views), but also by resorting to classic forms of commodifying content itself, such as its subscription service, as discussed above.

Notwithstanding *The Bee*'s creation of content commodity through the premium subscription, in the digital age the audience commodity is a topic of more importance than ever before, especially for platform-reliant content producers like *The Bee*. Digitization and the affordances of digital content have facilitated not only more opportunities to distribute and commodify content, but to package online audiences and their behavior as well (Mosco 2009, 135-6). With news organizations grasping for cash in the transition to digital, some have turned to native advertising in an Internet-age strategy to cash in on their trusting audiences, a strategy which has been widely criticized for its exploitative nature and the danger of losing trust in journalism at a time when fake news is rampant and claims of "fakeness" directed towards mainstream news sources even more so (Carlson 2015; Zeng 2018). But perhaps the most pervasive – and concerning – evolution of audience commodification in the digital age is "surveillance capitalism," in which the user data tracked and collected online, most notably by platforms like Facebook and Google, represents a powerful and lucrative "behavioral surplus" which are fabricated into "prediction products" meant to foretell the behavior and preferences of users both individually and *en masse*, and – as always – sold to advertisers (Zuboff 2019).

The rise of behemoth platforms such as Facebook and Google has important ramifications for the commodification of media content online, particularly with regards to its distribution. With staggering numbers of end-users already aggregated on their sites, platforms like these have become essential intermediaries for content producers of all kinds on the Internet, but particularly for news or news-adjacent companies, which hope to increase traffic to their sites – and by extension, ad revenues – by achieving followings or circulation via shares and algorithmic distribution on these sites (Nielsen & Ganter 2017; Nieborg & Poell 2018; van Dijck et al. 2019; Helmond 2015). Ultimately, the share of Internet user attention captured by these

platforms leads online content producers like *The Babylon Bee* and countless others to become dependent on the most powerful of these platforms, tailoring their content creation and distribution strategies to capture maximum user engagement through the platforms – including direct publishing to the platforms through features such as Facebook’s Instant Articles – and becoming subject to the curatorial and regulatory practices of the platforms, in short shifting to the production of “contingent commodities,” all while yielding more of the profit generation from both advertising and the generation of behavioral surplus to these powerful platforms (Nieborg & Poell 2018; Nielsen & Ganter 2017).

There is a clear imbalance of power in favor of platforms over content producers, and the threat of deplatforming and demonetization or even simply algorithmic deprioritization is one which hangs menacingly over creators as they attempt to commodify their digital content, particularly for news and related sites like *The Babylon Bee*. Because *The Babylon Bee* relies upon the audience commodity to make money, and because much of its audience accesses its site primarily or only through platforms like Twitter and especially Facebook, *The Bee* has found itself wholly reliant on these platforms and this reliance – and the site’s tendency to chafe against this arrangement – is an essential piece of the site’s political economy.

Recursive commodification

The notion of “immanent commodification” ties together the separate threads of content and audience commodification. Put simply, immanent commodification describes the process by which commodification may compound, with one commodity creating another (Mosco 2009, 141-3). Immanent commodification is of particular importance in studies of Internet media companies, given the range of opportunities digital commodification offers for user-audiences to

interact with content, creators, and one another, and to monitor and generate data from this interaction. Creators produce content, content produces audiences and audience communities, both of which produce attentive labor power for advertisers and behavioral surplus for platforms, which is also further commodified into prediction products (Mosco 2009; Garnham 1979; Smythe 1977; Zuboff 2019).

In addition, the hyperactivity and interactivity of Internet broadly is characterized by the presence of “free labor” on behalf of users as they generate profits with their clicks and keystrokes (Terranova 2012). Moreover, the most successfully commodified content might even spur fans online to voluntarily contribute free labor to create further content for commodification, provide feedback that will prove useful in helping content producers create and market content that will prove even more popular and profitable, or even provide free marketing and visibility for the content through their shares and mentions on social media platforms (Stanfill 2019; De Kosnik 2012; Andrejevic 2008).

In addition, this free Internet labor of commenting, sharing, and posting may also create online communities around particularly beloved content and content creators such as *The Bee*. According to Miranda Joseph (2002), community and commodification are deeply linked. Starting from the dependence of exchange value and thus commodification on community, Joseph argues first that capitalism depends on community. Ultimately, and perhaps more importantly, she extends her argument to the inverse: that capitalism and particularly the performativity of production are constitutive of community by considering social/cultural activity productive and that commodity itself can confer, to some extent, status, identity, and community (Joseph 2002). As such, creating an audience for published media content can generate value not only through the sale of audience attention to advertisers, but also for the

draw that such a created audience community may hold in retaining audience members and attracting others. In turn, this larger and more consistent audience may be advertised to for larger and more consistent profits. In addition, in *The Bee's* case, a loyal audience is more likely to also purchase *The Bee's* commodified content and center for community activity (i.e. forums, comments sections, and the Not the Bee platform) via the site's premium subscription.

The addition of free Internet labor to the existing trend of immanent commodification in media industries leads me to introduce the process of *recursive commodification*. In immanent commodification, one textual media commodity creates others such as the audience commodity, which is packaged in a variety of ways including immediate attention for advertisers and as prediction products for future advertisers, created from user data. However, when media content inspires users online to commit free labor to interacting with it, more content is created for further commodification and interaction and the cycle begins anew, creating a feedback loop which allows the original content creator and the platform on which the content is hosted to profit each step of the way. Recursive commodification is uniquely enabled by Internet interactivity, and is important to understand in order to fully comprehend the political economy of *The Babylon Bee* and other digital age corporations that employ this practice.

First, it is important to note that the cycle of recursive commodification is not unique to *The Babylon Bee*, but rather is employed by a variety of other Internet-based ventures and companies. With its affordances for advertising, user tracking, and interactivity and especially free user labor, the Internet at large is set up perfectly to enable recursive commodification to continue and for digital capitalists to exploit for profit the pleasure that userbases experience when consuming content and contributing to communities that share an interest in such content. *The Babylon Bee* is merely one example of this, but perhaps the most obvious are the very social

media platforms against which *The Bee* constantly pits itself: in addition to collecting data and showing advertisements (including native advertisements not dissimilar to *The Bee*'s sponsored content), Facebook, Twitter, and other such platforms allow users to create the content that keeps other users constantly coming back. All purveyors of digital content and community, including Facebook and *The Babylon Bee* alike, need to do to continue profiting is to keep the cycle running smoothly: each member of their userbase is both a commodity themselves and a source of free labor to aid in continual content generation and engagement from other members of the userbase.

But *The Babylon Bee* does prove a useful example of how recursive commodification functions on a scale smaller than that of social media behemoths like Facebook. First, the site commodifies its audience by selling their attention to advertisers on its site through banner ads and sponsored content. It commodifies its content and the community it creates by forcing audience members who wish to view premium content and engage in discussion with other members of the broader *Bee* fan community to pay subscription fees in order to do so. Finally, *The Bee* profits from the free labor of this fan community, which aids *The Bee* writers in creating new headlines and articles or even produces original ideas for headline, which helps *The Bee* reach a larger audience and gain more advertising money through commodifying it. User labor also creates the community in comments sections and discussion threads which will cause other audience members to purchase premium subscriptions. After purchasing these subscriptions, some of this new audience will contribute to the unpaid labor of content creation, attracting more fans, and the cycle continues virtually *ad infinitum*, with users willingly adding their own free labor to that of actual employees of The Babylon Bee, LLC in helping the company grow and profit.

The user audience and online community around *The Babylon Bee* provides free labor that aids in both distribution (via shares and algorithm-driving engagements) and both satirical and community-focused content creation while also securing profits for *The Bee* through their own attention, which is sold to advertisers, and – for some users – with their subscription dollars. No doubt, *The Bee* and its employees need to add their own labor to content creation and other duties to keep the site running, but with the engine of recursive commodification running, *The Bee* is incentivized to operate both centrifugally and centripetally. First, the site must reach out, appealing to wider audiences to join *The Bee* community and contribute to the cycle of recursive commodification. Second, it reaches in, ensuring that those already in the loop stay committed to the site and its related community. The remainder of this chapter consists of my effort to understand how *The Babylon Bee* reaches out and in in this manner to maintain its profitable cycle of recursive commodification.

Corpus

To answer the question of how *The Babylon Bee* reaches out, distributing its materials to wider audiences, while also reaching in to maintain its loyal audience community, I expanded my focus beyond *The Bee*'s satire itself. Where scholarship informed by cultural studies tends to focus on media texts and audience consumption and interpretations, that which hews closer to political economy tends to focus more on production and distribution. In other words, for my study of *The Babylon Bee*'s political economy, I was more interested in *The Bee* as a company and organization than on its satire. As such, my primary focus was on non-satirical content including “real” news reporting on *The Bee* and the unironic premium content in which *Bee* staff reflects on the site. Only after examining this content did I refer to *The Bee*'s satire to determine

how my findings from these other sources manifested in *Bee* content, as a test of the reliability of the findings I generated.

First, I collected articles about *The Babylon Bee* or articles and videos that include interviews with its owners and leadership from non-satirical news sources using the databases LexisNexis and Factiva. Because The Babylon Bee, LLC is a small, privately-owned company, these articles and interviews provide the best picture of how *The Bee* operates as a profit-driven entity, as well as providing an outside perspective on the site. I collected twenty-two “real” news articles about *The Bee* from fourteen news sources.¹⁴ These news stories include general information on *The Bee*, reporting on specific *Bee*-related incidents, and interviews with or opinions from *Bee* Founder Adam Ford, Editor-in-Chief Kyle Mann, and CEO Seth Dillon. The articles cover the span of *The Bee*’s existence, with the earliest written in 2016 but a greater number of articles from 2019 and 2020, reflecting the period when *The Bee* surged in popularity and was the subject of several controversies which are described below.

In addition, *The Babylon Bee* offers a variety of non-satirical content and features to its “premium” subscribers, including op-ed-style commentary from *The Bee*’s writers and executives about their content and current events, discussion threads in which premium subscribers can participate, and even a “headline forum,” in which premium subscribers can submit, rate, and comment on satire headlines for publication by the site. I obtained a premium subscription to access these features, which provide an “inside perspective” from *Bee* staffers – especially its CEO, Seth Dillon, and Editor in Chief, Kyle Mann – and members of the site’s

¹⁴ Given the highly partisan nature of *The Bee*, I was also sure to contextualize the articles I uncovered in terms of their source’s ideology. On the whole, this collection of articles is fairly balanced between sources that favor the Left and the Right, though the sources which show conservative bias are more likely to show stronger bias than those which skew liberal: Media Bias/Fact Check identified five articles in my sample from sources that display “Right Bias,” five from sources with “Right-Center Bias,” two from sources listed as “Least Biased,” seven from sources with “Left-Center Bias,” and two from sources with “Left Bias.” One article was from the “News On-the-Record” channel of *MediaVillage* and was not evaluated by Media Bias/Fact Check.

larger online community of subscribers. For my corpus, I gathered all *Bee* premium content that was published in November 2020, including the typical blend of non-satiric commentary and discussion threads from *Bee* writers, the comments sections on articles published in that month, and headline forum submissions and comments from that month. This month was chosen because it proved to be a particularly active month for *The Bee* and its community due to the U.S. presidential election and subsequent contestation over its results. My study also covered the structure of the premium subscription itself and its included features, as these are important to understanding the processes of commodification used by *The Bee*.

Finally, I did reach somewhat beyond the typical boundaries of political economic research to include certain instances of *The Bee*'s mainline satirical content itself. By this inclusion, I was able to query how *The Bee*'s economic processes and incentives manifest in and shape the content commodity they produce, as well as how that content aids the company in profiting from and potentially exploiting the audience community centered around the satirical content. In other words, I included *Bee* satirical content in order to examine how visible the site's practices of recursive commodification is in its primary content commodity. I sampled *The Bee*'s over 8,000 total articles (as of March 2021) purposively, selecting those which relate most directly to my outline of *The Babylon Bee*'s business mode developed from analysis of the first two sources and political economy literature. These satire articles presented the possibilities of challenging or confirming my findings from non-satirical sources. Ultimately, I reviewed 195 *Bee* headlines collected using the following search terms on the site: "Snopes," "Facebook," "satire," "sponsored," "rebel," and "resistance." For those headlines that seemed particularly supportive of or challenging to my themes, I also read the articles themselves. In addition, I

viewed any *Bee* articles specifically mentioned in the “real” news coverage of *The Bee* included in my corpus.

My analysis of this corpus took the form of thematic coding; I found the versatility of this analytic perspective appropriate to wide range of materials included in the corpus for this study. This is a procedure which is exploratory and inductive. With sensitizing concepts in mind to focus my analysis, I analyzed the press articles and *Bee* premium content I have collected, highlighting important points in the data, looking for patterns, and grouping connected segments across texts (Hesse-Biber 2016).

The first sensitizing concept was *The Bee*'s sources of revenue, and how this profit generation is squared with a Christian worldview. Another was *The Bee*'s relationship to and dependence on other major players in the online ecosystem, particularly platforms like Facebook and Twitter, on which *The Bee* depends and from which it derives much of its traffic (and thus profits), and how these relationships can be disrupted by controversies around *The Bee*'s content. Finally, I was attentive to ways in which the owners of *The Bee* perceive themselves as creating an online Christian community, and the extent to which members of that community online might share or modify that perspective. While these concepts serve to keep my analysis in line with my research questions and the relevant literature which I review below, it was equally important to retain a truly inductive approach, letting the data and trends between texts drive my analysis and the manner in which theory was ultimately applied.

Moving forward from reading and coding with sensitizing concepts in mind, I further refined the thematic categories of data generated from the patterns identified during thematic coding, drawing interpretive meaning from the theme and applying existing theory. Finally, to ensure the reliability and validity of these themes, I checked them against the data once more.

For this study, this involves iterative reference to the press surrounding *The Bee* and the premium content from which the themes were inductively generated, as well as application of these themes to *The Bee*'s primary content, its news satire articles.

Based on my thematic coding analysis of my corpus in its several parts, I identified two tactics *The Babylon Bee* uses to maintain its cycle of recursive commodification. In order to reach beyond its existing audience and into the conservative countersphere and even the broader public sphere, *The Bee* relies upon a strategy of marketing its satire, community, and ideology as being defined by resistance. Meanwhile, to keep its existing audience satisfied and engaged, *The Bee* follows a path that is tried and true for other partisan news and opinion media corporations, especially on the Right: constructing an echo chamber for its audience.

Reaching out: marketing resistance

On October 22nd, 2020, *Babylon Bee* Editor-in-Chief Kyle Mann (2020c) posted a short Premium article entitled, "Hey, New Subscribers! Welcome To The Actual Resistance." This post came in reference to the most recent of a number of spats with the online media platforms upon which *The Bee* depends, this time after Facebook threatened to demonetize the page unless they removed a recent article headlined, "Senator Hirono Demands ACB Be Weighed Against A Duck To See If She Is A Witch" (*Bee* 2020ab), a reference to the recent Supreme Court confirmation hearings for Amy Coney Barrett which Facebook claimed might incite violence. *Bee* CEO Seth Dillon positioned this move by Facebook as one of many instances of Facebook and Twitter revealing liberal bias and censoring *The Bee* unjustly, claiming that no such restrictions were placed earlier in the year when a Black Lives Matter leader called on followers to "burn down this system" (as cited in Wulfsohn 2020b). Dillon and *The Bee* refused to remove

the article from their Facebook page, instead redoubling advertising and other efforts to convince their social media audience to subscribe and positioning this subscription money as an act of resistance against the social media platforms and the censorship practices *The Bee* claims are unjust.

This is not the first public dispute between *The Babylon Bee* and social media platforms, nor even Facebook in particular. In 2018, Snopes, then a partner of Facebook which helped the platform in identifying misinformation, flagged as fake news a *Bee* article claiming, CNN had purchased an “industrial-sized washing machine to spin the news,” labelling it with a warning box on Facebook (Mikkelson 2018). Though Facebook admitted that this was an error and that there were protocols on the platform for flagging satire (Wemple 2018), the feud would continue. To date, *The Bee* has published 18 articles critical of Snopes as displaying a liberal bias and wielding its powers of fact-checking unjustly, such as “Snopes Rates Biden’s Claim That $2+2=5$ As ‘Mostly True’” (*Bee* 2019e) and “Snopes Launches New Website To Fact-Check Snopes Fact Checks” (*Bee* 2017c). By 2018, conflict had flared to such an extent and *The Bee*’s leadership was so angered by the necessity of complying with Facebook and Twitter’s policies that when *Bee* Creator Adam Ford sold the site to Seth Dillon, he specifically cited his frustration with Facebook and Google’s “practical duopoly on information” (quoted in Dickson 2020). After again flagging *The Bee* as misinformation in 2019, Snopes ultimately responded by citing a study published by *The Conversation* that suggested that *The Babylon Bee* was more frequently believed to be real news – especially by conservatives – than other news satire sites (Garrett et al. 2019). These fears of a liberal media establishment seem to ring true with *The Bee*’s audience as well: on the user-generated headline forum, suggested articles targeting Facebook or concerned with the idea of censorship more broadly are so widespread that “Facebook” and “censorship”

represent two of only twenty-four searchable topic tags on the forum. Last fall, the conflict between *The Bee* and the platforms upon which it depends reached a head, as the satire site was banned by Twitter (see Wulfsohn 2020a) and with the threat of demonetization from Facebook over the Hirono article mentioned above.

These controversies pitting *The Babylon Bee* against Twitter and Facebook are revealing in a number of ways. First, they reveal the dominance of these platforms in the process of digital content commodification: no matter how much *The Babylon Bee* might like to leave these platforms behind as a result of these spats, the site has stayed extremely active on both. Some of the site's revenue is still derived from ad revenue through attracting traffic, and Facebook and Twitter have staggeringly large userbases which digital content creators hope to access through participation on the platforms.

Beyond this, there is some logic behind the notion that these high-profile spats might actually *increase* the size and loyalty of *The Bee*'s audience and the site's revenues through subscriptions. As discussed in the previous chapter, the claim by producers of conservative news media and news commentary that they exist in opposition to the "liberal media establishment" of mainstream media that has proven successful time and time again since the founding of *National Review* in 1955. It is a tactic for creating a loyal following of conservatives that has proven extremely lucrative for the likes of Fox News, for example. Moreover, with these disputes *The Bee* allows audiences to join the site in a crusade against the hated "liberal media" through the discursive strategy of weaponized victimhood (Bebout 2020). Through its satire and through public confrontations with online platforms that conservatives might consider the newest and most powerful addition to the existing "liberal media," *The Bee* is able to exploit these frustrations already widespread through the American Right, gaining not only revenue through

advertisements and subscriptions, but free audience labor in the form of social media promotion and contributions to their content. Importantly, while the idea of resisting an establishment elite is particularly popular on the American Right at the moment, it is a proposition that can also work transideologically in bringing virtually any audience member with grievances into the fold, which is precisely why it has become such a popular tactic in conservative media.

As suggested above, this notion of *The Babylon Bee* as resisting ongoing efforts to silence or oppress conservatives is one which is forwarded by *The Bee*'s owner and senior leadership, but it is also one which the satire site has successfully sold to its audience. In addition to attacking traditional targets of conservative resentment like CNN – see “CNN Promises Not To Call The Race Unless Biden Ahead” (*Bee* 2020ah) – *The Bee* regularly frames Facebook as a current hegemonic power against which its audience must fight, as in the headlines “Facebook Removing Any Posts Quoting The First Amendment For ‘Encouraging Illegal Activity’” (*Bee* 2020j) and “Facebook Will Now Tell You How To React To News Stories” (*Bee* 2019g). In contrast, *The Bee* exploitatively positions itself and its audience as the heroic resistance, explicitly using that term in reference to living out stereotypical conservative actions such as going to the store during the COVID-19 pandemic without a mask (*Bee* 2020ao) as well as to the act of supporting *The Bee* through direct contributions (subscription fees) and audience labor (providing free publicity through shares and aiding in content creation) in its fight against supposed liberal tyranny (Mann 2020d).

Bee premium subscribers agree across the site with this notion of an oppressive liberal hegemony, perhaps best summarized by user Doug1943, who – in a rhetorical maneuver I would call “imaginative” – references Marx to glorify the American Right as a counterhegemonic force: “Well, Marx did say that the dominant ideology is always the ideology of the dominant class”

(*Bee* 2020z). This also provides *The Bee* and its owners the opportunity to square their exploitation of Christianity for profit generation through sacralization: *The Bee* may be making money off of their endeavor, but at least they are providing what its ownership portrays – and probably earnestly perceives – as a much-needed Christian-conservative satirical voice in a news environment that conservatives have long believed has a liberal and secular agenda (Lane 2020; Ward 2020).

Reinforcing the belief in a hegemonic “liberal media establishment” and a need for resistance is the first step, providing alternative media as a supposed means of resistance is the second. For instance, *The Bee* frequently references the liberal slant of most popular American political satire (already well-documented in this thesis), positioning itself as the alternative voice among other satirists who simply repeat the same viewpoint; one recent headline reads: “‘We Don’t Like Cuomo Now,’ Says Every Late-Night Host In Perfect Robotic Unison” (*Bee* 2021i). Emphasizing *The Bee*’s unique and strategic positioning within the marketplace of online political satire has been a core strategy since *The Bee*’s earliest articles¹⁵ and statements from its owners: Adam Ford originally introduced the site as “*The Onion*... but from a Christian worldview,” claiming his new site was unique in that “satire... belongs almost exclusively to the anti-religious worldview. So *The Bee* aims to change that” (Ford 2016). Here, of course, the “Christian worldview” is conflated with the Right, and the “anti-religious” worldview with the Left, as is common in conservative media of recent decades (Ward 2020).

The Babylon Bee, LLC aims not only to provide an alternative to satire from the Left, but also to “Big Tech” and their popular social media platforms, which it increasingly paints as part of the “liberal media establishment,” as shown above. Recently, *The Bee* has attempted to wean

¹⁵ See again the satirical “quote” from President Obama in the early article “Christian News Satire Site Launches” (*Bee* 2016e), referenced in the introduction.

itself from its reliance on these platforms by creating its own social news-sharing platform, “Not the Bee,” and by pushing for greater numbers of subscribers so that the company is less reliant on ad revenue from traffic generated on Facebook and Twitter. In a recent premium subscriber update, *The Bee* staff explicitly positioned this shift away from reliance on such platforms as one of the benefits of their subscriber model, stating that the model “makes us less dependent on Big Tech oligarchs and allows us to focus on serving YOU instead of their algorithm” (*Bee* 2020af). In response to a recent article by *The New York Times* which originally labelled *The Bee* as “a far-right misinformation site” (Isaac 2021), *The Bee* once again capitalized upon claims of fighting “the liberal media” – *The New York Times* included, of course – by sending an email update to existing subscribers asking that they upgrade their subscription plans as a means of resisting the supposed liberal media elite: “Upgrade today to save satire and make us cancel-proof” (Dillon 2021b).

Notably, premium subscriptions to *The Babylon Bee* are often bundled or marketed alongside “Not the Bee” subscriptions. By reinforcing the notion of social media platforms as a part of the liberal media establishment, *The Bee* gets ad revenue from users who click into their articles agreeing with this stance, subscription fees from users who may be persuaded by the argument that this subscription is part of a “resistance” effort against Big Tech, and additional sellable user data from those who begin to use “Not the Bee” as a platform. In marketing a “problem” of ideological bias in other media sources and increasing audience numbers and profits claiming to be the solution, *The Babylon Bee* follows in the profitable footsteps of other successes of the conservative countersphere, including the *National Review*, Fox News, and – more recently – Parler.¹⁶ Like others of its ilk, *The Bee* suggests that audience support in the

¹⁶ After the riot at the U.S. Capitol by right-wing extremists in January 2021, *Bee* CEO Seth Dillon explicitly associated *The Bee* with Parler, stating that its loss of servers foretold danger for *The Bee*: “Parler did nothing but

form of money, time, and attention is an action which is moral and beneficial, even necessary, to positive political discourse. What it does not dwell on, however, is the benefit of these actions for *The Bee*'s bottom line.

Reaching in: constructing an echo chamber

After successfully reaching out and attracting new members to join *The Bee*'s actively laboring fan community – again, such labor includes sharing articles, commenting, contributing to discussion threads, and drafting headlines in the headline forum – and especially to pay for a premium subscription, *The Bee* must also design its content in a way which will keep its community actively engaged and satisfied. This engagement and satisfaction are key to encouraging the fan audience/userbase to continually offer their free labor – or even labor they pay to do, in the case of premium subscribers – to add energy to the cycle of recursive commodification.

In his own words, Adam Ford originally created *The Babylon Bee* to “bring laughter to the church,” offering humor and a critical but ultimately deeply sympathetic perspective to the experience of being a Christian in the present United States (qtd in Darling 2016; Dickson 2020). Politics, and conservative politics in particular, were a part of the site from the beginning, but it made up a slightly smaller portion of the overall content of the site as compared to satire on religion, lifestyle, and popular culture. *The Bee*'s earliest content was even critical of Donald Trump: the site's sixth ever article was entitled, “Psychopathic Megalomaniac Somehow Garnering Evangelical Vote,” and accompanied by an unflattering picture of Trump (*Bee* 2016b).

host a site where conservatives congregate and speak freely. If that's beyond the pale, no conservative sites are safe.” While suggesting support for Parler, Dillon also ends the email by subtly suggesting that *Not the Bee*, with its “own social network,” might be an appropriate inheritor of Parler's userbase (Dillon 2021a).

Though *The Bee* does occasionally continue to write light jabs poking fun at Trump, the site ultimately found that a better way to retain the audience it profits off of is through supporting Trump as many American conservatives have continued to do: its editors have called their attempts to make jokes at Trump's expense "writing in hard mode," due to the recognition that this will hurt the traffic to *The Bee*'s site and its follower count on social media (quoted in Goldberg 2020). In other words, *The Babylon Bee* has made a conscious decision to prioritize content which reinforces, rather than challenges its audience's beliefs for the sake of profit, even when its writers might prefer to include other perspectives on the site. Like *ClickHole* in Day's (2018) description, *The Babylon Bee* is prioritizing the financial rewards of its audience commodification strategy over the ideological surplus value it can create with its satirical discourse, simply giving people what they want because it is profitable. This implies that *The Bee* intentionally and exploitatively aims to create an echo chamber and suggests that no matter what Mann or Dillon might say publicly about the worth of satire and conservative voices in the public sphere, their site ultimately values revenue over discourse. To this end, such a strategy is an effective way to keep users engaged with their clicking, reading, sharing, and commenting, keeping the cycle of recursive commodification ever moving.

The creation of discursive echo chambers is not an unusual tactic for conservative capitalists in the communications sector or for corporations attempting to thrive in the complex and competitive world of digital commodification. This tactic has been employed in conservative opinion media in print and on the airwaves for decades (Jamieson & Cappella 2008), long before any discussion of filter bubbles as a driving force of polarization (Pariser 2011). As suggested by that term, however, Internet media and especially platforms have only confounded this problem by algorithmically feeding users content which supports preexisting beliefs because they have

found that this increases user engagement time (Vaidhyathan 2018). For digital media companies, increased user engagement time comes correlated with larger profit margins and greater success in the process of commodification through showing advertisements, collecting more user data for prediction products, and even resorting to more traditional means of commodifying content such as *The Bee*'s subscription service.

Sponsored content represents one effective means of extracting value from the loyal and like-minded echo chamber of a following that *The Bee* presides over, as advertisers tend to reinforce the belief structures central to *The Bee* and its readership, assured they will find a sympathetic audience. For instance, the "Classic Learning Test" or CLT, a new, for-profit alternative to the SAT and ACT favored primarily by Christian liberal-arts colleges (Eekhoff Zylstra 2019) advertised itself with a *Bee* article by painting its competitors as brainwashing tools of the liberal elite: "SAT Now Just A Single Page Requiring You To Draw Devil Horns On A Picture Of Trump" (*Bee* 2020ag). Beyond simple commercial advertising, *The Bee* also allows political advertisers to take advantage of its audience constructed to be predisposed to conservatism, including the First Liberty Institute, the 501(c)(3) organization that has defended anti-LGBTQ discrimination on the basis of religious freedom (see Posner 2018). In its sponsored *Bee* article, "Biden Offers Anyone Who Votes For Him A Seat On The Supreme Court" (*Bee* 2020ae), First Liberty both contributes to and takes advantage of *The Bee*'s echo chamber, purchasing the ability to produce more polarizing content via *The Bee* and to advertise their position in support of Amy Coney Barrett. Clearly defined audiences like those present in echo chambers have always been proven a useful commodity to advertisers (Smythe 1977) and this trend remains true in the digital era, even if the means of delivering the advertisements themselves evolve, as in the case of sponsored articles.

The reinforcement of polarized belief systems and the use of sponsored content are not financial strategies unique to *The Babylon Bee*. The site does stand out, however, in its use of audience labor on its headline forum as one means of ensuring matching its content to its audience's existing ideological stances and building its echo chamber and ensnare a greater audience for its future profits. Producers of media content have been using Internet forums to collect feedback from fans for nearly two decades, using this free-market research labor to get a sense of public opinion and create media content that will prove the most popular and profitable (Andrejevic 2008). On its headline forum, *The Babylon Bee* proves to be yet another media company banking on this free labor: *Bee* writers frequently post draft headlines to the forum which users may up- or down-vote, and the most popular of these are ultimately published as full *Bee* articles. In addition, a premium subscription allows users to submit their own original headlines for consideration by the site with no compensation except a sense of pride and a badge for the user's profile. This entire process bears repetition in order fully emphasize its inherent exploitation: users are not only providing free labor, but *paying subscription fees* for the "privilege" of helping *Bee* writers hone their ideas down to their best content and of even providing content to the site. This also ensures that *The Babylon Bee* reinforces its existing audience's beliefs due to the fact that the site's content is selected or created by the audience members themselves. This may also attract more audience members of similar beliefs, serving to increase the audience size and further amplify the echo chamber effect of the site while generating profits for The Babylon Bee, LLC and its owners.

No bad clicks, no bad comments

In describing *The Bee*'s strategies to maintain its cycle of recursive commodification – marketing itself as a resistive publication and creating an echo chamber – I have so far only focused on audiences who are or might be receptive to *The Bee*'s messaging. Of course, this is not always the case. Alternatively, *The Bee*'s connection to the broader public sphere may also draw criticism from outsiders of the conservative countersphere who do not share *The Bee*'s ideology. However, this opposition does not truly interrupt *The Bee*'s model and indeed can even fuel it. Any challenge this may pose to the stable ideology within the countersphere is mitigated by two factors. First, it is easy for *Bee* fans to avoid such opposition if they wish, withdrawing once more to the recesses of the countersphere, especially when the primary fora of *The Bee* require paid subscriptions, and thus some level of commitment to the site and its community and is probably free of such opposition.

Perhaps more importantly, these critiques only fuel the raging laughter of the quasi-carnavalesque and *mundus reinversus* of *The Bee*. When faced with ideological critiques of *The Bee* – in the comments of a Facebook post, for instance – fans of *The Bee* frequently respond in one of three ways. First, they may respond with earnest debate. Second, such criticism may fan the flames of aggrieved entitlement or the perception of persecution of modern-day conservatives, leading *The Bee* or its fans to accuse opponents of hegemonic aspirations, intolerance, and/or hypocrisy – see the article entitled “Party of Love And Tolerance Wishes Death On Political Opponent” (*Bee* 2020f). Finally, in the spirit of carnivalesque inversions and play, fans of *The Bee* may themselves parody or roleplay as “triggered libs,” exaggerating and satirizing typical liberal comments or critiques.

Perhaps because fans of *The Bee* are inspired by the site's satiric and often ironic mode of discourse, this last response seems to be the most common. Frequently, fans of *The Bee* will even preempt possible critiques with such ironic exaggerations of the Left, so much so that *The Bee* has gleefully added a "Comment Generator" to its site, which allows users to post pre-scripted comments that satirize critiques from those who approach *The Bee* from outside its primary discursive community or without the same approach of quasi-carnavalesque play and irreverence: "Conservatives only have two jokes", "Can we get a fact-check here, Snopes?", "This article contains a type of humor that has not been appropriate or funny in my lifetime or yours," or even "I don't think that this is the subject to try to satirize. There's too much hurt and pain to try to laugh off. This tweet and article should have stayed in the drafts folder."

With a devoted fanbase, a position as an alternative to "the liberal media," and the defensive properties of ironic ambiguity and carnivalesque bad taste, *The Bee* does not mind such critiques. In fact, *The Bee* seems to revel in profit from the controversy that ensues when they "trigger the libs" – it only drives engagement on the social platforms on which they still depend. Clicks, shares, subscriptions, headline pitches, controversies, news coverage, and comments both laudatory and disgusted – any engagement with *The Bee* only drives its cycle of commodification and provides more energy to its quasi-carnavalesque revelry.

Chapter Three: Writing for the Right

“SNL? Perfect. Daily Show? Love it! The Onion? So good! But satire aimed at liberals or liberal beliefs? TIME OUT! I KNOW SATIRE, and by it’s [sic] definition, satire is ONLY OK when being used to ruthlessly skewer Republicans and conservative ideals. Once it’s used to criticize progressives, a line has been CROSSED, and it is completely unacceptable. Period! Do better!”

“When Democrats like me use satire, it’s funny, sharp, edgy, smart, and relevant. When conservatives use satire, it’s mean-spirited, low-brow, contrived, intentionally misleading fake news. IT IS LITERAL VIOLENCE. GOT IT??”

-Quotes from enraged progressives on social media, “reported” by *The Bee* (2018c)

So far, I have considered how existing theories of the public sphere and the carnivalesque can be adapted to suit the right-wing satire of *The Babylon Bee*. I have also examined the political economy of *The Bee*, which is critical to understanding how it operates, including its incentives in structuring its site and services, its reliance on social media platforms, and some important strategies it uses to attract and market itself to audiences. Moving past theory and political economy, in this chapter I provide a more detailed view of *The Bee*’s primary means of both communicative and coordinative discourse, the site’s very *raison d’être*: its satire. The crucial question of what conservative satire looks like – above and beyond the flat jokes of *The ½ Hour News Hour* – remains unanswered.

In this chapter, I at last close that crucial gap, more fully examining *The Babylon Bee*’s mainline satirical content in order to determine what common discursive tactics the site employs in its effort to bring news satire to the Right. In order to determine such strategies, I collected the 100 most popular articles published by *The Bee* in 2020, as reported by the “shares” counter at the top of each article on *The Bee*’s website. I chose to focus first on the most shared articles as the ones which most resonated with audiences – whether they were shared out of consensus, for

the laughs, or in outrage or disgust – and which were consequently read by the greatest number of people, shaping *The Bee*'s impact on the conservative countersphere and the public sphere more broadly. I chose 2020 partially for convenience, but also due to the number of hugely significant political – or at least politicized – events that occurred in the year, including the COVID-19 pandemic, the national protests for racial justice following the murder of George Floyd, the death of Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg and the subsequent political contestation over her seat on the Supreme Court, and the presidential election between Donald Trump and Joe Biden. I then performed a close read of these 100 articles, noting common themes and developing from these themes a list of discursive tactics commonly used in *The Bee*'s satire. Finally, for each tactic, I also added to my corpus illustrative *Bee* articles published before and after 2020, drawing from previous analysis of the site.

Ultimately, I identified five discursive tactics which *The Bee* frequently employs in its Right-wing satire: riding irony's edge, resisting "the liberal media" and other institutions, playing the victim, punching down, writing satire "from a Christian worldview," which I describe in further detail below. I end by discussing the "trouble with Trump" that *The Bee* has encountered throughout its years writing satire, as well as what the satirical discourse of *The Babylon Bee* shares with discourse in the conservative countersphere more broadly.

Tactic 1: Riding irony's edge

Frequently, the "play" element of satire can be found in its inclusion of and reliance upon irony. In her foundational *Irony's Edge: The Theory and Politics of Irony*, Linda Hutcheon (1994) argues that irony's defining quality is its "edge": irony frequently carries with it a strong affective charge capable of evoking powerful emotions in its audiences, including both those

who “get it” and those who do not, as well as in its targets (2). Moreover, because irony is “weighted in favor of the unsaid” (37), it is a frequently polysemic mode of communication which is “inclusive” of coexisting but substantially different readings (58). This polysemy means that irony is an inherently risky or “unstable” form of discourse (97) – ironic messages often lead to readings wholly unintended by the ironist (11) but no less affectively charged. In this section, I argue that *The Bee* frequently produces ironic content with a considerable edge, content that is deeply ambiguous and polysemic and produces strong emotional responses in audiences – all of which maximizes online engagement with *Bee* content and drives the site’s bottom line. I also argue that this edge is especially prominent in *Bee* articles dealing with Donald Trump, likely among the most divisive figures in American political history.

Before I begin, I would like to offer a brief caveat to this section. According to Hutcheon, the key to drawing any sort of stable meaning from irony is shared membership in a “discursive community” – defined by “the complex configuration of shared knowledge, beliefs, values, and communicative strategies” (91) – between audience members, or between audience and ironist. The most important discursive community in ironic interpretation is ideology (100), and as I noted in the introduction, the Rightward ideology of *The Babylon Bee* and its typical audience is not one that I share. In this section, I address some of the *Bee* articles I find to be most ambiguous or with the highest potential for polysemy. To attempt to capture the ironic edge of this content, I will attempt to describe what I see as the possible competing meanings that it includes, but given my place outside of *The Bee*’s typical discursive community, it is possible that I will offer interpretations that few if any readers agree with, and likely that I will exclude

interpretations that some audiences might find obvious.¹⁷ In some cases, I will also offer readings I have seen or heard presented by other *Bee* readers.

When *The Babylon Bee* addresses the thorny issue of firearm ownership, irony's edge is readily apparent. Take *The Bee* article headlined "Gun Stores Overwhelmed By People Returning \$600 Guns for \$2000 Guns" (*Bee* 2020aq), published in December 2020 during congressional negotiations over the amount of money to be included in each COVID-19 stimulus check. Is the article enthusiastic about the idea of using government money to purchase firearms, perhaps as a way of "owning the libs" who would advocate both for larger checks and gun control? Or is article critical of the passionate love of gun ownership common on the American Right? My father, a lifelong Republican voter but "Never-Trumper," claimed at the time that it was a hilarious dig at the more gun-crazed segments of the Right and shared the article with his friends – also upper-middle-class conservatives – who agreed with this interpretation.

Bee commentors, however, seem to favor the first interpretation. Comments from subscribers included a GIF arguing emphatically, "If you've got the money, you get the gun" and one commentor who described the article as "Good thinking" because "The left will not give up, they desperately want our guns. How else will they rule us?" Another reacted with a longer anecdote supporting the idea presented in the article: "I hate to write this, after 25 years as a [sic] NRA member finally brought [sic] the first gun with the first \$600 earlier this year. Yes, going to get a few others and stock up on ammonium [sic] with the second \$2,000. I'm not joking. Throw in there shooting classes for the wife. We will be ready when the commies try to take our house and belongings."¹⁸ In a similar vein to the above is the article, "New AR-15 Glows Blue When

¹⁷ Of course, I run these risks in my analysis of *Bee* content throughout this paper; this is simply the content in which I am most aware of irony's edge.

¹⁸ At this point, it is worth briefly describing Poe's Law, which states that "it is difficult to distinguish extremism from satire of extremism in online discussions unless the author clearly indicates his/her intent" (Know Your Meme

Libs Are Near” (*Bee* 2020am). This is another reference to the *Lord of the Rings* franchise, in which the heroic Frodo Baggins’ elven-made sword glows blue when orcs – a race of pure evil – are in proximity. So what is the joke? Is it simply that liberals are faceless hordes of evil that heroic conservatives should mow down with their assault rifles? Is the joke instead that liberals are so convinced of Republican gun obsession and violence that a liberal reader like myself might think that conservatives would see themselves in this way? I am not sure, but I do feel irony’s edge at work.

In a similar display of deep ambiguity, *The Bee* is prone to riffing on the idea that Christian religious beliefs must manifest in conservative political ideology, all while propagating this very perspective themselves, as demonstrated in the previous section. One article, “Local Pastor Clarifies ‘Being Salt And Light’ Actually Means ‘Voting Republican’” (*Bee* 2018d) addresses this head-on. Here, *The Bee* seems to be fighting the notion that Christian faith necessitates a conservative politics – but, as will be explained later in this chapter, the rest of the *The Bee*’s content suggests just the opposite. One line in the article suggests a slightly more nuanced reading is possible: “Mensing [the pastor] argues that by voting for the GOP, Christians are being a light to the world and salt to their communities, ‘a powerful witness to the glory of Republicanism.’” Perhaps instead of my original interpretation, others might read this article as a critique of Christians who see their politics as more important than their faith – shouldn’t they instead be a witness to the glory of God? Similar to this article is another, headlined “Scholars Now Believe Phrase Jesus Wrote In The Dirt Was ‘Own The Libs’” (*Bee* 2019d). Regardless of what *The Bee* actually intended with these articles that seem to contradict the site’s own stated

qtd. in Milner 2016, 19). I believe these comments were made unironically, but especially in the comments section of a satire site, one can never be sure.

ideology, thanks to the ambiguity and polysemy afforded by the ironic mode, audiences are free to interpret them in a wide variety of ways.

What is more, it seems that *The Bee*'s writers are very aware of the fact that they are writing highly ambiguous content. In a *Bee* premium article entitled "How To Write A Bangin' Babylon Bee Headline," Editor-in-Chief Kyle Mann (2020a) makes this point outright while giving tips to subscribers submitting headlines to the forum: "You don't always have to make a point – As Frank says, the best jokes are the ones that make you go, 'That's so stupid!' *Some* of our satire is intended to be very cutting and make an important political, doctrinal, or cultural point. But sometimes the best comedy either makes fun of both sides of an issue or just satirizes the entire debate." Given my definition of satire as playful commentary, this raises the question of whether such articles by *The Bee* can even be truly considered satire if they do not have a particular critique or commentary to make. Regardless, it is clear that *The Bee* itself finds such ambiguity and polysemy as I have presented in this section acceptable, and even encourages it in its content.

Furthermore, the inherent ambiguity of *The Bee*'s satire is perhaps amplified by or contributed to by its home on the Internet. As described by Phillips and Milner (2017), Internet culture is frequently defined by ambivalence in its frequently ironic, playful, or otherwise satiric modes of discourse. Much like satire more broadly, this ambivalence can be marginalizing or subversive (13), and frequently both at once. As such, Internet-based satire – a devilish hybrid of two slippery, polysemic forms of communication – can be difficult terrain for textual analysis. While the other discursive tactics I introduce throughout the remainder of this chapter are supported by *Bee* articles that I feel have clearer dominant interpretations than the ones I use as examples here, it is important to keep this polysemy in mind; your interpretation of these articles

may differ meaningfully from my own, which may in turn differ from the interpretations of other *Bee* readers and from the *Bee* writing staff's intended commentary.

Tactic 2: Resisting “the liberal media” and other institutions

In the previous chapters, I introduced and referenced the claim of the “liberal media establishment” that has become central to American conservative politics for nearly seventy years. Rather than once more detailing the history and significance of this belief to the modern American Right, I will provide an overview of the ways in which this belief manifests in *The Bee*'s satire. When *The Babylon Bee* references the “liberal media,” it frequently refers to three groups: the mainstream news media, Big Tech (especially social media platforms), and Hollywood and celebrity culture more broadly. Furthermore, other popular articles from *The Bee* suggest that the media – already broadly construed, considering the range of the three categories above – is just one of many institutions dominated by liberalism, and that institutional resistance across the board is key to understanding the conservative satire of the present moment.

The central argument of the “liberal media” critique of the mainstream news media is straightforward: news sources have a staunch liberal bias and will do whatever it takes to make political actors and positions on the Left appear favorable while denigrating everything associated with the Right, all while maintaining a hypocritical veneer of journalistic integrity and objectivity in order to indoctrinate the masses. In its most exaggerated content along these lines, *The Bee* suggests that the mainstream news media are so liberally biased that major news networks might go as far as to interfere with federal electoral processes: “CNN Promises Not To Call The Race Unless Biden Is Ahead” (*Bee* 2020ah).

A more common critique is that mainstream news sources exploit their positions as reporters of current events to frame news in a light that inherently favors the liberal position; an oft-repeated example of this was the characterization of Black Lives Matter protests following the murder of George Floyd by police in the summer of 2020 as “mostly peaceful” despite footage of looting. In one article suggesting such skewed framing, *The Bee* compares this to a fictional “Gondor News Network” in the *Lord of the Rings* franchise portraying the orc armies – an obviously evil and violent force – as “mostly peaceful” protestors (*Bee* 2020t).

In its ever-popular content portraying mainstream news media as manipulative and illegitimate, *The Bee* found a useful character in Donald Trump, who has famously been making similar claims that mainstream journalism is in fact “fake news” since announcing his 2016 bid for the presidency. In particular, *The Bee* adopted Trump’s claim that mainstream news would do anything to portray him in a negative light, from actively twisting his statements – see “Trump Says To Drink Lots Of Water, Media Reports He Told Everyone To Drown Themselves” (*Bee* 2020k) – to inventing or not properly vetting anonymous sources critical of Trump – as in “Anonymous White House Source Claims Trump Punched A Baby” (*Bee* 2020v).

Regardless of the precise claim, it is clear that the notion of unforgivable liberal bias in mainstream news media achieves *The Bee*’s goal of creating content that receives a large number of shares. The most popular article on the topic in 2020, with nearly two million shares, is entitled “Trump Installs Ejection Seats Throughout Press Briefing Room” (*Bee* 2020h) and is exactly what it seems like it would be: a fantastical quasi-carnavalesque celebration of the idea of physically injuring the “enemy” of the mainstream news media – in particular CNN correspondent and frequent target of Trumpian ire Jim Acosta – for such offenses as “parroting Chinese propaganda” or “insulting the president”. As with other core beliefs of the conservative

countersphere, *The Bee* at once finds an existing audience of conservatives who believe in and express distaste for a “liberal media establishment” and further reinforces those beliefs with its content.

The Bee’s criticism of social media platforms as the digital-age inheritors of the “liberal media” mantle follows a similar logic to the one described with reference to the mainstream news media above: the liberal elite dominate Big Tech and consistently use their power to propagate liberal stances while attempting to refute or bury conservative ones. The difference from the idea of a liberal news media is that rather than creating biased news content themselves, platforms are portrayed more as censors that promote or silence online voices as befits some grand liberal agenda. In some articles, this censorship involves simply removing content or users which *The Bee* perceives as benefitting conservative causes or hurting liberal ones, as in the article “Twitter Shuts Down Entire Network To Slow Spread Of Negative Biden News” (*Bee* 2020ac).¹⁹ More frequently, *Bee* articles imply that this censorship occurs through biased use of platforms’ affordances to flag dis- or misinformation on their sites: used too sparingly on liberal sources – “Snopes Rates Biden’s Claim That 2+2=5 as ‘Mostly True’” (*Bee* 2019e) – while used overzealously against conservative sources – “Trump Tweet Reading ‘Good Morning, America!’ Labeled As Misinformation” (*Bee* 2020aj).

As suggested in the previous chapter, this notion is of particular importance to *The Bee*, as articles on the satire site has repeatedly been flagged as misinformation by Snopes, Facebook, and Twitter, and such high-profile feuds are likely to ultimately draw attention and profits to *The Bee* from those who read about the conflicts and are predisposed to agree with the notion of social media platforms as liberally biased censors. Ultimately, *The Bee* implies that no matter

¹⁹ For further context, this article was released soon after Facebook and Twitter decided to block a *New York Post* article alleging scandal by Joe Biden’s son, Hunter Biden, which was of questionable veracity at the time.

their methods – whether by removal of content and users or by misinformation tags – social media platforms are inimical to the American values of freedom of speech – “Facebook Removing Any Posts Quoting The First Amendment For ‘Encouraging Illegal Activities’” (*Bee* 2020j) – and even freedom of thought – “Facebook Will Now Tell You How To React To News Stories” (*Bee* 2019g).

Though they traffic in entertainment rather than news, Hollywood and American celebrities in general are nonetheless portrayed by *The Bee* as just one more facet of the supposed liberal media establishment. For the entertainment industry, *The Bee*'s critique appears to be that these media elites are shamelessly pandering to the “woke” crowds, both in their self-presentation and industry culture, as in “Hollywood Unveils New ‘Walk Of Shame’ For Conservative Actors” (*Bee* 2021g), and in their entertainment media content itself, as in “Sesame Street Introduces ‘Todd’, A White Male Muppet Who Is Blamed For Everything” (*Bee* 2021o) and “Paw Patrol Replaces Chase The Cop With Karl The Antifa Rioter” (*Bee* 2020o). As in articles criticizing the perceived bias of news media and online platforms, the primary concern regarding these theorized manifestations of liberalism in media content is that they amount to a form of indoctrination, especially of children, as is apparent in this statement in the above “Paw Patrol” article from a fictional Nickelodeon executive “It was never our intention to show toddlers that police officers might be good sometimes. We are so, so sorry. Karl is a great role model for your kids: he hates fascism and shows it by destroying things.”

A favorite target of *The Bee* in this category is the site's competition on the Left side of the market for news satire, particularly late-night hosts, whom *The Bee* portrays as drone-like yes-men truly in line with, rather than holding to account the liberal elite in politics and the news media. A *Bee* headline after the recent publication of sexual harassment allegations against

Democratic New York Governor Andrew Cuomo reads, “‘We Don’t Like Cuomo Now’ Says Every Late-Night Host In Perfect Robotic Unison” (*Bee* 2021i), and features a very effectively designed collage of these comedians striking eerily similar poses, reinforcing the *Bee*’s implied message of sameness. Of course, given *The Bee*’s position as the premier site of political satire on the Right, bashing the liberal competition is also good business insofar as it calls attention to *The Bee*’s unique position.

The supposition of a “liberal media establishment” is a clever discursive maneuver that has been popular in the conservative countersphere for decades: the more it is repeated by conservative sources which truly *do* have an apparent ideological bias, the more audiences believe in the presence of liberal bias in news sources that have not been found to have significant biases (Watts et al. 1999; Jameson and Cappella 2008, xi). Furthermore, the more largely neutral or at least moderate media organizations are seen as being biased, the more justified and reasonable the idea of strictly conservative news sources in opposition to these sources becomes among the same audiences, moving the entire dialogue to the Right. Perhaps taking a cue from the recent populist turn of American conservatism in the Trump era, *The Bee* does not stop at throwing suspicion of hegemonic ideological aims on the media, but extends such criticisms to a variety of institutions including education, the justice system, and – most surprisingly for a conservative publication – even corporations.²⁰ As I argue in the previous chapter and as is supported by decades of success of the “liberal media establishment” belief in the conservative countersphere, *The Babylon Bee* is incredibly successful in marketing its content and its ideology as bastions of resistance against hegemony.

²⁰ See, respectively: “Teachers Urge Government To Reopen Schools Before Students Learn To Think For Themselves” (*Bee* 2020g), “Judge Dismisses Sexual Assault Allegations Against Biden On Grounds That He Is Not A Republican” (*Bee* 2020l), and “Man Who Agrees With The Media, Universities, Corporations, And Hollywood Thinks He’s Part Of The Resistance” (*Bee* 2020z).

By foregrounding opposition to the most central institutions in American society, *The Bee* is able to appeal to any potential audience members who are discontent with such sprawling, multi-faceted groups as the media, education, the courts, and big business, all before or without even offering stances of their own beyond mere dissatisfaction. The notion of joining a vaguely defined “resistance” casts a broad net.

Tactic 3: Playing the victim

The natural extension of the idea of liberally dominated institutions explained above is the notion that conservatives are oppressed in the present-day United States, experienced as aggrieved entitlement and communicated through discourses of weaponized victimhood. It is difficult to say which phenomenon informs the other – do feelings of victimhood necessitate the impression of biased institutions or vice versa? – but it is clear that the two beliefs are deeply intertwined. *The Babylon Bee*’s satire track’s closely with Bebout’s (2020) description of “weaponized victimhood,” introduced in the first chapter of this thesis.²¹ This material capitalizes on the recent feelings of aggrieved entitlement felt by many conservatives, especially those who occupy historically privileged identities (e.g. white, male, Christian, straight)²² (Kimmel 2013, xiv, 24; Bebout 2020, 77). Adhering to the reinversion of the social hierarchy in the quasi-carnavalesque, as explained in the first chapter, *The Bee* not only portrays conservatives as victims in the present-day United States, but also extends this imagined victimhood to more specific identities such as white and Christian Americans in fantastical and exaggerated ways,

²¹ To review - according to Bebout, discourses of weaponized discourse i) “deploy hyperbole,” ii) “assert a moment of crisis,” iii) “claim victimhood,” and iv) “appear on the political right of the United States” (64). As I hope will make clear in this section, all four characteristics appear in the satire of *The Bee*.

²² These four privileged groups all lean Right in the United States, according to recent data from Pew Research Center (Pew Research Center 2018; Kiley and Maniam 2016).

prompts its audience to ironically roleplay as liberal “snowflakes” who they perceive as defaulting to cries of their own victimhood, and casts *The Babylon Bee* itself as a victim of the “political correctness” and “cancel culture” that conservatives love to hate.

The satire of *The Babylon Bee* is prone to suggesting that in an age of communicated dominated by the “liberal media,” the very political identity of conservatism is one that is no longer seen as acceptable in the public sphere. In my opinion, perhaps *The Bee*’s cleverest expression of this belief is in the article headlined, “Katy Perry Releases Controversial New Single ‘I Kissed A Republican And I Liked It.’” The body of this article further claims, “Leftists are upset that the artist is apparently endorsing a bizarre alternative lifestyle like getting along with people you disagree with” (*Bee* 2020a). This article seems to suggest that under the implied liberal hegemonic culture, conservatives now occupy the marginalized and publicly detested position that members of the LGBTQ community might once have experienced,²³ providing a prime example of the hyperbole and reversals of status inherent to weaponized victimhood. The article also ends with yet another dig at the “liberal media establishment” that demonstrates how the two beliefs work in tandem, adding the detail that “YouTube flagged [the song] as ‘potentially problematic content.’” This reimagination of conservatives in the place of historically marginalized identities – it is worthy to note that these are frequently ones born into, and not chosen, like conservative ideology – continues with similar reversals, as in “Office Conservative Clearly A Diversity Hire” (*Bee* 2021e).

Along with these reversals, *The Bee* toys with the idea of conservatism being immediately associated with bigotry in liberal minds, especially the notion that anybody who voted for Donald Trump must be a bigot: as “reported” in an article ironically introducing the

²³ The original song title being, of course, “I Kissed A *Girl* And I Liked It,” and plays off of the socially conservative notion of homosexual behavior as taboo.

new “AR-16” rifle – which is simply an AR-15 rifle wearing a “Make America Great Again” hat – is seen as deadlier by liberals because of its alignment with Trump, “being-scared-by-guns expert Noah Carlson... warned that the gun was probably racist and sexist and that he wouldn’t be surprised if it was also rude to women” (*Bee* 2020c).

The Babylon Bee’s satire also frequently describes or imagines situations in which identities associated with historical privilege and with the Right, such as whiteness and Christianity, are valued less or given fewer privileges in the present-day United States, if not outright victimized or oppressed. During the Black Lives Matter protests in the summer of 2020, *The Bee* published an article titled, “Clever Churchgoers Avoid Arrest By Disguising Themselves As Rioters.” The article clearly suggests that liberal support for restrictions on religious gatherings due to the COVID-19 pandemic alongside support for the continuation of gatherings racial justice protests was hypocritical and clearly favored one identity group associated with the Left (Black people) over one associated with the Right (Christians). This frustration is compounded by the fact that many conservative outlets, including *The Bee*, focused on conflicts with police, looting, and vandalism to portray these protests instead as primarily violent “riots” – the article reports that “[s]ome of the [church] attendees were forced to stage brawls in order to keep up appearances” (*Bee* 2020m). From *The Bee*’s perspective and that of many other conservatives, this perceived inequity could only be because of the bias of the “liberal establishment” against conservatives.

Similarly, *The Bee* has found great success in satirical fantasies that picture white Americans as an oppressed or reviled racial group, drawing associations with the typically conservative notion of “reverse racism.” Indeed, *The Bee*’s most-shared article of all time – with nearly ten million shares, according to *The Bee* website – is such a fantastical reversal: “Cracker

Jack Changes Name To More Politically Correct Caucasian Jack” (*Bee* 2020q). The article pokes fun at the slew of corporations that opted to modify their branding to remove racially insensitive elements in 2020, perhaps most prominently (and announced on the same day this *Bee* article was released) Aunt Jemima syrup.

Around the same time and broaching a similar topic to the above articles, *The Bee* published an article I have found more bewildering than any other on the site: “Chick-Fil-A Now Open On Sunday But Only For Black People” (*Bee* 2020r). The body of the article includes the following copy:

Chick-fil-A will be providing racial justice training for all its employees. Sunday employees will all be required to wear traditional African Kente cloths as they serve food in the dining room. They will also offer to shine customer’s sneakers for free as they eat.... When addressing white people, workers will still say “my pleasure!” When addressing people of color, workers will now say “my privilege!” while kneeling respectfully. Further changes will be seen during the rest of the week as well. Dining rooms will be rearranged to provide a separate place of honor for minorities to sit. They will also be provided with separate bathrooms and drinking fountains. Chick-fil-A leadership insists this new “separate and more equal” policy will make their restaurants bright shining beacons of racial reconciliation for the world to emulate. (*Bee* 2020r)

A generous reading of this article – published on Juneteenth, the holiday celebrating the emancipation of the final enslaved African-Americans – would be that *The Bee* saw the corporate gestures towards racial inequities in the summer of 2020 as performative and actually counterproductive to improving the lived experience of Black Americans – Chick-fil-A CEO Dan Cathy is “quoted” earlier in the article as stating that “everyone knows the best way to achieve racial reconciliation is to segregate black people and make them feel as awkward as possible.” How *The Babylon Bee*, seemingly exclusively staffed by white men (*Bee*, “About Us”), might have received such insight into the Black reaction to these corporate announcements and messages remains an open question. On the other hand, the article truly seems to focus much more on the white experience, exaggerating such corporate shows of support for the Black

community not only to the level of “reverse racism,” but even to an inversion of Jim Crow laws that enforced racial segregation, with much more favorable treatment given to white over Black Americans in the South.²⁴

It is worth noting that even in the above, highly exaggerative and even fantastical article, the complaint that white Americans are being treated *worse* than previously, but rather that other identity groups – in this case Black people – are being privileged at a higher level than they are. Any number of demographic indicators might cast serious doubt on this notion, but it is consistent with the experience of aggrieved entitlement described by Kimmel (2013): the feeling of having one’s historical privilege relative to other groups can easily spur false senses of injustice or oppression. The problem with this feeling is when it evolves into a discourse of weaponized victimhood and has the effect of drawing attention away from and obscuring systems of *actual* victimhood or inequity (Bebout 2020, 76). Much as conservative media outlets normalize their beliefs by painting the mainstream, politically neutral media as “liberal,” privileged groups may retain their privilege by promoting the notion that they are already equally as oppressed as, if not more oppressed than other groups.

As I have suggested in previous chapters, *The Bee* also frequently portrays itself as a symbol of this conservative victimhood in both its content both satirical and non-satirical. Building on my previous explanations of *The Bee*’s conflicts with media companies including Facebook, Twitter, Snopes, CNN, and *The New York Times* from instances when *The Bee* has been flagged as misleading or disinformation, I argue that *The Bee* regularly wages war against a

²⁴ As I mention briefly above, I have always found this article particularly bewildering. I also think that irony’s edge is especially prominent in this article, and the reasons for its truly massive number of shares might vary widely, from those who enjoyed the article and feel the interpretation I provide matches their beliefs, to those who find the article racist and want to share their distaste for the satire with others, to the possibility that some people read only the headline and not the more troubling body text, and shared it as one silly and pop-culture-driven suggestion for a form of reparations.

strawman argument from the “liberal media establishment” that “satire” is a label which can only be applied to content on the Left. Returning once more to the *Bee* article about the site’s own launch, it paints liberal elites including then-President Obama as attempting to the “far-left” (*Bee* 2016).

The Bee has only doubled down on this supposed liberal belief in the intervening years with pieces such as “Report: Satire Is Great, As Long As It Never Targets Any Of My Own Beliefs” (*Bee* 2016e), and “Liberals Remind Nation Satire Only OK When Mocking Conservatives” (*Bee* 2018c), and the infographic “Is It Satire, Or Dangerous Disinformation?” (*Bee* 2021f). With content highlighting conservative, Christian, and white victimhood, *The Babylon Bee* attracts audiences experiencing aggrieved entitlement, reinforces the belief that they are being unjustly treated in the present-day United States, and presents itself as a symbol of the proof that the “liberal establishment” won’t even let conservatives make jokes these days.

Tactic 4: Punching down

In my own experience writing political satire for print and digital publication, in a format not dissimilar to that used by *The Babylon Bee* and *The Onion*, the cardinal rule is “Always punch up.” Whether the satire in question is Swift’s famous “A Modest Proposal” or a much smaller publication, like the university-level journal I write for, the discursive value of such political humor is often found in its ability to “punch up,” questioning and denaturalizing elites, institutions, and dominant ideologies. This temporary shift in the power balance is brought about by irony’s cutting edge, as well as the derisive laughter and social inversions of the carnivalesque. While this power is useful in levelling the playing field when used to question or mock elites, it can be devastatingly harmful when turned against common people with a less

powerful voice than the satirical publication in question, and especially when used against people or groups already facing considerable societal inequities. When used to punch down against these groups, satire can quickly become a way of maintaining social hierarchies by ridiculing the bottom strata, reinforcing the dominant classes sense of their own superiority. I argue that *The Babylon Bee* does this. Perhaps white, Christian, and conservative contributors to and fans of *The Bee* truly consider themselves victims in contemporary culture, as examined above, but this does not erase the impact of such satire in further diminishing already marginalized groups, especially those of non-binary and trans identities.

As may have been apparent in the previous section, *The Babylon Bee* is not especially sensitive in its content that deals with race. Two years after Democratic Senator Elizabeth Warren made national news for claiming Native American heritage, and supporting this claim with a DNA test that showed only minor amounts of Native American genetic ancestry, *The Bee* was still using the story as an excuse not only to poke fun at Warren – to be expected of a political satire site addressing a political opponent – but also to further Native American stereotypes seemingly mostly informed by Disney’s *Peter Pan* and *Pocahontas*, as in “Warren Rejects Peace Pipe Offered By Sanders” (*Bee* 2020a) and “Warren Returns To Tribe In Shame After Failing To Take Land Back From The Pale Faces” (*Bee* 2020d). Similarly, *The Bee* showed little sympathy for discussions of racial inequity throughout the Black Lives Matter protests of 2020, opting instead to depict protestors associated with the movement as violent “Antifa rioters.” As the year wore on, *The Bee* so thoroughly demonized such protestors that some articles on the topic simply revel in quasi-carnavalesque offensiveness and grotesque bodily degradation at the expense of the protestors (Bakhtin 1968, 19; Fiske 2010, 66), encouraging audiences to fantasize about protestors being covered in bird excrement – “With Statues Gone,

Pigeons Forced To Poop On Rioters” (*Bee* 2020s) – or fatally run over by trains – “Upping The Ante: Protestors Now Attempting To Stop High-Speed Freight Trains” (*Bee* 2020w).

The Bee is similarly critical of and unsympathetic to women and feminism, going so far in one article – “Woman Escapes The Patriarchy To Find Freedom In Grueling 80-Hour Work Week” (*Bee* 2021j) – as to suggest that the historical lack of employment opportunities for women in favor of housewife or homemaker roles might have actually been to women’s benefit, saving them from “unreasonable demands from male co-workers and sometimes even sexual harassment.” After Fox News host Tucker Carlson recently made a slew of sexist comments diminishing the ability of women in the United States military, *The Bee* responded in “defense” of female soldiers with a list of “advantages” they have over male soldiers, including “They can’t do as many push-ups, which helps the self-esteem of the male soldiers,” “They are very submissive and good at taking orders,” “They don’t throw grenades well, so the enemy will never know what to expect,” and “You can pay them way less, which gives you more money for weapons and ammo” (*Bee* 2021k). No doubt, *The Bee* would state that this outright sexism was written somehow ironically, but what other message could have been intended is unclear, and that also does not seem to be how many of their commentators interpret this article. Instead, many simply added to the list with their own misogynistic suggestions or outright commended the article with praise such as, “This is so politically incorrect it’s refreshing!”

Likewise, when American soccer star and outspoken feminist Megan Rapinoe recently met with Joe and Jill Biden to give a speech on “Equal Pay Day,” *The Bee* responded by suggesting that a team of teenage boys could defeat the U.S. Women’s National team in soccer, and should thus also deserve equal pay, at once insulting the team’s skill on the basis of gender and implying that men should be paid more because they are simply *better* – the article may have

been explicitly about soccer, but a reading that applies this logic to the wage gap more broadly is well within reason. *The Babylon Bee* – again, staffed only by white men – is not only unsympathetic to pleas from racial minorities and women for social justice, but chooses to punch down, ridiculing the very notion that such change is merited by these groups.

The most frequent targets of *The Babylon Bee*'s downward punches, however, are those of trans or non-binary gender identities. Already part of a deeply marginalized identity group, such gender nonconforming individuals are regularly lambasted by *The Bee*, which frequently portrays adherence to biological sex assigned at birth as at once commonsense, biblical, and “scientific.” A recent quiz from *The Bee* that claims to answer the question “What Gender Are You?” asks a short handful of irrelevant questions about safe driving ability and movie preference before ending on the question “what kind of chromosomes do you have?”, the answer to which alone determines the two possible results: man or woman (*Bee* 2021b). The idea that there would be any more genders or that anybody could not conform to this binary is seen as absurd – *The Bee* regularly jokes about the number of accepted genders, making up numbers in the tens of thousands – and simply a part of liberal indoctrination – “‘There Are More Than Two Genders,’ Tortured Employee Forced To Say In Darkened Room At Google Headquarters” (*Bee* 2018a).

The Bee finds identification beyond sex assigned at birth so funny, in fact, that it released a list of its “Top 10 ‘Identifies As’ Jokes” (*Bee* 2021b) to its premium subscribers to help them sift through the content, many of which seem to suggest that such identification is somehow insincere and opportunistic. Example headlines from this list include “Man Identifying As 6-Year-Old Crushes Game-Winning Homer In Tee-Ball Championship” (*Bee* 2017b), “Man Identifies As Woman Just Long Enough To Voice Valid Opinion On Abortion” (*Bee* 2019c), and

“Church Service Canceled After Guitar Cable Identifies As Female” (*Bee* 2017a). Going a step further, *The Bee* is quick to make transphobic jokes at the expense of particular individuals when they come out in the public eye, such as when actor Eliot Page came out as transgender in the fall of 2020. In “Elliot Page Retroactively Awarded 17 Oscars For Amazingly Convincing Portrayals Of Women” (2020am), *The Bee* toys derisively with the idea of such a transition and the expected use of personal pronouns, sarcastically stating that “Page himself is a man, which is something we definitely believe, as you can tell by our use of words like ‘his’ and ‘himself’” and inherently challenging the validity of the coming out process. Such explicit assertions that trans and non-binary identities are invalid can only serve to reinforce existing systems of marginalization and could not be a clearer example of *The Bee*’s nasty tendency to punch down.

I suggested at the beginning of this section that due to the narrative of weaponized victimhood, *The Bee* almost certainly does not see its humor as punching down, but rather as humor at the expense of groups favored by the liberal establishment. One *Bee* article, however, suggests that *The Bee* is very aware of the “punching down” critique, and is even willing to defend the practice outright. In “Billionaire Bruce Wayne Criticized For Punching Down,” *The Bee* imagines that in the fictional Gotham City, home of Batman, liberal activists might use the “punching down” line of argument even to criticize the legendary comic book hero: “Bruce Wayne is a white male with billions of dollars.... He is one of the most privileged people in existence. And who is he attacking? People below the poverty line he says are ‘muggers.’ And he often punches mentally ill clowns. The sickest thing is that he seems to think we should praise him for this” (*Bee* 2019f). Perhaps *The Bee* is not implicitly referencing its own satire with this article, but its message is applicable nonetheless: according to *The Bee*, sometimes punching down is necessary. After all, aren’t the victims of Bruce Wayne’s downward punches violent

criminals? People who are clearly, obviously evil in true comic book fashion? If *The Bee* envisions itself as the Batman of political satire, this hardly provides a fair view of the subaltern groups at which *The Bee* aims some of its most vicious jabs.

Tactic 5: Writing political satire “from a Christian worldview”

Though *The Babylon Bee* is most notable today for the conservatism of its satire, those who run the site have always seen it as first and foremost “Christian news satire,” without any explicit mention of political ideology (Ford 2016; *Bee* 2016e). In some ways, it is odd that a media organization that defines itself by this religious identification might skew so staunchly towards one end of the American political spectrum. After all, American Christians are roughly split across the two major political parties: in 2014, Pew Research Center (2014) found that 43% of American Christians identified as Republicans or Republican-leaning and 40% Democrats or Democrat-leaning, with 17% not leaning either way, and the majority of Americans in both parties self-identifying as Christian. However, the claim of being the sole or true representative of Christianity in politics is not new in American conservatism, especially in conservative news and news-adjacent media.

The key to this discursive maneuver by conservative elites is the notion of politics “from a Christian worldview.” With this strategically ambiguous phrase, creators of news content on the Right are able to appeal to believers across the many denominations and divergent branches of Christianity, and suggest a divinely authoritative stance on social and political current events based on Biblical application and interpretation (Ward 2020, 24).²⁵ Moreover, this “Christian

²⁵ That this application and interpretation is done by mere humans and not divine entities, and that other justifiable, Biblically-informed interpretations are possible are caveats that are rarely mentioned in media content that claims to present a “Christian worldview.”

worldview” is often defined via dualistic juxtaposition with and opposition to some ill-defined non-religious worldview, frequently represented by *other* and especially “mainstream” news sources and typified by stereotypical conservative beliefs about “the liberal bias that characterizes so much of the ‘mainstream’ media,” characterized by “darkness” and “the philosophies of this world” (Christian radio news promotions and talk show openings quoted in Ward 2020, 24).

The idea that *The Babylon Bee* is “satire from a Christian worldview” has been present from its very origins: that phrase is used verbatim to describe *The Bee* in Adam Ford’s (2016) announcement of the site’s launch and *The Bee*’s self-introduction, titled “Christian News Satire Site Launches” (*Bee* 2016e). This early article also includes the notion that previous (read: liberal) satire “articulat[ed] a specific brand of worldview: far-left, anti-religion, naturalist, nihilist.” Since then, the discourse of the “Christian worldview” has manifested itself in *The Bee*’s content through the outright association of godliness with political conservatism and blasphemous secularism with political liberalism, as well as the sacralization of *The Bee*’s own content.

When “Christian worldview” discourse is applied to social and political content in the conservative countersphere, the ultimate implication is typically that conservatism and particularly the politics of the Republican Party are Biblically grounded and that the liberal agenda is not only atheistic and secular, but anti-religious and even anti-Christian at its core. Despite the ironic mode frequently used by *The Bee*, it hardly takes a lifelong member of the Christian-conservative discursive community to tell when *The Bee* is making such implications: one of the site’s top twenty most popular articles of all time is headlined, “In Bold Anti-Trump

Statement, Pelosi Rips Up Bible” (*Bee* 2020n)²⁶ and has over two million shares, according to *The Bee*. The dualism of “Christian worldview” discourse is on full display in this title: the most powerful member of the Democratic party bears active disdain for the Bible and those associated with it, which – given that this fictional act is “Anti-Trump” – prominently includes Donald Trump.

Other headlines are similarly straightforward in making this claim, for instance “Democrat Watching RNC Unsure Who This ‘God’ Guy They Keep Mentioning Is” (*Bee* 2020u) and “Democrats Hiss In Terror As ACB [Amy Coney Barrett] Pulls Out Crucifix” (*Bee* 2020aa). While these simplistic “liberals are godless” headlines frequently receive the most shares, *The Bee* does also address some more specific positions typical of liberals that it portrays as being antithetical to the Christian worldview, as in “Bibles Pulled From Shelves For Outdated Idea That All Humans Are Of One Race And Made In The Image Of God” (*Bee* 2020p) or “Confessionals Installed Outside Polling Places So Catholics Can Confess Sin Of Voting For A Pro-Abortion Candidate [i.e. Joe Biden]” (*Bee* 2020ai). It is worth noting that in the second of these articles, in the Christian worldview, so strong is the association between Christian faith and Rightward politics that *The Bee* suggests that the mere act of voting for a Democrat is a sin, albeit in a satire article.

Were the above headlines insufficient evidence, a recent op-ed for Premium subscribers written by the Managing Editor of *The Babylon Bee* makes the perspective on the Left from a “Christian worldview” abundantly clear:

Progressivism errs because it sets up humanity as our only hope for achieving Utopia. According to them, it is the systems we build, and the judges we appoint who will bring our world to a place of perfect justice. It doesn’t matter how many dead bodies this hubris

²⁶ For context, this article was published several months after Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi had torn up a printed copy of Trump’s 2020 State of the Union address, and two days after Trump infamously cleared a path of Black Lives Matter protestors with tear gas for a photo op in front of a church, holding a Bible.

has given us in several millennia of following it. It doesn't matter that this self-worship is the sin of Lucifer who followed it to his destruction. In Leftism, mankind is his own god. There are no other options, and no amount of human misery and genocide will stop them from continuing to worship that god as they pursue the Utopia we're all designed to long for. (Berry 2020)

Regardless of the presence of specific policies, the constructed binary of “Christian worldview” rhetoric is always the same: Christianity/godliness/conservatism/Republicanism/good versus atheism/sinfulness/liberalism/Democratism/evil.

The Babylon Bee and other conservative news media companies claiming to be rooted in an ambiguously defined “Christian worldview” may view or at least portray themselves as the sorely needed link between religion and politics, but – as discussed in the previous chapter – they are also motivated by the need to turn a profit and stay in business. Squaring evangelistic and capitalistic motivations can sometimes create cognitive dissonance for purveyors of commodified Christian content as well as their audiences. While some struggle with this dissonance or choose to lean into one motivation or the other, others adopt a mindset of “sacralization,” in which they view their production and distribution of Christian content as itself an act of ministry or evangelism insofar as it grows or supports the broader Christian community (Borden 2007). In other words, the discourse of the “Christian worldview” is useful not only in persuading Christian audiences to accept a particular – namely conservative – ideological politics, but also in allowing the producers of such content to see a divine mission of evangelism or “living their faith” in their labor.

It seems possible that *The Bee* sees its content in this light – it seems unlikely that for its writers, the notion of politics “from a Christian worldview” would appear as an intentionally ambiguous and manipulative discursive tact to lure unsuspecting American Christians into the open arms of the Republican Party. Instead, I believe they genuinely see conservative politics as

a practice of their religious beliefs.²⁷ Though thoroughly drenched in irony, the article “Trump Shares Babylon Bee Article, Thousands Accept Jesus Into Their Hearts” (*Bee* 2020ad)²⁸ seems to support this interpretation. By extension, those fans of *The Bee* who share the site’s articles on their social media accounts or with friends and family might also be able to sacralize this audience labor, considering it a form of evangelism (if communicative discourse) or the reinforcement of Christian beliefs (if coordinative discourse). *The Bee* has also titled its two books – *How To Be a Perfect Christian* and *The Sacred Texts of The Babylon Bee: Vol. 1* – in an overly holy manner that implies that even if *The Bee* is not itself divine, as these titles ironically suggest, its writers and audiences may still see this satire as a form of ministry or evangelism, if an unusually humorous one.

The trouble with Trump

In *The Great Cat Massacre*, cultural historian Robert Darnton (2009) suggests, “When you realize that you are not getting something – a joke, a proverb, a ceremony – that is particularly meaningful to the natives, you can see where to grasp a foreign system of meaning in order to unravel it” (78). Though in our hyper-partisan era it may sometimes feel to me the present-day American Right is on another planet, American conservatives are certainly less foreign to me than are the eighteenth-century French workers Darnton describes. Yet the principle Darnton introduces holds true in my study of *The Babylon Bee*: other than the use of

²⁷ And, given that “politics from a Christian worldview” discourse has been heavily used in the conservative countersphere since long before *The Bee* was founded in 2016, the site’s writers themselves may have internalized the conflation of Christian faith and conservative politics from other conservative discourse or media.

²⁸ Trump (2020) really did share the *Bee* article “Twitter Shuts Down Entire Network To Slow Spread Of Negative Biden News” on his Twitter account, saying “Wow, this has never been done in history.” Though Trump’s staff later claimed he knew that the site was satire, it is still entirely possible that Trump was fooled and “ate *The Onion*” or perhaps “stung by *The Bee*,” as it were. Even *The Bee* wasn’t so sure he knew it was a joke (Mann 2020c).

highly ambiguous irony, all of the discursive tactics I identify which are frequently used by *The Bee* are not innovations but are already central to the discourse of the conservative countersphere. As I have suggested, resisting the liberal media and other institutions which might be considered “the establishment” is standard practice in the American right wing, as is the discourse of weaponized victimhood and lashing out at groups that are felt to be favored by the elite over those with traditional privileged status. So too is discourse involving “commonsense” conflation of conservatism with Christian beliefs. In keeping with my definition of satire as playful commentary, it stands to reason that the critiques of conservative satire like *The Babylon Bee* would be the same critiques of conservatism writ large, simply presented with more irony and humor.

The most unique element of *The Bee*'s satire then, both in comparison to other news satire and other conservative political media, is its reliance on irony to produce deeply ambiguous or ambivalent content. The key to determining what such profound polysemy affords *The Babylon Bee* can be found where irony's edge is most apparent in *Bee* satire: material centering Donald Trump.

When the 2020 presidential election was called for Joe Biden, *The Bee* posted an article titled, “Entire Staff Of The Babylon Bee Commits Seppuku Over Loss Of Glorious Leader Trump” (*Bee* 2020ak), complete with a picture of two employees in the *Bee* headquarters wearing “Make America Great Again” hats and preparing themselves for ritual suicide with traditional Japanese weaponry. The headline and accompanying article have a slew of reasonable interpretations: *The Bee* never liked Trump much and does not care that he has not been re-elected, *The Bee* did like Trump and its staff was greatly disappointed with the election results, or simply that the “liberal media” sees *The Bee* as sycophantic Trump supporters and it is funny

to play the role, at least for the length of an article. Prominently displaying irony's edge, this article allows all of these readings to coexist polysemously, as all three are reasonable given *The Bee*'s history: as mentioned previously, some of the site's earliest content – “Psychopathic Megalomaniac Somehow Garnering Evangelical Vote” (*Bee* 2016b) and “Trump Claims To ‘Know Nothing’ About KKK Hat He Was Wearing During CNN Interview” (*Bee* 2016g) – was bitingly critical of Trump, but the site has since come around to the idea that making fun of Trump is “writing on hard mode” with its audience (quoted in Goldberg 2020).

Since this early article, *The Bee* has written a broad range of articles centering Trump, which are often highly ambiguous in their depiction of the man. In one frequent type of Trump-based article, *The Bee* characterizes Trump as a brilliant manipulator, imagining scenarios in which Trump cleverly “owns the libs”: “Genius Trump Nominates Joe Biden To Supreme Court Forcing Dems To Accuse Him Of Sexual Harassment” (*Bee* 2020x) or “Prankster Trump Swaps Biden's Mask Out With A Trump 2020 Mask” (*Bee* 2020y), for two examples. Whether *The Bee* actually intends audiences to see Trump as a secretly brilliant political strategist, as some pundits have suggested, or whether these articles are supposed to poke fun at such characterizations, is never entirely clear, and the meanings are once more able to coexist within the satire.

Even more confoundingly, some *Bee* articles simply feature Trump in the place of pop culture heroes in franchises such as *Willy Wonka*, *Star Wars*, and (again) *The Lord of the Rings*: respectively “Trump Announces He Has Hidden 5 Golden Tickets Among Stimulus Checks” (*Bee* 2020i), “In Blow To Biden Transition, Trump Reveals He Has Obtained The Darksaber” (*Bee* 2020ap), and “His Work In Middle-Earth Finished, Trump Arrives At Gray Havens To Sail Into The West” (*Bee* 2021c). If there is any satirical commentary present in such articles, it is difficult to decipher.

Most shocking and ambiguous of all are the articles which frame Trump as a savior and emissary from God, sometimes even taking over for Jesus Christ, as in the recent articles “Wax Museum Removes Trump Figure After Visitors Keep Praying To It” (*Bee* 2021m) and “‘Hosanna! Hosanna!’ Trump Triumphantly Rides Into CPAC On Back Of A Donkey” (*Bee* 2021h). As a “Christian news satire site,” it is unlikely that *The Bee* actually has such an outlandishly idolatrous view of Trump; indeed, one of *The Bee*’s few jabs at Trump pokes fun at his narcissism, imagining that he was quoted as saying “I have done more for Christianity than Jesus” (*Bee* 2019h). Yet even if *The Bee* does not view Donald Trump as the literal second coming of Christ,²⁹ the “wax museum” and “donkey” articles which frame Trump as divine are also not critical of him. As I argue at the start of this thesis, satire is a playful form of commentary, but the commentary offered by these articles is either missing or indecipherable (at least by me). What is going on here?

One possible explanation is that Trump is uniquely impossible to satirize. This is a popular theory among pundits, who have suggested a variety of reasons for this. Trump resists political damage when his hypocrisies are pointed out (usually a hallmark of satirical critique), himself offers a large number of jokes, and inspires such strong responses – positive or negative – that many do not want to laugh at him (Brooks 2020). Trump is so bombastic and absurd a political figure that there is nothing left for satirists to imagine or exaggerate (Di Placido 2020; Greenman 2019). Trump is perhaps entirely resistant to critique or negative commentary of any kind (Von Drehle 2020). While Trump’s erratic, brash behavior probably makes satire dealing with the man more difficult to write, the rise of Trump has portended the “death of satire” is as overly apocalyptic as the prediction of some doomsaying pundits that the terrorist attack of 9/11

²⁹ A belief that at least some fringe parts of the Christian Right hold (see Orchard Twig and Orchard Twig 2019, Holy Ghost Writer 2019, Sirois 2019).

would lead to the “death of irony” in America (Gournelos and Greene 2011, xi; Randall 2011). To the contrary, news satire sites like *The Bee* and *The Onion* have proven their ability to satirize Trump effectively in some articles, such as the abovementioned “I have done more for Christianity than Jesus” article (*Bee* 2019h) and “‘I’ve Been Selfish And Arrogant, And I Apologize,’ Says Content, Mentally Healthy Trump Minutes After Social Media Ban” (*Onion* 2021). Satire is playful commentary, and I do not believe that it can ever fully “die,” regardless of how set-in-stone public opinion is on a given topic or figure.

Instead, I believe that the reason *Bee* content centering Trump is so ambiguous is because Trump is a uniquely polarizing figure, even within his own party.³⁰ As such, *The Bee* cannot write content which is overly critical of Trump without losing a large portion of their conservative audience, nor can they lavish praises upon him without alienating those who do not approve of him. Luckily for *The Bee*, irony’s ambiguous, polysemic edge works in the site’s favor in this matter, as it can obtain clicks, shares, and comments from those predisposed to believe it is jabbing at Trump, those who would favor material glorifying him, and those are deeply ambivalent. Articles such as “Trump Cancels 2020 Election Over Coronavirus Concerns” (*Bee* 2020e) can as easily be read with longing for an extended Trump presidency as with concurring laughter at the characterization of Trump as a brazenly anti-democratic tyrant. Moreover, because engagement of any kind – positive or negative – is more important to coming out on top of platforms’ algorithms than positive feedback (Phillips and Milner 2017, 124-126), the wildest, most fantastical Trump headlines can benefit *The Bee* even when platform users click in or comment purely to disagree or argue over the proper interpretation of an article. This

³⁰ A survey in February of 2021 suggested that 26% of Republicans want Trump “to remove himself from politics entirely,” while another 48% want him to remain the head of the Republican Party even after his electoral loss (Liesman 2021).

may also explain the similar presence of an intense, ambiguous, ironic edge in *Bee* content about controversial topics demonstrated earlier in this chapter, including American gun ownership and the perceived alliance between Christianity and the Republican party in the United States. Any press is good press, as the saying goes – or in the case of online content, any engagement is good engagement.

In short, highly ambiguous satire casts a wider net because more audience members can feel they are in on the joke, depending on their interpretation. This ambiguity can benefit *The Bee* on a number of levels. The first and most obvious level is financial: more clicks mean more ad money, as well as the potential for more shares and follows, which in turn may create more revenue from clicks and from subscriptions. With reference to *The Bee*'s place in the conservative countersphere, this ambiguity can help communicative discourse with the broader public sphere based on the same logic as the above, and as coordinative discourse can even help smooth over potential divisions within the countersphere, such as over Trump.

Finally, the “wide net” strategy supported by *The Bee*'s most ambiguous material is also at play its other discursive tactics, which it shares with the conservative countersphere at large. These four tactics serve to suggest that the Left represents an elite establishment oppressing common people, stripping them of the privileges they feel they earned to give them to supposedly marginalized groups, and leading the nation down an anti-Christian path. These tactics capitalize on grievance and discontentment, creating a Right that is unified by contempt for the other side rather than through finding shared goals, which could cause infighting. Irony and reactionism are each popular because they can mean different things to different people, and *The Babylon Bee* deals in both.

Conclusion: Why the Buzz around *The Babylon Bee*?

“Factually Inaccurate, Morally Correct: The Babylon Bee”

-The text of a graphic tee available on *The Babylon Bee* webstore

The first of my guiding questions in my examination of *The Babylon Bee* can be boiled down quite simply: What is new about *The Bee*? What is different? In the intervening chapters, I have laid the groundwork to provide an answer to this deceptively simple question, examining *The Bee* in the context of cultural theory, outlining the political economy and business model of the site, and identifying the discursive tactics used most commonly in *The Bee*'s satire. Now, as I pull together these threads in my attempt to answer the question of “what’s new,” I take heed of Bourdieu’s (1998) warning: “One of the great problems faced by sociologists is how to avoid falling into one or the other of two symmetrical illusions. On the one hand, there is the sense of something that has never been seen before.... And, on the other hand..., there’s the opposite, ‘the way it always has been,’ ‘there’s nothing new under the sun’” (43). Yes, *The Babylon Bee* publishes satire that is unique enough to make a considerable splash in a marketplace crowded with political humorists and to convince a fledgling academic to write an M.A. thesis on the topic. Yet for all its fascinating qualities, *The Babylon Bee* shares a large portion of its textual DNA with other carnivalesque texts, online content producers, and twenty-first century political discourse on the American Right. *The Bee* is perhaps an evolution of these traditions – or, at the very least, it carries some interesting mutations – but it is not an entirely new species.

Modifying the cultural theories of counterpublics and the carnivalesque to better fit the contexts of the Right in which *The Babylon Bee* exists requires not full revision, simply slight adjustments. The public sphere and the concepts of *jouissance* and *plaisir* require no

modification at all, as the former is meant to encompass the totality of public discourse and the latter simply describe understandings of pleasure, which is certainly not limited to one side of the ideological spectrum. Counterpublics and the carnivalesque require some alteration, but the problem of applying each of these to *The Babylon Bee* is the same: they were written to refer to subordinated or marginalized social groups, which does not include conservatives, who tend to favor the reinforcement rather than diminishment of traditional power structures.

The solution in each case is definitional and directional. Major's (2020) notion of the conservative countersphere is quite similar to that of subaltern counterpublics in that it is marked by opposition to elements of the broader public sphere, consists of members of a shared identity, and exists recessed from but still connected to the rest of the public sphere, enabling both communicative and coordinative discourse. The conservative countersphere's point of departure from subaltern counterpublics is that its members marginalization in the broader public sphere is not reality, even though it is sincerely felt through the phenomenon of aggrieved entitlement. Otherwise, Day's (2011) notion of satire as a tool for aiding in the formation of counterpublics applies neatly. The carnivalesque is likewise easily modified to the quasi-carnivalesque to better suit *The Babylon Bee*: many key elements of the carnivalesque are present in conservative satire such as *The Bee*'s, including reversals, revelry, and offensiveness. The only difference from the "true" carnivalesque is that when conservatives invert what they see as the social order – namely, with themselves as the primary victims – they end up placing themselves on top and, when they punch down, marginalized groups at the bottom, each group where they already are. As such, no inversion actually occurs.

Though I introduce the term "recursive commodification" in this thesis and use *The Bee* as my primary example, it is far from unique to this site. The very social media platforms with

which *The Bee* constantly feuds are even more apt examples of recursive commodification, as they make money of advertisements, rely on free user labor to create content which draws other users to their site to an even greater extent than *The Bee*, and commodify data gathered from user profiles and engagements to add yet another source of revenue. Even so, *The Bee* innovates among news satire sites by moving beyond mere advertising revenues in adding a subscription service, discussion threads, and a headline forum, adding platform-like qualities to its site and creating an efficient feedback loop to help generate more consistent profits. The marketing of vaguely defined resistance to the “liberal elite” to attract audiences, and the use of belief-reinforcing echo chambers to retain audiences is also not new: conservative media companies across time and media have used the same strategy, including prominent examples such as *National Review*, *The Rush Limbaugh Show*, *The Wall Street Journal* opinion section, Fox News, and most recently, Gab and Parler. *The Bee* innovates on this model only by bringing it to satire.

In its discursive tactics, *The Babylon Bee* borrows heavily from the common discursive tactics of the contemporary American Right writ large. The Right has perpetuated a belief in a “liberal media establishment” for decades and framed itself as a resistive force, and one informed by “Christian worldview.” Grappling with feelings of aggrieved entitlement, segments of the Right have weaponized their perceived victimhood, and frequently lash out or punch down at more truly marginalized groups. Many of these tactics already succeed, rather than fail, because of their vagueness and ambiguity – Is there really such thing as one, unified “Christian worldview” in politics? Likely not. And beyond resisting the Left, what does the American Right actually stand for? The answer is unclear. *The Babylon Bee* proves not only that the Right can produce successful satire, but that by embracing the ambiguity and polysemy of ironic satire, they can cast a wider net in their discourse than ever before. In my introduction, I wrote about a

sense of fascination with *The Bee* and an air of strangeness around its satire that motivated my first research question: there is any one quality of *The Babylon Bee* that accounts for this, which makes it truly unique among news satirists and conservative media, it is the frequency and intensity of ironic ambiguity.

The discursive tactics I describe also offer an answer to my second question regarding how *The Babylon Bee* is able to bring satire to the Right. More than this, however, they enable *The Bee* to both contribute to the popular and ideological growth of the conservative countersphere and to turn a profit. In both cases, *The Bee*'s satire must work in two directions at once to feed the cycle of recursive commodification while contributing to the countersphere and spreading its ideology. Second, *The Bee*'s satire must operate centripetally, in what I have previously referred to as coordinative discourse. In other words, once users have been brought into the conservative countersphere or into *The Bee*'s community of social media followers and paying subscribers, effective discourse will make them want to remain a part of these communities. As such, it is unsurprising that *The Bee*'s discursive tactics bear a great resemblance to the discourse of the American Right more broadly: reinforcing existing beliefs and creating an echo chamber has proven time and time again to be effective at producing loyalty to an ideology and to the media outlets which espouse it.

Second, *Bee* satire must operate centrifugally, as communicative discourse. Even while *The Bee*'s satire must continue to engage those already in its hive, it must also appeal to those outside it, must have the capacity for virality or high engagement online. This is where *The Bee*'s penchant for ambiguity is most useful: the ability for audiences to see what they want to see in *The Bee*'s satire or to spur a desire to further clarify the satiric message leads to engagement, creating opportunities for profit and ideological persuasion. *The Bee*'s ability to produce some

content that is genuinely funny across ideologies – something I have perhaps underappreciated in this thesis – also enables its potential for virality.

For decades, satire on the Left has benefitted liberal and progressive ideologies, successfully engaging audiences of various preexisting belief systems. At last, *The Babylon Bee* has succeeded in doing the same for the Right, filling a niche which has existed historically, just not in recent decades. The writers for *The Bee* have proven they have considerable skill in creating clickable, shareable satirical content that caters to a largely untapped desire for conservative news satire but is also carried beyond strict ideological boundaries by its polysemy and effective humor. Moreover, its recent growth in popularity and staff and implementation of a model of recursive commodification suggest that *The Bee* may be here to stay. *The Bee* may or may not prove to be a harbinger of a greater wave of professionally produced conservative news satire to match the wide array available on the Left. Alternatively, the trend of the recent past may hold and *The Bee* may remain unique in its role as a professional producer of conservative satire, with the majority of such content continuing to favor decentralized and amateur production, perhaps best represented by Pepe the Frog and other such memes in alt-right spaces like 4chan. Regardless, conservative news satire is now playing a larger role in the conservative countersphere and the American public sphere more broadly than it has in recent decades, and it is important for scholars of political communication to better understand such discourse. With its centralized, professional production and clearer comparison to news satire on the Left with sites like *The Onion*, *The Babylon Bee* has proven a particularly rich and useful object of study for me, and could continue to do so for future research, but deeper understanding of digital conservative political satire may also require branching out and away from *The Bee*.

Suggestions for further research

Satire has been studied and theorized about for centuries, if not millennia, but because it is a broadly defined mode of discourse which is employed across vastly different media, cultures, and ideologies, there is always an opening and arguably a need for further research. To this end, *The Babylon Bee* has served as a rich site of study for me, but I am neither naïve nor arrogant enough to believe that I have uncovered all the insights that *The Bee* has to offer.

One area that I believe is particularly ripe for research, especially given the instability of ironic and satiric meaning and interpretation, is in audience research around news satire. For instance, I dipped my figurative, scholarly toes into the comments sections to assess audience interpretations of certain highly ambiguous *Bee* articles, but there is at least as much to discover from these as there is from *The Bee*'s content itself. An ethnographic study of *Bee* comments, both on *The Bee*'s website and on social media platforms, could uncover truly fascinating insights from the reactions, jokes, and arguments which occur on them, as well as more unusual occurrences such as the tendency of conservative *Bee* fans to roleplay as offended liberals, which I mentioned briefly in this thesis. Given the long and hilarious history of news satire readers mistaking satiric fantasy for reality, as well as ongoing accusations by Snopes and, recently, *The New York Times* (Isaac 2021) that *The Bee* essentially serves as a mis/disinformation site for some readers, further media effects research on this phenomenon – especially with an eye towards partisan effects – could prove extremely useful. Finally, based on my own highly ambivalent reaction to and confusion regarding much of *The Bee*'s satire, I am curious about how well audiences are able to correctly identify the intended meaning of satire across partisan lines, as well as how any persuasion effects of satire differ if it is cis- versus transideological with its audience.

Turning away from audience research and back to the unique conservatism of *The Babylon Bee*'s news satire, I feel that there is potential to further clarify what is unique about *The Bee* and/or conservative as opposed to liberal news satire by performing a comparative study. As the most famous and most popular purveyor of news satire online, *The Onion* is perhaps the obvious choice for comparison with *The Bee*. On the other hand, *Reductress* and *The Hard Times* are digital natives like *The Bee*, whereas *The Onion* transitioned from print. In addition, these sites tend to skew further Left than *The Onion* and thus might better match *The Bee*'s distance from the ideological center in magnitude if not direction.

Finally, though the last two decades of American political satire have been dominated professionally produced news satire, from *The Daily Show* to *The Babylon Bee*. However, in the Internet age, it seems likely that the most prevalent and perhaps the most powerful political satire is created not by professionals, but by individual users. Memes, tweets, and amateur YouTube or TikTok videos come to mind as formats with significant satiric tendencies and potential, and journals' worth of literature likely exists on political humor in these and other Internet media. Further comparative research could elucidate any differences between the respective discursive niches of professional and amateur political satire, but even short of this, I encourage researchers working in amateur digital political satire to trace the practice's history not only to Aristophanes and Swift, but to more recent and even currently ongoing forms of professionally produced satire as well.

“Factually Inaccurate, Morally Correct”

To conclude, I would like to share one final story about *The Babylon Bee* and its satire. I feel this story encapsulates many of the ideas that I hope to impart upon you, one of the probably

five, but certainly fewer than ten people who will ever read this thesis.³¹ Three days after the young progressive icon Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez was inaugurated to her first term in the U.S. House of Representatives, *60 Minutes* aired an interview with her in which she responded to accusations of using “fuzzy math” in her policy proposals by saying, “I think that there’s a lot of people more concerned about being precisely, factually, and semantically correct than about being morally right” (“Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez...” 2019). Like many other conservative media outlets, *The Bee* wasted no time in jumping on this statement: “‘It Is More Important To Be Morally Right Than Factually Correct,’ Says Woman Who Is Neither,” ran their response (*Bee* 2019a). With this, *The Bee* had a new favorite target and a catchphrase that they felt summed up the failings of the Left.

A few weeks later, the catchphrase appeared again, aimed at one of *The Bee*’s other favorite punching bags: “Snopes Introduces New ‘Factually Inaccurate But Morally Right’ Fact Check Result” (*Bee* 2019b). In the two years since, other variations of this joke structure have popped up on *The Bee*’s feed when the site wants to accuse its opponents of ignoring “the facts” – “CNN Condemns Trump Rallies As ‘Physically Peaceful But Morally Violent’” (*Bee* 2020b) and “Media Now Claims Shooter Was Factually Arab, But Morally White” (*Bee* 2021n). So far, this story probably seems run-of-the-mill for *The Babylon Bee*: the site suggested a progressive politician was incorrect and immoral and then made the same, decades-old claim of liberal media bias. Same old, same old. Here’s the twist: *The Bee* saw in the very phrase that it uses to mock its political opponents an apt slogan for its own satire. Like other producers of news satire, *The Babylon Bee* writes comically exaggerative and fantastical stories grounded in reality to spread

³¹ Three faculty members sit on my defense committee, and both of my very supportive parents continue to make noises about wanting to read this. I have no idea who the others might be, but I can dream.

and reinforce its own systems of beliefs. So, on the web store of *The Babylon Bee*, you can now purchase a t-shirt that reads “Factually Inaccurate, Morally Correct: The Babylon Bee.”

Though simple, I believe this brief anecdote is a rich one and one that reflects five trends emblematic of *The Babylon Bee*. First, in the chain of events described above, *The Bee* quite literally made anti-liberalism its brand. As discussed in the most recent chapter, this satire site is like other elements of today’s conservative countersphere in that it favors reactionary anti-liberalism over a more cohesive conservative platform or ideology. In its satirical articles using the “factually... morally...” structure, *The Bee* makes a standard jab at an opposing liberal politician who made an interview misstep, then resorts to the tried-and-true tactic of ranting about the “liberal media establishment.” This anti-liberalism sells *The Bee*’s satire and – as in the case of the t-shirt – becomes its very brand.

Second, the application of the “morally correct” descriptor to *The Bee* should remind Leftist academics that may want to see satire as a progressive social or discursive force that it is in fact transideological, and that satirists on the Right view satire as a means of spreading and reinforcing their beliefs, as well. After all, in Adam Ford’s (2016) announcement of *The Bee*’s launch, he referred to satire as “a powerful, effective, and biblical tool for conveying ideas” that he intended to reclaim from the “anti-religious worldview.” Perhaps the desire to attribute transideological, *human* phenomena like satire to one ideology or another, as academics have done with satire in recent decades, actually contributes to the polarization plaguing us today. This is certainly not to say that Leftists and researchers should leave *The Bee* unperturbed in the recesses of the conservative countersphere, better to engage with and oppose *The Bee* and its fans on the points of commentary forwarded by its satire – if you can even decipher it – than to claim

the entirety of satire as an inherently progressive phenomenon and play into conservative notions of the liberal elite.

Third, *The Bee*'s choice to describe itself as "factually inaccurate" might easily be seen as a reclaiming of the fictional elements of news satire and thumbing of *The Bee*'s collective nose – antennae? – at organization and companies which accuse the site of spreading misinformation. Of course, whether or not *The Bee* actually does so at a higher rate than other news satire sources remains something of an open question. Fourth and relatedly, *The Bee*'s pride in its factual inaccuracy suggests the exaggerative discursive potential of satire and reflects an excuse that satirists of all persuasions have been using to dodge criticism for centuries: that they're just telling jokes. *The Bee*'s recognition of and pride in its own factual inaccuracy should serve as a warning to the large media companies like Facebook, Twitter, Snopes, and *The New York Times* that characterize *The Bee* as a far-right mis/disinformation site. On the one hand, this default reaction is understandable: far-right social media users tend to share the largest portion of misinformation (Hopp, Ferrucci, and Vargo 2020) and high-profile fake news campaigns such as QAnon tend to favor the Right. Ultimately, however, attempts to censor *The Bee* for spreading fake news lend further credibility to the longstanding myth of the liberal media elite and fuel support not only for *The Babylon Bee*, but also for true mis/disinformation.

Fifth and finally, *The Babylon Bee* took the quote from its original context in the *60 Minutes* interview, transformed it into a reliable punchline at the expense of the Left, and then claimed it as a testament to its own satire. Perhaps *The Babylon Bee*'s greatest strength is its ability to so smoothly recontextualize trends. Though *The Bee* does innovate and depart from its several traditions in some important ways, as I have suggested, at its core, it is just a recombination of three existing phenomena: news satire, online-first media companies with a

strategy of recursive commodification dependent upon free user labor, and twenty-first century American conservatism focused on anti-liberalism and broad reactionary appeal rather than specific policy proposals. Even more simply, *The Babylon Bee* took “Factually Inaccurate, Morally Correct” from the Left and turned it against them, just as it has with news satire.

References

- Achter, Paul. 2008. "Comedy in Unfunny Times: News Parody and Carnival After 9/11." *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 25 (3): 274–303. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15295030802192038>.
- "Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez: The 60 Minutes Interview." 2019. *60 Minutes*. CBS. https://www.cbs.com/shows/60_minutes/video/VorFgkYEweo3Nx653Weye1HRGC3mZqpN/alexandria-ocasio-cortez-the-60-minutes-interview/.
- Althusser, Louis. 1971. "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes Towards an Investigation)." In *Media and Cultural Studies: Keywords*, edited by Meenakshi Gigi Durham and Douglas Kellner, translated by Ben Brewster, 2nd Edition, 80–86. *Keywords in Cultural Studies*. Malden, MA: Blackwell.
- Andrejevic, Mark. 2008. "Watching Television Without Pity: The Productivity of Online Fans." *Television & New Media* 9 (1): 24–46. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1527476407307241>.
- Babylon Bee, The*. 2016a. "Popular Internet Atheist Still Thinks Last Book Of Bible Is Called 'Revelations,'" February 7, 2016. <https://babylonbee.com/news/popular-internet-atheist-still-referencing-book-revelations>.
- . 2016b. "Psychopathic Megalomaniac Somehow Garnering Evangelical Vote," February 25, 2016. <https://babylonbee.com/news/megalomaniacal-psychopath-somehow-garnering-evangelical-vote>.
- . 2016c. "Hillary Turns To Husband For Advice On Attracting Young, Impressionable, Female Voters," February 26, 2016. <https://babylonbee.com/news/hillary-turns-husband-advice-attracting-young-impressionable-female-voters>.
- . 2016d. "Man Holding Door For Woman Clearly Sexist Pig," February 27, 2016. <https://babylonbee.com/news/sexist-pig-holds-door-for-woman>.
- . 2016e. "Christian News Satire Site Launches," March 1, 2016. <https://babylonbee.com/news/christian-news-satire-site-launches>.
- . 2016f. "Holy Spirit Unable To Move Through Congregation As Fog Machine Breaks," March 2, 2016. <https://babylonbee.com/news/holy-spirit-unable-move-congregation-fog-machine-breaks>.
- . 2016g. "Trump Claims To 'Know Nothing' About KKK Hat He Was Wearing During CNN Interview," March 5, 2016. <https://babylonbee.com/news/trump-claims-know-nothing-about-klan-hat-wearing-during-cnn-interview>.
- . 2016h. "Youth Leader Still Can't Hear If Everyone Having Good Time," March 7, 2016. <https://babylonbee.com/news/youth-leader-still-cant-hear-everyone-good-time>.
- . 2016i. "Report: Satire Is Great, As Long As It Never Targets Any Of My Own Beliefs," May 26, 2016. <https://babylonbee.com/news/report-satire-great-long-never-targets-beliefs>.
- . 2016j. "Starbucks Unveils New Satanic Holiday Cups," November 3, 2016. <https://babylonbee.com/news/starbucks-unveils-new-satanic-holiday-cups>.

- . 2017a. “Church Service Canceled After Guitar Cable Identifies As Female,” January 5, 2017. <https://babylonbee.com/news/church-service-canceled-guitar-cable-identifies-female>.
- . 2017b. “Man Identifying As 6-Year-Old Crushes Game-Winning Homer In Tee-Ball Championship,” June 6, 2017. <https://babylonbee.com/news/man-identifying-6-year-old-crushes-game-winning-homer-tee-ball-championship>.
- . 2017c. “Snopes Launches New Website To Fact-Check Snopes Fact Checks,” October 10, 2017. <https://babylonbee.com/news/snopes-launches-new-website-fact-check-snopes-fact-checks>.
- . 2018a. “‘There Are More Than Two Genders,’ Tortured Employee Forced To Say In Darkened Room At Google Headquarters,” January 10, 2018. <https://babylonbee.com/news/two-genders-tortured-employee-forced-say-darkened-room-google-headquarters>.
- . 2018b. “CNN Purchases Industrial-Sized Washing Machine To Spin News Before Publication,” March 1, 2018. <https://babylonbee.com/news/cnn-purchases-industrial-sized-washing-machine-spin-news-publication>.
- . 2018c. “Liberals Remind Nation Satire Only OK When Mocking Conservatives,” July 25, 2018. <https://babylonbee.com/news/liberals-remind-nation-satire-only-ok-when-mocking-conservatives>.
- . 2018d. “Local Pastor Clarifies ‘Being Salt And Light’ Actually Means ‘Voting Republican,’” October 9, 2018. <https://babylonbee.com/news/local-pastor-clarifies-being-salt-and-light-actually-means-voting-republican>.
- . 2019a. “‘It Is More Important To Be Morally Right Than Factually Correct,’ Says Woman Who Is Neither,” January 7, 2019. <https://babylonbee.com/news/it-is-more-important-to-be-morally-right-than-factually-correct-says-woman-who-is-neither>.
- . 2019b. “Snopes Introduces New ‘Factually Inaccurate But Morally Right’ Fact Check Result,” January 23, 2019. <https://babylonbee.com/news/snopes-introduces-new-factually-inaccurate-but-morally-right-fact-check-result>.
- . 2019c. “Man Identifies As Woman Just Long Enough To Voice Valid Opinion On Abortion,” May 16, 2019. <https://babylonbee.com/news/man-identifies-as-woman-just-long-enough-to-voice-valid-opinion-on-abortion>.
- . 2019d. “Scholars Now Believe Phrase Jesus Wrote In The Dirt Was ‘Own The Libs,’” May 21, 2019. <https://babylonbee.com/news/scholars-now-believe-jesus-actually-wrote-own-the-libs-in-the-dirt>.
- . 2019e. “Snopes Rates Biden’s Claim That 2+2=5 As ‘Mostly True,’” September 2, 2019. <https://babylonbee.com/news/biden-claims-that-225-snopes-rates-mostly-true>.
- . 2019f. “Billionaire Bruce Wayne Criticized For Punching Down,” October 14, 2019. <https://babylonbee.com/news/bruce-wayne-criticized-for-punching-down>.
- . 2019g. “Facebook Will Now Tell You How To React To News Stories,” November 7, 2019. <https://babylonbee.com/news/facebook-will-now-react-to-news-stories-for-you-automatically>.

- . 2019h. “Trump: ‘I Have Done More For Christianity Than Jesus,’” December 23, 2019. <https://babylonbee.com/news/trump-i-have-done-more-for-christianity-than-jesus>.
- . 2020a. “Warren Rejects Peace Pipe Offered By Sanders,” January 16, 2020. <https://babylonbee.com/news/warren-rejects-peace-pipe-offered-by-sanders>.
- . 2020b. “CNN Condemns Trump Rallies As ‘Physically Peaceful But Morally Violent,’” January 21, 2020. <https://babylonbee.com/news/cnn-condemns-trump-rallies-as-physically-peaceful-but-morally-violent>.
- . 2020c. “New, Deadlier AR-16 Introduced Which Is An AR-15 Wearing A MAGA Hat,” January 21, 2020. <https://babylonbee.com/news/new-deadlier-ar-16-introduced-which-is-an-ar-15-wearing-a-maga-hat>.
- . 2020d. “Warren Returns To Tribe In Shame After Failing To Take Land Back From The Pale Faces,” March 5, 2020. <https://babylonbee.com/news/warren-returns-to-tribe-in-shame-after-failing-to-retake-land-from-the-white-man>.
- . 2020e. “Trump Cancels 2020 Election Over Coronavirus Concerns,” March 10, 2020. <https://babylonbee.com/news/pence-cancels-general-election-to-stymie-coronavirus>.
- . 2020f. “Party Of Love And Tolerance Wishes Death On Political Opponent,” March 24, 2020. <https://babylonbee.com/news/party-of-love-tolerance-wishes-death-on-political-opponent>.
- . 2020g. “Teachers Urge Government To Reopen Schools Before Students Learn To Think For Themselves,” March 31, 2020. <https://babylonbee.com/news/teachers-warn-parents-arent-properly-equipped-to-indoctrinate-children>.
- . 2020h. “Trump Installs Ejection Seats Throughout Press Briefing Room,” April 7, 2020. <https://babylonbee.com/news/trump-installs-ejection-seats-throughout-press-briefing-room>.
- . 2020i. “Trump Announces He Has Hidden 5 Golden Tickets Among Stimulus Checks,” April 15, 2020. <https://babylonbee.com/news/trumps-says-5-golden-tickets-to-be-hidden-among-stimulus-checks>.
- . 2020j. “Facebook Removing Any Posts Quoting The First Amendment For ‘Encouraging Illegal Activity,’” April 21, 2020. <https://babylonbee.com/news/facebook-pulling-down-any-posts-quoting-the-first-amendment-for-encouraging-illegal-activity>.
- . 2020k. “Trump Says To Drink Lots Of Water, Media Reports He Told Everyone To Drown Themselves,” April 24, 2020. <https://babylonbee.com/news/trump-says-to-drink-lots-of-water-media-reports-as-deranged-trump-tells-everyone-to-drown-themselves>.
- . 2020l. “Judge Dismisses Sexual Assault Allegations Against Biden On Grounds That He Is Not A Republican,” April 28, 2020. <https://babylonbee.com/news/judge-dismisses-sexual-assault-allegations-against-biden-on-grounds-that-he-is-not-a-republican>.
- . 2020m. “Clever Churchgoers Avoid Arrest By Disguising Themselves As Rioters,” June 1, 2020. <https://babylonbee.com/news/churchgoers-avoid-arrest-by-disguising-themselves-as-rioters>.

- . 2020n. “In Bold Anti-Trump Statement, Pelosi Rips Up Bible,” June 3, 2020. <https://babylonbee.com/news/pelosi-rips-up-bible>.
- . 2020o. “Paw Patrol Replaces Chase The Cop With Karl The Antifa Rioter,” June 11, 2020. <https://babylonbee.com/news/paw-patrol-replaces-chase-the-cop-with-karl-the-antifa-rioter>.
- . 2020p. “Bibles Pulled From Shelves For Outdated Idea That All Humans Are Of One Race And Made In The Image Of God,” June 12, 2020. <https://babylonbee.com/news/bible-accused-of-racism-for-claiming-that-all-humans-are-one-race-made-in-the-image-of-god>.
- . 2020q. “Cracker Jack Changes Name To More Politically Correct Caucasian Jack,” June 17, 2020. <https://babylonbee.com/news/cracker-jacks-changes-name-to-more-politically-correct-caucasian-jacks>.
- . 2020r. “Chick-Fil-A Now Open On Sunday But Only For Black People,” June 19, 2020. <https://babylonbee.com/news/chick-fil-a-now-open-on-sunday-but-only-for-black-people>.
- . 2020s. “With Statues Gone, Pigeons Forced To Poop On Rioters,” June 23, 2020. <https://babylonbee.com/news/with-statues-gone-pigeons-forced-to-poop-on-rioters>.
- . 2020t. “Orcs March On Minas Tirith In Mostly Peaceful Protest,” July 27, 2020. <https://babylonbee.com/news/orcs-march-on-minas-tirith-in-mostly-peaceful-protest>.
- . 2020u. “Democrat Watching RNC Unsure Who This ‘God’ Guy They Keep Mentioning Is,” August 26, 2020. <https://babylonbee.com/news/democrat-watching-rnc-unsure-who-this-god-guy-they-keep-mentioning-is>.
- . 2020v. “Anonymous White House Source Claims Trump Punched A Baby,” September 4, 2020. <https://babylonbee.com/news/anonymous-white-house-source-claims-trump-punched-a-baby>.
- . 2020w. “Upping The Ante: Protesters Now Attempting To Stop High-Speed Freight Trains,” September 5, 2020. <https://babylonbee.com/news/upping-the-ante-protesters-now-attempting-to-stop-high-speed-trains>.
- . 2020x. “Genius Trump Nominates Joe Biden To Supreme Court Forcing Dems To Accuse Him Of Sexual Assault,” September 20, 2020. <https://babylonbee.com/news/genius-trump-nominates-joe-biden-to-supreme-court>.
- . 2020y. “Prankster Trump Swaps Biden’s Mask Out With A Trump 2020 Mask,” September 29, 2020. <https://babylonbee.com/news/prankster-trump-swaps-bidens-mask-out-with-a-trump-2020-mask>.
- . 2020z. “Man Who Agrees With The Media, Universities, Corporations, And Hollywood Thinks He’s Part Of The Resistance,” October 7, 2020. <https://babylonbee.com/news/counter-cultural-rebel-believes-everything-athletes-reporters-actors-ceos-believe>.
- . 2020aa. “Democrats Hiss In Terror As ACB Pulls Out Crucifix,” October 12, 2020. <https://babylonbee.com/news/democrats-hiss-in-terror-as-acb-pulls-out-crucifix>.

- . 2020ab. “Senator Hirono Demands ACB Be Weighed Against A Duck To See If She Is A Witch,” October 14, 2020. <https://babylonbee.com/news/senator-hirono-demands-acb-be-weighed-against-a-duck-to-see-if-she-is-a-witch>.
- . 2020ac. “Twitter Shuts Down Entire Network To Slow Spread Of Negative Biden News,” October 15, 2020. <https://babylonbee.com/news/twitter-shuts-down-entire-network-to-slow-spread-of-negative-biden-news>.
- . 2020ad. “Trump Shares Babylon Bee Article, Thousands Accept Jesus Into Their Hearts,” October 16, 2020. <https://babylonbee.com/news/trump-shares-babylon-bee-article-thousands-accept-jesus-into-their-hearts>.
- . 2020ae. “Biden Offers Anyone Who Votes For Him A Seat On The Supreme Court,” October 19, 2020. <https://babylonbee.com/news/biden-offers-anyone-who-votes-for-him-a-seat-on-the-supreme-court>.
- . 2020af. “Facebook Comes For The Babylon Bee Again,” October 21, 2020. <https://babylonbee.com/news/facebook-comes-for-the-babylon-bee-again>.
- . 2020ag. “SAT Now Just A Single Page Requiring You To Draw Devil Horns On A Picture Of Trump,” November 2, 2020. <https://babylonbee.com/news/sat-now-just-a-single-page-requiring-you-to-draw-devil-horns-on-a-picture-of-trump>.
- . 2020ah. “CNN Promises Not To Call The Race Unless Biden Is Ahead,” November 3, 2020. <https://babylonbee.com/news/cnn-the-winner-of-the-election-will-be-impossible-to-call-on-election-day-unless-biden-is-ahead>.
- . 2020ai. “Confessionals Installed Outside Polling Places So Catholics Can Confess Sin Of Voting For A Pro-Abortion Candidate,” November 3, 2020. <https://babylonbee.com/news/catholic-church-provides-handly-confessionals-outside-polling-places-so-you-can-confess-if-you-voted-for-a-candidate-who-supports-abortion>.
- . 2020aj. “Trump Tweet Reading ‘Good Morning, America!’ Labeled As Misinformation,” November 4, 2020. <https://babylonbee.com/news/trump-tweet-reading-good-morning-america-labeled-as-misinformation>.
- . 2020ak. “Entire Staff Of The Babylon Bee Commits Seppuku Over Loss Of Glorious Leader Trump,” November 11, 2020. <https://babylonbee.com/news/entire-the-babylon-bee-staff-commits-seppuku-over-loss-of-master>.
- . 2020al. “Katy Perry Releases Controversial New Single ‘I Kissed A Republican And I Liked It,’” November 11, 2020. <https://babylonbee.com/news/katy-perry-releases-controversial-new-single-i-kissed-a-republican-and-i-liked-it>.
- . 2020am. “New AR-15 Glows Blue When Libs Are Near,” November 19, 2020. <https://babylonbee.com/news/new-ar-15-glows-blue-when-libs-are-near>.
- . 2020an. “Elliot Page Retroactively Awarded 17 Oscars For Amazingly Convincing Portrayals Of Women,” December 3, 2020. <https://babylonbee.com/news/elliott-page-awarded-17-retroactive-oscars-for-amazingly-convincing-portrayals-of-women>.

- . 2020ao. “Only Other Guy In Store Not Wearing Mask Gives You Knowing Look As Though Welcoming You To Secret Society,” December 8, 2020. <https://babylonbee.com/news/only-two-maskless-shoppers-exchange-knowing-glance-as-though-part-of-some-secret-society>.
- . 2020ap. “In Blow To Biden Transition, Trump Reveals He Has Obtained The Darksaber,” December 19, 2020. <https://babylonbee.com/news/in-blow-to-biden-transition-trump-reveals-he-has-obtained-the-dark-saber>.
- . 2020aq. “Gun Stores Overwhelmed By People Returning \$600 Guns For \$2000 Guns,” December 30, 2020. <https://babylonbee.com/news/gun-stores-overwhelmed-by-people-returning-600-guns-for-2000-guns>.
- . 2021a. “20,000 Troops In D.C. Said To Not Be Enough To Stop Trump’s Battlemech,” January 14, 2021. <https://babylonbee.com/news/20000-troops-in-dc-for-inauguration-said-to-not-to-be-enough-to-stop-trumps-battlemech>.
- . 2021b. “The Babylon Bee’s Top 10 ‘Identifies As’ Jokes,” January 15, 2021. <https://babylonbee.com/news/the-babylon-bees-top-10-man-identifies-as-jokes>.
- . 2021c. “His Work In Middle-Earth Finished, Trump Arrives At Grey Havens To Sail Into The West,” January 20, 2021. <https://babylonbee.com/news/his-work-in-middle-earth-finish-trump-arrives-at-grey-havens-to-sail-into-the-west>.
- . 2021d. “Op-Ed: What Will Get This Economy Going Again Is Child Labor,” January 29, 2021. <https://babylonbee.com/news/op-ed-what-will-get-this-economy-going-again-is-child-labor>.
- . 2021e. “Office Conservative Clearly A Diversity Hire,” February 1, 2021. <https://babylonbee.com/news/office-conservative-clearly-a-diversity-hire>.
- . 2021f. “Infographic: How To Tell Satire From Disinformation,” February 16, 2021. <https://babylonbee.com/news/infographic-how-to-tell-satire-from-disinformation>.
- . 2021g. “Hollywood Unveils New ‘Walk Of Shame’ For Conservative Actors,” February 24, 2021. <https://babylonbee.com/news/hollywood-unveils-new-walk-of-shame-for-conservative-actors>.
- . 2021h. “‘Hosanna! Hosanna!’ Trump Triumphantly Rides Into CPAC On Back Of A Donkey,” February 28, 2021. <https://babylonbee.com/news/hosanna-hosanna-trump-triumphantly-rides-into-cpac-on-a-donkey>.
- . 2021i. “‘We Don’t Like Cuomo Now,’ Says Every Late-Night Host In Perfect Robotic Unison,” March 2, 2021. <https://babylonbee.com/news/we-dont-like-cuomo-now-says-every-late-night-host-in-perfect-robotic-unison>.
- . 2021j. “Woman Escapes The Patriarchy To Find Freedom In Grueling 80-Hour Work Week,” March 8, 2021. <https://babylonbee.com/news/nations-women-finally-liberated-from-the-home-to-go-work-for-giant-corporations-80-hours-a-week>.
- . 2021k. “Think Women Can’t Fight? Here Are 9 Advantages Of Female Soldiers,” March 16, 2021. <https://babylonbee.com/news/take-your-sexism-elsewhere-here-are-9-advantages-of-female-soldiers>.

- . 2021l. “What Gender Are You? Take The Quiz!,” March 18, 2021. <https://babylonbee.com/news/what-gender-are-you-take-the-quiz>.
- . 2021m. “Wax Museum Removes Trump Figure After Visitors Keep Praying To It,” March 22, 2021. <https://babylonbee.com/news/wax-museum-removes-trump-figure-after-visitors-kept-praying-to-it>.
- . 2021n. “Media Now Claims Shooter Was Factually Arab, But Morally White,” March 23, 2021. <https://babylonbee.com/news/media-now-claims-shooter-was-factually-arabic-but-morally-white>.
- . 2021o. “Sesame Street Introduces ‘Todd’, A White Male Muppet Who Is Blamed For Everything,” March 29, 2021. <https://babylonbee.com/news/sesame-street-introduces-todd-a-white-male-muppet-that-is-blamed-for-everything>.
- . n.d. “About Us.” Accessed February 24, 2021. <https://babylonbee.com/>.
- Bakhtin, Mikhail M. 1968. *Rabelais and His World*. Translated by Helene Iswolsky. Cambridge, Mass. and London, Eng.: MIT Press. <http://hdl.handle.net/2027/mdp.39015005056968>.
- Barthes, Roland. 1975. *The Pleasure of the Text*. Translated by Richard Miller. New York: Hill and Wang.
- Baym, Geoffrey. 2005. “The Daily Show: Discursive Integration and the Reinvention of Political Journalism.” *Political Communication* 22 (3): 259–76. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10584600591006492>.
- . 2009. *From Cronkite to Colbert: The Evolution of Broadcast News*. 1st Edition. Oxford University Press.
- Bebout, Lee. 2020. “Weaponizing Victimhood: Discourses of Oppression and the Maintenance of Supremacy on the Right.” In *News on the Right: Studying Conservative News Cultures*, edited by Anthony Nadler and A.J. Bauer, 64–83. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Berry, Joel. 2020. “Op-Ed: How LeBron In Lace hilariously Showed Us Two Different Americas.” *The Babylon Bee*, September 24, 2020. <https://babylonbee.com/news/op-ed-how-lebron-in-lace-showed-us-two-different-americas>.
- Boedecker, Hal. 2007. “Fox News Channel’s Unfair, Unbalanced ‘1/2 Hour News.’” *Orlando Sentinel*, June 10, 2007, sec. Hal Boedecker the TV Guy. Internet Archive Wayback Machine. https://web.archive.org/web/20070610115723/http://blogs.orlandosentinel.com/entertainment_tv/tvblog/2007/02/unfair_and_unba.html.
- Borden, Anne L. 2007. “Making Money, Saving Souls: Christian Bookstores and the Commodification of Christianity.” In *Religion, Media, and the Marketplace*, edited by Lynn Schofield Clark, 67–79. New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press. <http://hdl.handle.net/2027/mdp.39015069367244>.
- Bourdieu, Pierre. 1998. *On Television*. Translated by Priscilla Parkhurst Ferguson. New York: New Press.

- Brooks, Dan. 2020. "How President Trump Ruined Political Comedy." *The New York Times*, October 7, 2020, sec. Magazine. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/10/07/magazine/trump-liberal-comedy-tv.html>.
- Carey, James W. 2008. "A Cultural Approach to Communication." In *Communication As Culture, Revised Edition: Essays on Media and Society*, 2nd Edition, 11–28. London, UNITED KINGDOM: Taylor & Francis Group. <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/uva/detail.action?docID=356343>.
- Carlson, Matt. 2015. "When News Sites Go Native: Redefining the Advertising–Editorial Divide in Response to Native Advertising." *Journalism* 16 (7): 849–65. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1464884914545441>.
- Darling, Daniel. 2016. "The Babylon Bee's Adam Ford Says the Church Needs Laughter." *ChristianityToday.Com*, April 29, 2016. <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2016/april-web-only/babylon-bees-adam-ford-says-church-needs-laughter.html>.
- Darnton, Robert. 2009. *The Great Cat Massacre and Other Episodes in French Cultural History*. New York: Basic Books.
- Day, Amber. 2011. *Satire and Dissent: Interventions in Contemporary Political Debate*. Bloomington, UNITED STATES: Indiana University Press. <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/uva/detail.action?docID=3014853>.
- . 2018. "Welcome to the Clickhole: The Economics of Internet Parody and Critique." In *The Comedy Studies Reader*, edited by Nick Marx and Matt Sienkiewicz, Illustrated Edition, 120–33. Austin: University of Texas Press.
- De Kosnik, Abigail. 2012. "Fandom as Free Labor." In *Digital Labor: The Internet As Playground and Factory*, edited by Trebor Scholz, 187–212. London, UNITED KINGDOM: Taylor & Francis Group. <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/uva/detail.action?docID=1047015>.
- Di Placido, Dani. 2020. "The Political Comedy Of 'SNL' Is Becoming Downright Painful To Watch." *Forbes*, October 18, 2020, sec. Arts. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/danidiplacido/2020/10/18/the-political-comedy-of-snl-is-becoming-downright-painful-to-watch/>.
- Dickson, E. J. 2020. "What Is the Babylon Bee? Trump Retweeted the Satirical Website." *Rolling Stone*, October 16, 2020. <https://www.rollingstone.com/culture/culture-news/babylon-bee-satire-news-trump-tweet-1076701/>.
- Dijck, José van, David Nieborg, and Thomas Poell. 2019. "Reframing Platform Power." *Internet Policy Review* 8 (2). <https://doi.org/10.14763/2019.2.1414>.
- Dillon, Seth. 2021a. "A Message from Our CEO," January 13, 2021. <https://mail.google.com/mail/u/0/#inbox/FMfcgxwKkRMtJKzMkRMqktLLWtKZHjfg>.
- . 2021b. "The NY Times Just Called Us a Far-Right Misinformation Site," March 23, 2021. <https://mail.google.com/mail/u/0/#inbox/FMfcgxwLtGgzsqPhCGrwKwDCrkJbqlzp>.

- Eco, Umberto. 1984. "The Frames of Comic 'Freedom.'" In *Carnival!*, edited by Thomas A. Sebeok, 1–9. Berlin/Boston, GERMANY: De Gruyter, Inc.
<http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/uva/detail.action?docID=937812>.
- Eekhoff Zylstra, Sarah. 2019. "The Ancient New Alternative to the SAT and ACT." The Gospel Coalition. April 24, 2019. <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/ancient-new-alternative-sat-act/>.
- Entman, Robert M. 2003. "Cascading Activation: Contesting the White House's Frame After 9/11." *Political Communication* 20 (4): 415. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10584600390244176>.
- Feinberg, Leonard. 1967. *Introduction to Satire*. 1st Edition. Ames, IA: Iowa State University Press.
<http://hdl.handle.net/2027/mdp.39015002989351>.
- Fiske, John. 2010. *Understanding Popular Culture*. 2nd Edition. London and New York: Routledge.
- Ford, Adam. 2016. "Introducing The Babylon Bee." *Adam4d.Com* (blog). 2016.
<https://adam4d.com/the-babylon-bee/>.
- . 2018. "I Sold The Babylon Bee and Am No Longer Running It." *Adam4d.Com* (blog). 2018.
<https://adam4d.com/i-sold-the-babylon-bee-and-am-no-longer-running-it/>.
- Fraser, Nancy. 1990. "Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy." *Social Text*, no. 25/26: 56–80. <https://doi.org/10.2307/466240>.
- Garnham, Nicholas. 2012. "Contribution to a Political Economy of Mass-Communication." In *Media and Cultural Studies: Keywords*, edited by Meenakshi Gigi Durham and Douglas M. Kellner, 2nd Edition, 201–29. Malden: Wiley-Blackwell.
- Garrett, R. Kelly, Robert Bond, and Shannon Poulsen. 2019. "Too Many People Think Satirical News Is Real." *The Conversation*, August 16, 2019, sec. Arts + Culture.
<http://theconversation.com/too-many-people-think-satirical-news-is-real-121666>.
- Goldberg, Emma. 2020. "What 'The Babylon Bee' Thinks Is So Funny About Liberals." *The New York Times*, October 11, 2020, sec. U.S.
<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/10/11/us/politics/babylon-bee-conservative-satire.html>.
- Gramsci, Antonio. 1985. "Cultural Themes: Ideological Material." In *Media and Cultural Studies: Keywords*, edited by Meenakshi Gigi Durham and Douglas Kellner, translated by William Boelhower, 2nd Edition, 36–37. *Keywords in Cultural Studies*. Malden, MA: Blackwell.
- Gray, Jonathan, Jeffrey P. Jones, and Ethan Thompson. 2009. "The State of Satire, the Satire of State." In *Satire TV: Politics and Comedy in the Post-Network Era*, 3–36. New York: NYU Press.
- Greenberg, Jonathan. 2018. *The Cambridge Introduction to Satire*. Cambridge Introductions to Literature. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781139343251>.

- Greenman, Ben. 2019. "Is Satire Possible in the Age of Trump?" *The New York Times*, March 8, 2019, sec. Books. <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/03/08/books/review/mark-doten-trump-sky-alpha.html>.
- Habermas, Jürgen. 1989a. "The Public Sphere: An Encyclopedia Article." In *Media and Cultural Studies: Keywords*, edited by Meenakshi Gigi Durham and Douglas Kellner, translated by Sara Lennox and Frank Lennox, 2nd Edition, 75–79. Malden, MA: Blackwell.
- . 1989b. *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*. Translated by Thomas Burger and Frederick Lawrence. Polity Press.
- Hall, Stuart. 1980. "Encoding/Decoding." In *Media and Cultural Studies: Keywords*, edited by Meenakshi Gigi Durham and Douglas Kellner, 2nd Edition, 137–44. *Keywords in Cultural Studies*. Malden, MA: Blackwell.
- Helmond, Anne. 2015. "The Platformization of the Web: Making Web Data Platform Ready." *Social Media + Society* 1 (2): 2056305115603080. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305115603080>.
- Hesse-Biber, Sharlene. 2016. *The Practice of Qualitative Research*. 3rd Edition. Los Angeles: SAGE Publications, Inc.
- Holy Ghost Writer. 2019. *Donald J. Trump: The Second Coming of Christ*. <https://www.amazon.com/Donald-J-Trump-Second-Coming-ebook/dp/B07W4451TD>.
- Hopp, Toby, Patrick Ferrucci, and Chris J Vargo. 2020. "Why Do People Share Ideologically Extreme, False, and Misleading Content on Social Media? A Self-Report and Trace Data-Based Analysis of Countermedia Content Dissemination on Facebook and Twitter." *Human Communication Research* 46 (4): 357–84. <https://doi.org/10.1093/hcr/hqz022>.
- Hughes, Geoffrey. 2009. *Political Correctness: A History of Semantics and Culture*. 1st Edition. West Sussex: John Wiley & Sons, Ltd. <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781444314960>.
- Huizinga, Johan. 1955. *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press. <http://hdl.handle.net/2027/mdp.39015003736553>.
- Hume, Kathryn. 2007. "Diffused Satire in Contemporary American Fiction." *Modern Philology* 105 (2): 300–325. <https://doi.org/10.1086/588102>.
- Hutcheon, Linda. 1994. *Irony's Edge: The Theory and Politics of Irony*. 1st Edition. London and New York: Routledge.
- Isaac, Mike. 2021. "For Political Cartoonists, the Irony Was That Facebook Didn't Recognize Irony." *The New York Times*, March 19, 2021, sec. Technology. <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/03/19/technology/political-cartoonists-facebook-satire-irony.html>.
- Isgur, Sarah, and David French. n.d. "Satire Meet Reality." *Advisory Opinions (The Dispatch)*. <https://advisoryopinions.thedispatch.com/p/satire-meet-reality-19a>.

- Jamieson, Kathleen Hall, and Joseph N. Cappella. 2008. *Echo Chamber: Rush Limbaugh and the Conservative Media Establishment*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press.
- Jones, Jeffrey P. 2010. *Entertaining Politics: Satiric Television and Political Engagement*. Lanham, MD, UNITED STATES: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.
<http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/uva/detail.action?docID=666064>.
- Joseph, Miranda. 2002. *Against the Romance of Community*. Minneapolis, UNITED STATES: University of Minnesota Press.
<http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/uva/detail.action?docID=310600>.
- Kiley, Jocelyn, and Shiva Maniam. 2016. "Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual Voters Remain Solidly Democratic." *Pew Research Center: Fact Tank*. October 25, 2016.
<https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/10/25/lesbian-gay-and-bisexual-voters-remain-a-solidly-democratic-bloc/>.
- Kimmel, Michael. 2013. *Angry White Men: American Masculinity at the End of an Era*. New York: Bold Type Books.
<http://proxy01.its.virginia.edu/login?url=https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=nlebk&AN=1528232&site=ehost-live&scope=site>.
- Krefting, Rebecca. 2019. "Savage New Media: Discursive Campaigns for/against Political Correctness." In *The Joke Is on Us: Political Comedy in (Late) Neoliberal Times*, edited by Julie A. Webber, 245–65. Lanham: Lexington Books.
- Lane, Julie B. 2020. "Cultivating Distrust of the Mainstream Media: Propagandists for a Liberal Machine and the American Establishment." In *News on the Right: Studying Conservative News Cultures*, edited by Anthony Nadler and A.J. Bauer, 157–73. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Liesman, Steve. 2021. "A Large Share of Republicans Want Trump to Remain Head of the Party, CNBC Survey Shows." *CNBC*, February 12, 2021, sec. All-America Economic Survey.
<https://www.cnbc.com/2021/02/12/a-large-share-of-republicans-want-trump-to-remain-head-of-the-party-cnbc-survey.html>.
- Lowry, Brian. 2007. "Reviews - The ½ Hour News Hour." *Variety*, February 27, 2007. Internet Archive Wayback Machine.
<https://web.archive.org/web/20070227235353/https://variety.com/review/VE1117932833.html?categoryid=32&cs=1>.
- Major, Mark. 2020. "Bridging the Marginal and the Mainstream: Methodological Considerations for Conservative News as a Subfield." In *News on the Right: Studying Conservative News Cultures*, edited by Anthony Nadler and A.J. Bauer, 213–31. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Mann, Kyle. 2020a. "How To Write A Bangin' Babylon Bee Headline." *The Babylon Bee*. April 23, 2020. <https://babylonbee.com/news/how-to-write-a-babylon-bee-headline>.

- . 2020b. “Do Our Jobs For Us: Give Us Topic Of The Week Ideas!” The Babylon Bee. September 18, 2020. <https://babylonbee.com/news/do-our-job-for-us-give-us-topic-of-the-week-ideas>.
- . 2020c. “What A Time To Be Alive.” The Babylon Bee. October 16, 2020. <https://babylonbee.com/news/what-a-time-to-be-alive>.
- . 2020d. “Hey, New Subscribers! Welcome To The Actual Resistance.” The Babylon Bee. October 22, 2020. <https://babylonbee.com/news/welcome-to-the-actual-resistance>.
- Marx, Karl. 1976. *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*. Translated by Ben Fowkes. Vol. 1. New York: Penguin. <http://hdl.handle.net/2027/mdp.39015005938256>.
- Mikkelson, David. 2018. “FACT CHECK: Did CNN Purchase an Industrial-Sized Washing Machine to Spin News?” Snopes.Com. March 1, 2018. <https://www.snopes.com/fact-check/cnn-washing-machine/>.
- Mims, Bob. 2018. “The Babylon Bee Fought Facebook — and Won. Now the Satirical Site Is Releasing a Book Full of ‘Fake News for the Soul.’” *The Salt Lake Tribune*, May 25, 2018. <https://sltrib.com/religion/2018/05/25/thus-saith-the-satirical-babylon-bee-to-fellow-christians-laugh-at-yourselves-for-heavens-sake>.
- Mosco, Vincent. 2009. “Commodification: Content, Audiences, Labor.” In *The Political Economy of Communication*, 2nd Edition, 127–56. London and Thousand Oaks, California: SAGE.
- Nieborg, David B, and Thomas Poell. 2018. “The Platformization of Cultural Production: Theorizing the Contingent Cultural Commodity.” *New Media & Society* 20 (11): 4275–92. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444818769694>.
- Nielsen, Rasmus Kleis, and Sarah Anne Ganter. 2018. “Dealing with Digital Intermediaries: A Case Study of the Relations between Publishers and Platforms.” *New Media & Society* 20 (4): 1600–1617. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444817701318>.
- Onion, The*. 2020. “Smoke Alarm Sick Of Being Yelled At For Doing Its Job.” *The Onion*, September 21, 2020. <https://local.theonion.com/smoke-alarm-sick-of-being-yelled-at-for-doing-its-job-1845127577>.
- . 2021. “‘I’ve Been Selfish And Arrogant, And I Apologize,’ Says Content, Mentally Healthy Trump Minutes After Social Media Ban.” *The Onion*, January 7, 2021. <https://www.theonion.com/i-ve-been-selfish-and-arrogant-and-i-apologize-says-1846012723>.
- Orchard Twig, Marvin, and Eleanor Orchard Twig. 2019. *Donald John Trump: The Second Coming of Christ*. <https://www.amazon.com/Donald-John-Trump-Second-Coming-ebook/dp/B07VJ7N399>.
- Pariser, Eli. 2011. *The Filter Bubble: What the Internet Is Hiding From You*. New York: Penguin Press.

- Patterson, Troy. 2007. "Republicans Make Jokes: The Daily Show for Conservatives Shows up on YouTube." *Slate Magazine*. February 15, 2007. <https://slate.com/culture/2007/02/the-daily-show-for-conservatives.html>.
- Pew Research Center. 2014. "Religion in America: U.S. Religious Data, Demographics and Statistics." *Pew Research Center's Religion & Public Life Project*. 2014. <https://www.pewforum.org/religious-landscape-study/>.
- . 2018. "Trends in Party Affiliation among Demographic Groups." *Pew Research Center - U.S. Politics & Policy*. March 20, 2018. <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2018/03/20/1-trends-in-party-affiliation-among-demographic-groups/>.
- . 2019. "Share of U.S. Adults Using Social Media, Including Facebook, Is Mostly Unchanged since 2018." *Pew Research Center Think Tank*. April 10, 2019. <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/04/10/share-of-u-s-adults-using-social-media-including-facebook-is-mostly-unchanged-since-2018/>.
- Phillips, Whitney, and Ryan M. Milner. 2017. *The Ambivalent Internet: Mischief, Oddity, and Antagonism Online*. 1st Edition. Cambridge, UK ; Malden, MA: Polity.
- Posner, Sarah. 2018. "How a Local Religious-Right Faction Launched Anti-Trans Bathroom Debate." *Rolling Stone*. January 22, 2018. <https://www.rollingstone.com/politics/politics-news/anti-trans-bathroom-debate-how-a-local-religious-right-faction-launched-a-national-movement-203248/>.
- Randall, Eric. 2011. "The 'Death of Irony,' and Its Many Reincarnations." *The Atlantic*. September 9, 2011. <https://www.theatlantic.com/national/archive/2011/09/death-irony-and-its-many-reincarnations/338114/>.
- Robocalls: Last Week Tonight with John Oliver (HBO)*. 2019. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FO0iG_P0P6M.
- Roose, Kevin. 2020. "How The Babylon Bee, a Right-Wing Satire Site, Capitalizes on Confusion." *The New York Times*, October 16, 2020, sec. Technology. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/10/16/technology/babylon-bee.html>.
- Scannell, Paddy. 2007. "Communication and Publicness: Habermas, Germany (USA/UK), 1950s-1990s." In *Media and Communication*, 233–59. London ; Thousand Oaks, Calif: Sage.
- Schmidt, Vivien A. 2002. *The Futures of European Capitalism. The Futures of European Capitalism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. <https://oxford.universitypressscholarship.com/view/10.1093/0199253684.001.0001/acprof-9780199253685>.
- . 2008. "Discursive Institutionalism: The Explanatory Power of Ideas and Discourse." *Annual Review of Political Science* 11 (1): 303–26. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.polisci.11.060606.135342>.
- Schutz, Charles E. 1977. *Political Humor: From Aristophanes to Sam Ervin*. Rutherford, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press.

- Sienkiewicz, Matt. 2018. "The Carnival's Edge: Charlie Hebdo and Theories of Comedy." *Jewish History* 32 (1): 19–32. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10835-018-9303-7>.
- Sirois, Martie. 2019. "Hate To Break It To You, But Trump Is *Probably Not* The Anointed, Unprofane Second Coming Of Christ." Medium. August 3, 2019. <https://martiesirois.medium.com/hate-to-break-it-to-you-but-trump-is-probably-not-the-anointed-unprofane-second-coming-of-8be55875a22>.
- Smythe, Dallas W. 1977. "Communications: Blindspot of Western Marxism." *CTheory* 1 (3): 1–27.
- Stanfill, Mel. 2019. *Exploiting Fandom: How the Media Industry Seeks to Manipulate Fans*. 1st Edition. Iowa City: University Of Iowa Press.
- Storm, Jonathan. 2007. "Fox News' Fake News Funny? You Decide." *The Philadelphia Inquirer*. March 7, 2007. <https://web.archive.org/web/20070307112404/http://www.philly.com/mld/philly/entertainment/television/16718773.htm#>.
- Sugar, Rachel. 2018. "The Controversial History of the Annual Starbucks Holiday Cup." Vox. November 2, 2018. <https://www.vox.com/the-goods/2018/11/2/18052550/starbucks-holiday-cup-explained-2018-controversies>.
- Terranova, Tiziana. 2012. "Free Labor." In *Digital Labor: The Internet As Playground and Factory*, edited by Trebor Scholz, 67–114. London, UNITED KINGDOM: Taylor & Francis Group. <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/uva/detail.action?docID=1047015>.
- Trump, Donald (@realDonaldTrump). 2020. "Twitter Shuts Down Entire Network To Slow Spread Of Negative Biden News https://t.co/JPmjOrKPcr via @TheBabylonBee Wow, this has never been done in history..." Twitter, October 16, 2020. Trump Twitter Archive. <https://www.thetrumparchive.com/?searchbox=%22%5C%22never+been+done%5C%22%22>
- Vaidyanathan, Siva. 2018. *Antisocial Media: How Facebook Disconnects Us and Undermines Democracy*. New York, NY, United States of America: Oxford University Press.
- Von Drehle, David. 2020. "Opinion | Trump Has Killed Satire." *Washington Post*, July 14, 2020. https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/trump-has-killed-satire/2020/07/14/7a5fe848-c5e3-11ea-b037-f9711f89ee46_story.html.
- Ward, Mark, Sr. 2020. "'From a Christian Perspective': News/Talk in Evangelical Mass Media." In *News on the Right: Studying Conservative News Cultures*, edited by Anthony Nadler and A.J. Bauer, 17–46. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Warner, Jamie. 2011. "Humor, Terror, and Dissent: The Onion After 9/11." In *A Decade of Dark Humor: How Comedy, Irony, and Satire Shaped Post-9/11 America*, edited by Ted Gornelos and Viveca Greene, Illustrated Edition, 57–77. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi.
- Warner, Michael. 2002. *Publics and Counterpublics*. Cambridge, Mass. and London, Eng.: The MIT Press.

- Watts, Mark D, David Domke, Dhavan V Shah, and David P Fan. 1999. "Elite Cues and Media Bias in Presidential Campaigns: Explaining Public Perceptions of a Liberal Press." *Communication Research* 26 (2): 144–75. <https://doi.org/10.1177/009365099026002003>.
- Weigel, David. 2007. "The Half Hour News Hour's 15 Minutes." *Reason.Com*, February 15, 2007, sec. Posts. <https://reason.com/2007/02/15/the-half-hour-news-hours-15-mi/>.
- Weiss, Joanna. 2007. "Fake News Entry Cranks up the Volume, Not Laughs." *Boston Globe*, February 17, 2007, sec. Arts & Entertainment. http://archive.boston.com/ae/tv/articles/2007/02/17/fake_news_entry_cranks_up_the_volume_no_tLaughs/.
- Wemple, Erik. 2018. "Opinion: Facebook Admits Mistake in Flagging Satire about CNN Spinning the News with a Washing Machine." *Washington Post*, March 2, 2018. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/erik-wemple/wp/2018/03/02/facebook-admits-mistake-in-flagging-satire-about-cnn-spinning-the-news-with-a-washing-machine/>.
- Williams, Bruce A., and Michael X. Delli Carpini. 2012. *After Broadcast News: Media Regimes, Democracy, and the New Information Environment*. Illustrated edition. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Wulfsohn, Joseph. 2020a. "The Babylon Bee Stings Twitter CEO after Account Was Briefly Suspended." *Fox News*, August 18, 2020. <https://www.foxnews.com/media/the-babylon-bee-stings-twitter-ceo-after-account-was-briefly-suspended>.
- . 2020b. "Facebook Removes Babylon Bee Satire Mocking Sen. Hirono's Treatment of Amy Barrett, Says It 'Incites Violence.'" *Fox News*, October 20, 2020. <https://www.foxnews.com/media/facebook-removes-babylon-bee-satire-mocking-sen-hironos-treatment-of-amy-barrett-says-it-incites-violence>.
- Young, Dannagal Goldthwaite. 2019. *Irony and Outrage: The Polarized Landscape of Rage, Fear, and Laughter in the United States*. New York, NY, United States of America: Oxford University Press.
- Zeng, Yuan. 2018. "Native Advertising: Revenue and Acclaim or a Ruined Reputation?" *Media Asia* 45 (1–2): 21–24. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01296612.2017.1527572>.
- Zimmerman, Sacha. 2007. "Half a Laugh." *The New Republic*, March 5, 2007. <https://newrepublic.com/article/63390/half-laugh>.
- Zuboff, Shoshana. 2019. *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power*. First edition. New York: PublicAffairs.