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**Intro:** Welcome to the Let’s Talk Government Podcast. A podcast that is provided for you by the department of government at Minnesota State University, Mankato. Located in Minnesota in the United States. I am your host Dr. Pat Nelson, the chairperson of the department of criminal justice. I want to thank you for joining us as we explore different topics related to government. Some may be surprising and some may not, so please enjoy.

**Dr. Nelson:** Welcome to Episode 23 of the let's talk government podcast. Today we're going to talk about Satire and Politics. I am joined by one of my favorites, Dr. Amelia Pridemore from the political science program at Minnesota State University, Mankato. We've had some very interesting discussions on outlaw citizenship and storming the capitals so thank you for joining me today. So I guess the obvious place to start is what is satire?

**Dr. Pridemore:** Well, the way that Dr. Dannagal Young, who is the author of a fabulous book that myself and my students love; Irony and Outrage, about the power of satirical programming as well as what's called outrage programming a lot of what you see on conservative talk radio. So she defined satire as playful conversation. It's intended of course to elicit laughter. But as I tell students when I teach them about satire, something can be hilariously funny, but that doesn't make it satirical. So what makes it satirical? So one thing that it does is it articulates a political or social judgment, and it often does so in somewhat of an antagonistic or aggressive type of fashion. It also advances critiques in society and institutions and when we do this it forces us, the audience, to examine if we possibly ourselves are complicit according to Dr. Young. Now, targets of satire. It might be prominent political figures, the president. It might be institutions, things that you know we do that we don't really think about but they're naturally a part of our everyday lives. Like for example, religion. John Oliver did a large piece on the impact of televangelists and how some of them use faith for financial gain. So if you're talking about institutions, religion is one of them. And there's some people who use it in often not so great ways. Practices, just things we do that maybe we don't even think about so much. And then it could be social or cultural convention such as gender roles. But these conventions have political implications or perhaps the people who are the target of it is us. There's a danger in satire when you're watching it sometimes as I tell people all the time. It could turn out at the end of a program that you're sitting there feeling really guilty about what you did last year, last week, five minutes before. There's a danger to self when listening to satire because who knows it may be when you're listening to a satirical program and that judgment has passed, it may be on you. It may be on you or just all of us as a society. And that's one of the key points about it. The other thing is that satire is a process. That judgment I mentioned to you, that's the point of a big process that satire is. So not only is it a deliberate way of telling jokes but there's also a deliberate process that Young identifies. So again, it starts out with a little bit of aggression. There's a little bit of a punch to it but it's sort of like a play fighting type of aggression. So for example, John Oliver will often start off his programming saying something to the effect of, ‘Hi welcome to our blank void, since he's been having to record in a socially distance form kind of like, ah, this is terrible. But he's kind of making a joke with it so it's not your dad screaming at the TV right? There's a little bit of snark to it. And then there's a lot of play that Young identifies. What I call the play part is really critical in terms of winning the audience's hearts and minds. And I call this the clown setup. And what I mean by the clown setup is that the host of a satire program will basically say, either literally or in some other form or fashion, don't take me seriously. I'm just a comedian. I'm just a clown. I'm an idiot. Like for example, one thing that people would say to Jon Stewart, in the early days of The Daily Show was, can you believe how much of an impact that your program has had? And Jon Stewart would typically reply with, my show comes on after a program that involves puppets making prank calls. John Oliver put a picture of himself in his awkward teenage years on the Billboard of his show for the previous season. They'll do this all the time. Another one with Oliver was that before one of his seasons started on the preview real they said, and the critics are raving, and it was basically all of these horrible things that Donald Trump, Jack Warner from FIFA, some other authoritarian leaders had to say that was really terrible about his show as a promo. It's like, the critics are raving this show is terrible. But he made sure that the people who were who were saying this were some that a lot of people don't like. But what they do is they make sure to kind of take themselves down a notch. Hey, don't take me so seriously. And so what happens is, is where they don't put themselves on a pedestal and in fact, try to sell a set themselves up as the goofball. A lot of times what happens is, and this is something that happens with us when it comes to entertainment presentation or when information as is presented to us as simple as entertainment. Well, what happens with audiences is, if something is presented as straight up political information people put up their guard. Put up your dukes because that's going to challenge their preexisting beliefs. ‘Oh no you don't, don't come at me with that.’ But if you have somebody who's saying, ‘hey, look at me I've got a really dumb show that's followed by some puppets later on. hey, look at my awkward middle school picture.’ It's like, oh, isn't this fun. And that's a very deliberate process. And what it does is when you have people put down their guards, naturally speaking, the information flows to them a lot easier. It's a little -- it's a little easier to digest when you swallow your food with a glass of satire. With a glass of entertainment per se, right? So the clown setup is key because that's what's going to disarm the audience. Hey guys, we're just here to have fun and be stupid, isn't that nice?

**Dr. Nelson:** But we see that in print satire too don't we? the clown set up?

**Dr. Pridemore:** Oh yeah.

**Dr. Nelson:** I mean if you look at “Bloom County,” Opus was a penguin who was the center of all this political commentary and Bill the cat and even Doonesbury. It's on the comic page. How could it be political? Or editorial cartoons are drawn cartoonish so you have that comic setup so that makes a lot of sense Amelia.

**Dr. Pridemore:** Oh yeah. You could talk about editorial cartoons and likewise, some satirical print programming like “The Onion.” A lot of times too that really builds on what some people have often called the kernel of truth. So for example editorial cartoons. Sometimes they would make Barack Obama's ears especially large and you know he was known for having kind of larger ears. But they would make his basically be like much larger than his head. Or George W. Bush they'd have him on like these cowboy boots or whatever to kind of represent this ideal of him being this loud brash Texan or whatever. But the thing is, is it's kind of like the way a lot of these tend to operate, especially when you have a print based satirical publication, they start out with something that is so believable, that it's real, almost. In fact, some of these same people who have been the target of satirical programming like for example, Jack Warner of FIFA, who has had a war of words with John Oliver. Okay well there was an Onion story about FIFA that came out and Jack Warner was on television, how dare you say these horrible things about me and it was a story in The Onion. But the thing is, is I've personally seen people who don't know what The Onion is, believe it because it just seems like there's this this air of truth to something that's absurd. And the thing is, is when you're looking at something that's absurd and you kind of see the connection between the real and the absurd, sometimes what I will say is if you're laughing because it's real maybe you should think about why you're laughing.

**Dr. Nelson:** That's a good point.

**Dr. Pridemore:** Why are you laughing? And is this a laughing matter? ‘Oh yeah, that stupid thing that one politician does all the time? Oh yeah man, I see that all the time.’ Why are we seeing that all the time? Is it okay that we're seeing this all the time? For example, one of my favorite Onion articles that I've sometimes used is, it was from a few years ago and it was an article that was something called to the effect of; taxpayers demand that their money only be wasted on things that are awesome. So the fake people who were fake interviewed for the story were saying things like, ‘hey, instead of building a bridge to nowhere how about you build us space lasers and let's make a huge sausage that goes all the way from Miami to New York. We’ll eat it of course.’ And one of my favorite bits of it was sports stadiums. Taxpayers didn't mind, according to this Onion article, taxpayers didn't mind public financing of new sports stadiums as long as the old stadiums could be exploded while everybody gets to watch and while ACDC’s Highway to Hell is playing in the background. And so in other words, yes if you're going to waste our money on things like sports stadiums well at least do something cool for us. Or if you're going to waste our money waste it on things that are cool. Now think about it. One thing that has come up a lot when we talk about public financing and that's been criticized has been the public financing of sports stadiums. Why are we publicly financing the NFL, right? So why are we doing this? And for that matter, why are we spending money on this, why are we spending money on that? When we talk about how government does or does not spend our money we were laughing at for example, the sports stadiums bit. But why are we laughing? Is there something to be said about why we're laughing at this and not just the sport stadiums but any of this. Why are we laughing? And that causes us often to ask some really important questions. If this is so absurd should we do something about something that is so absurd?

**Dr. Nelson:** Well I kind of interrupted your discussion of process. We were at clowns there so what **[inaudible]** after that?

**Dr. Pridemore:** Okay so basically throughout the programming, often times, again there's a little bit of aggression, a little bit of play but again there's this kind of clowning around aspect to it. So for example, one thing that's often done by pretty well all of the prominent satirists out there, John Oliver, Samantha Bee, Trevor Noah on The Daily Show does this fairly often, they'll throw out some kind of outrageous graphics in the middle of their face just if nothing else to keep you laughing and keep the show going. For example, John Oliver's quest for some rather suggestive rat art that happened this past year, it was utilized and some of his sketches after he found it. So, yeah but you're informing the audience but you're disarming them at the same time and making them more receptive because ‘this is fun wow.’ But you're still drawing them in and it goes a little further and further until it reaches what I call the judgment. And the judgment, kind of like what I mentioned before according to what Dannagal Young has had to say, the judgment could be a political figure, a political party, they could be an institution possibly one that we hold dear, like for example freedom of religion. Well yeah some people find ways to create loopholes around that to have a $6 million dollar house and a $60 million jet. But sometimes it's us and one big example that I use in terms of we ourselves are to blame when it comes to satire is, John Oliver's piece on warehouses and he mainly focused on Amazon during this bit. One of the things that he made sure to do was he said, ‘Hey guys, how many of you are buying prime this week? How many of you had to have your horse head mask in one day?’ And then he goes on to show these Amazon workers, some of them who are 80 years old, but some of them who were very young people who were physically giving out. Some of them had no bathroom breaks and having to wet themselves on the job. And he followed it at the end with this little like parody of Amazon's commercial about how happy their workers are and it was something like, ‘Hey, Jim aren't you a happy person to be working here at Amazon? I am going to have to wet myself now can you please turn the camera off.’ But the thing is, is when you think about how many times you or I or anybody else has ordered prime just in the past day. And then when you watch something like that where you're having to see a 77-year-old man have to walk the equivalent of a football field to get your Oreo cookies. And people having to wet their pants at work all of a sudden that horse head mask isn't so fashionable after all is it? And that's something but the thing is there's a bit of discomfort about that. If all of a sudden those Oreos aren't as tasty when you see where they came from or what it took to get them to you. But in a way this is a very necessary process that has to happen. If we don't-- if we ourselves are doing something that's detrimental to our society and to our democracy, or just to each other maybe we need to be called about ourselves and sometimes satire achieves that.

**Dr. Nelson:** So I think it's important to note that satire is not always about politics. Many times it is about the conditions that humans are or something that's going on in society. I'm just thinking about some of the parodies I saw about wearing masks over the last year. It was some satire to also put some social pressure on people to realize that they should be wearing masks and wearing them properly. So is there any way—well was that the full process? I don't want to stop the process.

**Dr. Pridemore:** It was the general outline of it yeah. The big key is the judgment.

**Dr. Nelson:** Alright so is there-- I mean so why doesn't satire just get out of control and keep going and going and going? Is there any way to just like say wait timeout let's think about this?

**Dr. Pridemore:** Well actually that's a great point because there's a bit of satire that one of my mentors from Marshall University, Dr. Jamie Warner, has talked about and that's called political culture jamming. And basically how I describe it anyway is that satirists are not putting the brakes on themselves satirists put the brakes on often ludicrous, sometimes even dangerous political information that we're either getting from our political leaders, or other political figures, or from the mass media. So actually satire isn't so much that it's out of control, satire is actually the emergency brake when you take into account the concept of political culture jamming. So, Dr. Warner in a very awesome 2007 article that she wrote about The Daily Show and political culture jamming. So culture jamming itself has been around for quite some time mainly it was used as a critique against capitalistic culture but it was kind of done in a very aggressive style. What political culture jamming does it's a little different and namely in that it uses a lot of the same-- like culture jamming when it was done in advertising. It uses a lot of the same messaging techniques. Just like is done on the news, just like it's done in politics. The difference between regular culture jamming and the political culture jamming that Dr. Warner lays out is that there's a humor and parody involved that makes it seem innocuous. Again, ‘Oh, it's just a fun show.’ It makes it innocuous and again it allows them, as Dr. Walter puts it, satire is like John Stewart. Can operate stealthily and they can basically get the job done in kind of a little skies way. Setting themselves up like the cloud. ‘Don't take me seriously,’ even though they are making an impact. it's sort of basically, they don't come out as putting themselves up on a pedestal. So really it's like, ‘Oh, it's just a conversation with this cool friend of mine’ versus say the exalted one that’s on a pedestal, right? And so there's a greater approachability to it. Now with culture jamming what basically this means is that satirical comedians will, according to Dr. Warner, use dissident interpretations of political messaging, political events. So it's coming from somebody who is advancing a critique. They don't want to pair it back what they're seeing on the news or they're seeing in politics. And what they do is, the term jam, they jam that political messaging. And oftentimes they use the same techniques that news and politics does particularly the news. So for example, take these news parody shows like The Daily Show, The Colbert Report. The same desk, the American flag graphics, you're talking about these pundit shows that Stephen Colbert was mimicking in the old Colbert Report. Eagles flying around all over the place, graphics galore. And if you're talking about John Oliver, John Oliver is known for well, he's not having to broadcast in his blank void that he's having to use now. John Oliver is known for at the end of every show putting on some kind of crazy over the top spectacle with marching bands and people dressed up in bear costumes, the foul mouth squirrel. And for that matter the lawsuit that led to the foul mouth squirrel sparked the incident with the cold magnate Bob Murray. Well right before everything was shut down for COVID John Oliver did a satirical take on Bob Murray and people using litigation to silence dissident voices so a greater aspect not just what happened to John Oliver. They did a whole bit involving a time square dance number with fireworks, costumes, dancers. So, a lot of these spectacles often times that are well over the top, well the things that are often used say on a cable news network, same stuff. All the graphics flying at you, lots of American flags all over the place because we're patriots. Well satirists are using the same thing. And what that does is that newscast parody or that parody of something that we see in the political sphere, it gives them the sort of era of legitimacy. This era of respectability according to Warner in the music and graphics. One thing that I found that was really funny when I talked about this with students is one of my students remarked in class once that when watching cable news he felt like everything was breaking news. Everything was just breaking news, breaking news, all the time breaking news. And I said, to kind of spark some further discussion with the students, I said, okay well when you see breaking news what happens? What do you see? And they're like, ‘oh yeah the graphics, the music and somebody yelled out from the back, ‘it's like Colbert!’ And I remember thinking to myself, The Colbert Report was designed to parody the news and now they're designed to be like the news and now the students are telling me, especially the younger generations, they're telling me the news looks like Colbert.

**Dr. Nelson:** Well and like-- I'm going to date myself a little bit but like the weekend report from Saturday Night Live was always so hilarious because it was just like watching news that was made up. So when you kind of equate that I never thought of it as satire I just thought it was just entertainment but really it kind of crosses lines there doesn't it.

**Dr. Pridemore:** Yeah, Weekend Update didn't go as far probably as the Daily Show and some of the spin offs that have come before it namely because a lot of their takes weren't as aggressive. But still yet when you've got for example, Tina Fey's remarks about when she and Amy Poehler became a two-woman hosting force on Weekend Update, some of her remarks that were to the effect of perhaps some women aren't exactly nice, but perhaps some of the same women who aren't exactly nice get things done and perhaps that should be more fashionable, to put everything very politely. That made some waves and that did make some people think because a lot of times when we talk about women in politics they talk more about that likeability. ‘Do we like her; do we like her?’ I mean how many people asked that about Donald Trump, right?

**Dr. Nelson:** We're worried about how they dress or what their hair looks like. That type of thing is yes, I agree.

**Dr. Pridemore:** Especially when you talk about that likeability factor if you think about it but what Tina Fey was having to say was very accurate in terms of critiquing the whole, ‘did we like her?’ Well maybe if she can get things done and maybe it shouldn't matter as to whether or not we like her. Or if we like her does it still mean—likewise, is it good to have somebody we like who isn't going to get anything done, right? But yeah she called up that whole likeability thing that a lot of what's been said in the blogosphere namely about female candidates. But that's one of the things that culture jamming does, is essentially it calls out. I always say that when it comes to the messaging often, especially in the era of 24-hour news and social media, man what it is, is it just feels like it's like a wrecking train which some media scholars pointed out. Uh oh this is going to be really bad as technology evolves. Well the thing about culture jamming is, is it puts the brakes on what seems to be this never-ending cycle and it says, wait a minute what's going on here. For example, why are we caring about this when it comes to our female candidates? Wait a minute what are we letting people use this tax-exempt status for religious organizations for exactly? Wait a minute. What is going on here? Time out. And I think that's one aspect, that culture jamming aspect I think is a major benefit to not only us being informed citizens but our actually having a healthier democracy, especially in the age of greater technology and things just flying at us at the speed of light, feeling like the news is Colbert. One media scholar, and he wrote this book in 1985 but I still assign it to this day and a lot of my students find this to be prophecy, Neil Postman's “Amusing Ourselves to Death.” Basically, there's a lot to unpack with postman's arguments but basically what he has said was as technology has advanced not only do we have information moving faster but the thing is, is with that information moving faster we lose a lot of context that we need. Where we've just got to have things right now and we've got to do it in 30 seconds and boom right off the bat. We don't deliberate and ponder and question and follow up on information that's being thrown out there. We're not interrogating this enough whether it be our press actually doing the interrogating for us or for that matter, as we ride along this kind of speeding locomotive ourselves as citizens, we ourselves don't get enough time to ponder things. And the thing is if you're talking about whether or not we should spend our money on sports stadiums, how we treat our Amazon workers, who we should have as our next president, how we should handle a pandemic, right? We've got to be able to think about that longer than 30 seconds. And that culture jamming process what I argue is, is the culture jamming process in terms of stopping that transmission and saying, ‘wait a minute, what's going on here?’ A lot of times what that does is it gives us the chance to regain that lost context. We get our context back once we're able to put the brakes on. And one way that we can effectively put on the brakes is through political culture jamming that satire does.

**Dr. Nelson:** Well it's interesting because it kind of plays into the speed of information now. If you look at some of the historically really satirical publications like the New Yorker, the Onion, editorial cartoons, Doonesbury, Bloom County, they had to put work into and thought into it and then it would get published on the cycle. Or even the TV shows, I mean you didn't get to watch it every night when it was coming on. But now anybody can just grab their phone, start videoing themselves and putting it on Facebook. So, how does that speed of information impact satire in politics?

**Dr. Pridemore:** Well I think one thing is that you mentioned Facebook is now with YouTube, Facebook, etc. There's infinite platforms to where you don't need HBO or Comedy Central or TBS or whoever it may be to green light your show. You can basically have your own satire programming of whatever kind on your phone. And some people have really worked do this. For example, Trey Crowder the liberal redneck. He basically just started recording himself on Facebook and now he's a sensation. A lot of people just grab a phone and put themselves on YouTube or on Facebook Live. So, technology one big thing has been the platforms now for anybody who wants to get into the satire game is outright infinite. And the other thing that's really important about that too is as Samantha Bee can attest, when she got into some hot water about some Ivanka Trump remarks, a lot of times too when you have to pay to advertisers, network executives, to basically be able to stay on the air. Well, yeah Facebook moderates content, yeah YouTube moderates content but you don't have to worry about so many puppeteers that could pull the plug on you and pull the plug on your platform if you're working off a social media. Now has this happened? Well just ask Alex Jones, not a satirist nonetheless, he had his platform pulled. But yet you don't have to worry so much and therefore, you can be far less censored. The problem is often times you have far less of a budget. You don't get to have John Oliver's marching bands and Time Square shutdowns and fireworks. In fact if you did some of this with you as a private citizen when only armed with your cell phone you might get arrested for it.

**Dr. Nelson:** There's the possibility of defamation depending on how far you go.

**Dr. Pridemore:** Right. Which by the way that actually is a good point that you brought up with defamation. Actually satire, when you talk about the legal system, satire not only in terms of the First Amendment, not only is it helped by the First Amendment its actually set some major precedents for the First Amendment. One that happened well before the John Oliver, Bob Murray case which was a defamation case, one that happened before that was the infamous Hustler magazine and Jerry Falwell case.

**Dr. Nelson:** Oh I totally forgot about that yes.

**Dr. Pridemore:** The Falwell and Flint, which was the subject of the movie, the people vs Larry Flynt. This was a parody ad that was running Hustler magazine that was pretty raunchy about Jerry Falwell. It made it all the way to the United States Supreme Court, and it was an eight zero ruling I believe only one person abstained, even Antonin Scalia ruled in favor of Larry Flynt in this case and the standard that was set with Falwell and Flint was that a reasonable person would be able to say, ‘no, this is not true.’ So for example when accusations were in a parody ad, which means it wasn't really real, accusations were leveled at Jerry Falwell about some of his sexual behavior which was anybody can look at this and tell that it was just absolutely ridiculous. Well that was kind of the standard that was set. Basically, if anybody can look at this and just know that this is just absurd, this is a joke then yeah you can say what you want. Also helped that somebody like Falwell was a public figure. Out there in the public eye which was established largely by the New York Times or Sullivan. You also had him setting himself up there as this moral entrepreneur per se, remember Moral Majority?

**Dr. Nelson:** Yeah. Yeah.

**Dr. Pridemore:** But the key thing that came out of Falwell and Flint was that if nobody would ever believe the, ‘no it's clear that this is a joke, you're good to go. And that was one of the things that likely led to John Oliver being freed of Bob Murray. Because some of the content involving Bob Murray, such as that involved the talking squirrel, you can look at that and just tell that no this is just a joke. So actually what happened with Falwell and Flint and that set of satirical bit, was it opened up the door for more content that was used as political humor. It was done by pointing out the absurd question, ‘gee, why are we thinking this is absurd? And it was a very crude satirical piece that kind of really opened the door to that. And the one that kind of kept that precedent going was John Oliver and Bob Murray. So democracy thanks you, Larry Flynt and talking squirrel.

**Dr. Nelson:** This is a perfect segue to bring you back into the closing. So how does satire affect a democracy? Are there good things and bad things? I mean why do we-- why should we encourage that title in democracy.

**Dr. Pridemore:** Just as I mentioned before too you've got to be able to sometimes use the absurd to point out the absurd. In other words why are we laughing? The other thing is too, when you talk about democracy and you talk about a dissident voice, whether it's a protester on the sidewalk who has something really angry to say or perhaps it's someone doing a Time Square number with a squirrel. The thing is, is regardless of how this dissident voice that's part of a healthy democracy is doing things, still yet it's a dissident voice. It's a voice that challenges authority which is necessary for a healthy democracy. And some people might say well why don't they just say mean things why do they have to do this number with sexual humor and with swearing and funky looking rats and so forth. Well the thing is in terms of bringing people into thinking about this dissident voice, this alternative point of view rather than something that's often parroted out there, that draw that entertainment has, that's going to bring more people into that message. Maybe they're not going to accept the message but they are going to be more likely to at least listen. I think one of the things that we often find ourselves doing in our society today is we often just automatically shut down if somebody has a viewpoint other than our own. But when you kind of get people to let their guard down with that nice little clown setup right, let their guard down with the clown setup. Even if you don't change hearts and minds at least you can listen. At least we can maybe come to some kind of understanding with each other, with one another. And perhaps maybe it'll just have to take a foul mouth squirrel to do it but perhaps we could reach a greater understanding with one another.

**Dr. Nelson:** Well Dr Pridemore this has been an excellent conversation about satire. I learned a lot because I’ve always wondered were there things I don’t laugh at that other people do? But maybe it’s just how you’re interpreting it too. So, thank you for joining me today I appreciate it.

**Dr. Pridemore:** Thank you.

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