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- 1 On October 15, 2016, *Saturday Night Live* (SNL), a late-night television comedy show (NBC, 1975-) aired a reenactment of the second presidential debate where the candidate Donald Trump (impersonated by Alec Baldwin) was shown stalking Hillary Clinton (Kate McKinnon) while the ominous soundtrack of the movie *Jaws* (1975) played in the background.ⁱ By embodying harassment and aggressiveness, Trump was imagined as a predator intimidating its unsuspecting victim.



- 2 Picture 1. SNL sketch of the second presidential debate.ⁱⁱ
- 3 The following day, Donald Trump accused *Saturday Night Live* of a “hit job.”ⁱⁱⁱ Trump’s reaction raises several interesting questions. First, by his constant disagreement with the show’s impersonations of him—which he called biased,^{iv} inaccurate, and nasty^v—he broke from an established relationship between the office of the President and major American late-night television comedy shows. In past decades, a readiness to accept political parody and impersonations has become a way to achieve political success, while the willingness and ability to recognize and withstand parodies have been understood as a reflection of the presidential capabilities to be at the center of both supportive and critical attention.^{vi} Donald Trump did not accept that comedy should play this type of role in political discussion. Instead, he included comedy shows in his complaints about (liberal) media bias against him. Through repeated use of the word “biased,” Trump constructed the notion of “us”—Trump supporters—and “them,” the liberal media and (cultural) elitists.
- 4 Secondly, his reaction to the show emphasized questions of inclusion and exclusion at the core of discussions on the political power of humor. Those who are in on the joke can feel included in the audience, while those whose values are targeted can feel excluded. By voicing criticism about comedians and their audiences, Trump managed to bring together potentially excluded segments of the viewership and create a sense of inclusion among them. Third, it is important to look at whether *SNL* did attack the presidential candidate (s) during the 2016 election cycle and whether Trump’s accusations accurately portray how impersonations were done on the show.
- 5 These three elements—the role that political impersonations played in the 2016 presidential election, the creation of an “in-group” experience for different viewers during the campaign, and *SNL*’s treatment of impersonated politicians—are the focus of this article. Specifically, it examines the comedic impersonations of the two most covered candidates, Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton, on *Saturday Night Live* (*SNL*) during Seasons

41 (October 3, 2015–May 21, 2016) and 42 (October 1, 2016–), in particular the impersonations by Darrell Hammond as Trump in Season 41, Alec Baldwin as Trump in Season 42, and Kate McKinnon as Clinton in Seasons 41 and 42. Humor theories will serve as a background to analyze *SNL*'s presidential impersonations and to discuss the political and social functions of impersonations, as well as how these evolved in the 2016 election.

1. Political Comedy, Impersonations, and U.S. Presidential Elections

- 6 Political comedy entertains by making fun of powerful political figures and issues. In the United States, typical forms of modern political comedy are stand-up, late-night television, and political impersonations. Late-night television includes stand-up comedy specials, talk shows such as *The Tonight Show* (1954–), and news satire programs, including *The Daily Show* (1996–). These formats include political commentary, interviews, and satirical sketches. Political impersonations where actors and actresses interpret well-known political figures (in particular, presidents) are another cornerstone of American political comedy. The tradition was established by *Saturday Night Live* in 1975.^{vii} The variety show's sketches commented on politics, but it also reimagined and represented politicians through impersonations. On November 8, 1975, Chevy Chase made his first impersonation of President Gerald Ford as clumsy, incompetent, and confused.^{viii} Since then, the show has remained a well-known source of sketches with political impersonations.
- 7 Sketches are short, usually single-scene structures that present a situation, relationship, conversation, speech, or type of behavior as its organizing principle.^{ix} In impersonation sketches, the political figure functions as the main comedic element. Each actor's impersonation is different, and often the created characters come to stand as icons in political satire. The chosen impersonation style also creates continuity over changing and contextualized moments in political cycles, such as an election. Impersonations function through a recognizable resemblance between the actor and the chosen subject (e.g. a presidential candidate). The representations are caricatures, and they depend on quick recognition and categorization. Topicality is emphasized, too, as the candidates are presented in changing situations, which may be familiar to the audience due to earlier events or media discussions, such as primaries or television debates. This style of comedy can be understood in terms of relief theory, which finds that laughter is used to recognize, acknowledge, and even trivialize existing conflicts and tensions. In this way, comedy serves as a pressure valve for the viewing public.^x
- 8 An evaluation of these sketches can be divided into the comic and political functions of impersonations. The comic function of impersonations is based on the recognition of caricatures, where audiences are expected to share common assumptions about the candidates. These caricatures are supposed to both provoke laughter and question the audience's impressions of the public figures.^{xi} This type of evaluation gives impersonations a unique political function. Mimicking politicians becomes a means of comically reframing politics as well as memorable moments in the election cycle. Most importantly, the sketches redirect and reorganize the audience's attention.^{xii} *SNL* creator Lorna Michaels recognizes the show's political function, and he argues that the

commentary is meant to “give a perspective of what is going on.” However, at the same time, Michaels has argued that the comic function is the priority, not partisan politics.^{xiii}

- 9 The political function emphasizes the concept of framing. This is related to agenda-setting theory, which studies what topics become part of the public agenda. Accordingly, framing theory is interested in how topics are presented, how they influence audiences’ processing of information, and what people think about the topic. By looking at the ways in which media narrate stories, use rhetoric, and convey judgment or emotional reactions, framing theory examines implied meanings in public debate.^{xiv} Political impersonations in *SNL* are part of the public agenda, yet their way of constructing meanings differs from journalism; belonging to a comedy show, they are not required to follow such journalistic ideals as fairness, integrity, objectivity, or balance. While impersonations take their material from the topical public agenda, they reframe the media discussion through comedy, irony, and satire. In other words, they provide interpretations that work through affects and comedic responses.
- 10 Previously, *Saturday Night Live* has been criticized for its traditional and uncritical way of dealing with presidents, such as Chevy Chase’s performances as President Gerald Ford or Dan Aykroyd’s impersonation of President Jimmy Carter. Impersonations have often focused on creating recognizable caricatures and memorable quotes instead of including direct or harsh criticism.^{xv} Thus, the sketches have highlighted comic over political functions. In the twenty-first century, this mild style started to shift to political campaigning. This follows a wider trend in political comedy, where openly personalized and emotional comedy has again increased in popularity. In the multimedia world, several comedians (such as Jon Stewart, Stephen Colbert, and John Oliver) have publicly taken open and passionate political positions, and they have used their television shows and social media channels for political campaigning.
- 11 This trend has also affected traditional comedy shows like *Saturday Night Live*. In particular, Tina Fey’s characterization of Sarah Palin in the 2008 election, emphasizing Palin’s lack of qualification in politics and her rural, small-town background, took *SNL* impersonations to a new political level. By challenging Palin’s credibility and competence, the parody was argued to have had an impact on the election results.^{xvi} Fey’s impersonation was not only caricatured, but also opinionated, highlighting processes of reframing and interpretation. In the 2016 election, the question of political interpretation is of particular interest: did the show continue a more opinionated and political route or did it return to comic caricatures?
- 12 The beginning of the 2016 election made *SNL* a topical show once again.^{xvii} Parodies of the election through clever political impersonations of the candidates increased *SNL*’s ratings.^{xviii} Additionally, its skits were actively viewed and shared on social media, which increased access to the show’s content. For example, the clip of the second debate (followed by Trump’s “hit job” comment) got more than 20 million views on *Saturday Night Live*’s YouTube channel.^{xix} Also, mainstream media (such as *CNN*, *Washington Post*, *New York Times*, and *Fox News*) actively commented on and analyzed the weekly takes on the election, which created a sense of anticipation before the broadcasts and active public debates following them. After Donald Trump entered into a Twitter discussion about the show, public attention and the importance of the show increased even further.
- 13 This shows how comedy has the power to politically appeal to audiences, and the 2016 election was not an exception in this regard. The impact of political comedy shows on U.S. politics and presidential elections has been an increasingly studied subject. According to

Amy Becker and Don Waisanen, such studies can be divided into two categories: a study of features and a study of effects. The study of effects focuses on the impact of political comedy on knowledge, learning, attitudes, and opinion.^{xx} For example, earlier studies have shown that political comedy shows such as late-night television have added to political efficacy,^{xxi} political participation and engagement,^{xxii} and political knowledge and learning.^{xxiii} These studies show that political comedy shows target different audiences, including people who do not actively follow news sources, increasing their sense of understanding of the U.S. political system and encouraging them to form their own opinions, to search for information, and to take part in political debate and activities. Thus, political comedy shows are an important and positive part of American political participation.

- 14 Through irony and satire, political comedy shows open new critical viewpoints on political debates and redirect audiences' focuses toward chosen issues. In this sense, the impact of political comedy differs from the perspective of politicians and political content. Several studies have shown that ridicule increases cynicism toward the U.S. political system, the electoral system, and the news media. This is seen to be a result of late-night comedy's tendency to highlight absurdities in the political world.^{xxiv} Several studies have also shown that jokes about candidates increase an audience's negative opinions about them.^{xxv}
- 15 While acknowledging the effects of political comedy, my analysis falls into the category of studying features of political comedy—its rhetoric and conventions, ideological and ethical functions, and contributions to public discussion. At the same time, I try to answer Becker and Waisanen's desire to address questions of contexts and audiences when discussing the roles of political impersonations during the 2016 U.S. presidential election.^{xxvi} I will start by analyzing impersonations of Hillary Clinton, after which I will discuss interpretations of Donald Trump.

2. The “New” Hillary Clinton

- 16 Hillary Clinton has been variously interpreted on *SNL* over the years. First, during Bill Clinton's presidency she was impersonated by Jan Hooks, who portrayed her as a wannabe “co-president.” The character gained more independence in 2008 when Clinton ran against Barack Obama and Amy Poehler played her as a grumpy female politician. Former cast member Ana Gasteyer and *SNL* writer Jim Downey have evaluated these previous versions as being “rigid,” “awkward,” “driven by blind ambition,” and reflecting “rage over her wasted potential.” By contrast, Kate McKinnon's more recent version was more adventurous, entertaining, and easy-going, yet an equally ambitious character.^{xxvii}
- 17 McKinnon's version for the 2016 election reframed Clinton as a song-and-dance candidate. The musical interpretation of Clinton was both surprising and purposeful. Hillary Clinton is not publicly known for her musical talents, and she has also struggled to make herself approachable. Several singing moments on the show during the election season effectively utilized incongruity in comedy, where humor is found in surprising comparisons, the innovative use of existing categories, and conflicting cultural understandings.^{xxviii} In other words, the humor arises from the unexpectedness of a singing politician. Singing brought softness to Hillary's political character. Flexible movement in several sketches, including dancing and doing splits and somersaults,

presented an imagined, less rigid version of her persona. In the sketch “Bar Talk,” Clinton endorsed this interpretation by herself singing a duet of “Lean on Me” with McKinnon.^{xxxix}

- 18 Yet, some elements of the previous impersonations continued into the 2016 election cycle —mostly her ambitiousness and inability to relax. In these sketches, for example, she wears her pantsuits to bed^{xxx} and to the beach.^{xxxi} This was one way of emphasizing Clinton’s conventional inability to look informal or relaxed in any situation. Also, many of the sketches openly made references to her as being hard, scary, or awkward.
- 19 These controversial aspects were consciously planned, as Kate McKinnon sought to express the dichotomy she recognized in Clinton: “I just try to channel her staunchness and sweetness at the same time. It’s really the juxtaposition of those two things that makes her funny.”^{xxxii} This dichotomy is not only a personal trait, but a gendered political issue. In politics, women are more often criticized in terms of their physical features and emotions (or lack of them), which makes them representatives of their gender, not their politics.^{xxxiii} Clinton herself wrote in a *Humans of New York* blog that as a young woman trying to make a career in a man’s world, she had to learn to control her emotions, which has in part led to her coming across as cold or unemotional.^{xxxiv} The same issues were visible in this election, where opposition to a woman president was based on claims that female biology makes women unstable and emotional, and that women lack leadership traits. For some, strong and effective leadership continues to be seen as a masculine trait.^{xxxv} The *SNL* sketches addressed Clinton’s tendency to accommodate criticism based on her gender by combining masculine and feminine expectations. In one sketch, Clinton slipped “when I was a little boy,”^{xxxvi} and in another she claimed to have “strong, yet feminine laughter.”^{xxxvii} The combination of strength and femininity, also visible in her formal style of dress, made Clinton come across as a controlled figure, while McKinnon’s impersonation gave the same impression.
- 20 The contradiction of a singing candidate needing to be in constant control of her body as well as her actions is explained through her cynicism, a trait which has been part of the *SNL* impersonations for a long time. In the 2008 election’s famous sketch of Clinton (impersonated by Amy Poehler) and Sarah Palin (impersonated by Tina Fey) discussing sexism in the campaign, Clinton cynically expressed her cynicism that chauvinism had only become a public issue when someone else (Palin) had encountered it too.^{xxxviii} McKinnon’s Hillary Clinton continued to be a cynical character, depicted as someone who has seen it all, suffered everything, and experienced many setbacks because of her gender. Thus, cynicism was closely related to her ambition. Since Bill Clinton’s presidency, *SNL* has repeatedly brought up Clinton’s desire to be president. In 2016, her interest in the title itself was emphasized. Her over eagerness and competitiveness was also marked as a feminine trait.
- 21 The distinction between a determined (male) politician and desperate (female) title-seeker was extremely visible at the beginning of the election cycle. In the first sketches of the 2016 election, *SNL* pictured a woman convinced that it is finally her time. In another sketch, shown before Clinton had even officially announced her candidacy, she was shown at home, addressing audiences about her email scandal, arguing that “this is not how Hillary Clinton goes down.” The monologue alternated between bold and ambitious declarations that she would claim her place in history and modest doubtfulness about whether she would decide to run or not.^{xxxix} A couple of weeks later, another sketch was dedicated to the launch of her presidential campaign. It introduced “New Hillary,” who was more humble and approachable. While this “behind the scenes” portrayal still

focused on her inability to relax and soften her appearance,^{xl} McKinnon's later impersonations constructed a public image of the "New Hillary" as a more relaxed, yet equally ambitious political figure.

- 22 During the primaries, the sketches focused on comparing Clinton to Bernie Sanders (played by Larry David). The sketches presented Sanders as a grandfather figure who understood and stood up for the issues of the younger generation. This contradictory image of youthful old age mocked the Sanders phenomenon in a way that also opened a possibility for idealized interpretation. The difference between Clinton and Sanders was particularly underlined in a sketch in May 2016, when everyone was waiting for Sanders's endorsement of Clinton. In this sketch, Clinton and Sanders meet at a pub. Sanders orders "new brand beer, something refreshing and revolutionary," while Clinton gets the one that "no one likes, but gets the job done."^{xli}
- 23 At this time, Clinton was also seen as trying to appeal to young people. In a sketch during the summer, Clinton approaches happy, young people singing on the beach—"Hey there, 18- to 24-year-olds!"—and tries to convince them that she is "cool," too.^{xlii} After losing some primaries to Sanders, Clinton had addressed New York voters as if she was the true underdog. In the sketch, she also comments that she is like any other New Yorker who is always in a hurry: "And when I'm running, I really hate it when a slow old Jew gets in my way."^{xliii} Although these sketches ironically reframe her attempt to unite Democratic voters, after Sanders left the campaign they also led to the creation of an "in-group" experience. The sketches show Clinton as trying too hard, but at least addressing the audience with a more relaxed, singing, and entertaining demeanor.



- 24 Picture 2: A "Hillary Campaign Ad" sketch in which Clinton claims interest in the same issues as Sanders, physically morphing into Sanders and saying, "I'm trying here, guys."^{xliv}
- 25 After Trump became Clinton's main opposition in the election, *SNL* appeared to stand behind her. The sketches continued to make jokes about Clinton, but she started to represent liberal viewers. This was visible in the sketches where Clinton and Trump are present at the same time, in particular the three sketches of the televised presidential

debates, whose main point was to show Clinton's reactions to Trump's comments. Using audiovisual narration, reaction shots—where the audience sees how another character reacts to events, including intimate information on what emotions the event triggers, such that the viewer can decide whether s/he wants to share these reactions—provided an affective way of suggesting emotional interpretations.

- 26 Although the debate sketches gave Clinton some time in the spotlight, her character functioned as a mirror on Trump's behavior. Clinton appeared eager to hear how Trump would answer questions about foreign policy, the economic situation, and other political dilemmas. *SNL* showed her enjoying Trump's idiotic answers. For example, in the first debate sketch, Trump repeatedly talked himself into a corner, and Clinton was happy to let him dig a deeper hole there. When the hosts asked whether Clinton would like to respond, she replied, "He can have my time." Appearing pleased, she asked, "Can America vote right now?"^{xlv} The responses, which ranged from shock to laughter, marked Trump's candidacy as a bad joke. In the second debate's shark-attack scene, Clinton appeared confused and disbelieving of Trump's behavior, sharing the types of feelings expressed in social media after the actual debate.^{xlvi} And in the spoof of the third debate, Clinton reacted to Trump's outrageous comments on women and racial issues. For example, she played Trump Bingo—a popular online meme before the debate—and appeared bored while Trump talked nonsense about his foreign policy.^{xlvii}



Picture 3. Clinton's reactions to Trump in the sketches of the first and third presidential debates. In the first sketch, where the screen was often split to fit both Trump and Clinton, Trump talks about black people in a stereotypical way. In the third debate sketch, Clinton plays on the popular meme of Trump Bingo.^{xlviii}

- 27 The impersonation of Clinton became a model for liberal reactions to Trump. Although this narrative choice emphasized the sense of an "in-group" between Clinton and the show's liberal-leaning audience, it also made Trump an active part in the sketches and reduced Clinton's role to being reactive. Thus, in the latter part of the campaign *SNL* toned down Clinton's political expertise. Paradoxically, many of the sketches were written in a way that assumed that Americans would recognize Trump as an inexperienced and nasty option for president. In the television show, Clinton's victory was expected and hoped for as a counterforce to Trump, not necessarily in and of itself.
- 28 The emotionality surrounding viewers' reactions and McKinnon's singing interpretation of the candidate was highlighted in the episode following Election Day (and the death of Leonard Cohen) when, sitting alone at a piano, Kate McKinnon opened the show by singing Cohen's "Hallelujah." The version was not comical or amusing, but touching in the way that it addressed Clinton's loss:^{xlix}

I did my best, it wasn't much. I couldn't feel, so I tried to touch.
I've told the truth, I didn't come to fool you,
And even though it all went wrong
I'll stand before the Lord of Song

With nothing on my tongue but Hallelujah.^l

- 29 *Saturday Night Live's* opening scene is rarely non-comical. Thus, the decision to feature this song was ideological and a revealing commentary on the election results. The show also reinforced the sense of belonging and shared experience of Clinton's supporters. The emotional reaction to the loss of the election addressed the disappointment shared by many viewers of the comedy show. However, not everyone was taken by the emotional song about loss, and many of Trump's supporters considered that this non-comic opening proved the leftist and liberal bias of the show.^{li}

3. The Populist Masculinity of Donald Trump

- 30 Similar to Clinton, Donald Trump has a long history with *Saturday Night Live*. In 1988, his real estate career was parodied by Phil Hartman, who focused on the entitlements of a rich man with young mistresses. However, Darrell Hammond has had the longest career as Trump. His first appearance was in 1999, and he reframed Trump's political interests and his appearances on *The Apprentice*. The 2016 election included two impersonations of Trump. First, Darrell Hammond played the part during the primaries, while Alec Baldwin later took over the role to show the bipartisan struggle between Clinton and Trump. He has also continued to play Trump after the election. Similarities existed between Hammond's and Baldwin's impersonations; their caricatures emphasized Trump's hands, his hair, and his never-smiling composure, as well as his tendency toward (self-)exaggeration—including repeated use of the words “huge,” “best,” “genius,” and “fantastic,” which appeared especially in Trump's references to himself or the values he stands for. The chosen expressions mocked his pronunciation and exaggerating character. In addition, Trump was depicted as being unable to accept loss. In the election sketches, Trump's setbacks were called the best second, winning huge, or due to the voting process being corrupted.
- 31 However, Hammond and Baldwin were not the only ones to impersonate Trump during the 2016 election. Taran Killam also gave the character a shot. In October 2015, he appeared in a sketch where Trump (Killam) addressed audiences from his luxurious penthouse and invited his wife Melania (Cecily Strong) to convince viewers that he does not hate women or immigrants. Melania ironically assured that Trump can't hate women because he loves looking at them, and that he can't hate immigrants because he marries them. At the end, Melania concluded that Trump is the “total package—he is strong, he is white, he is good in bed,” and that he creates his outrageous statements and conservative populist issues for better poll numbers.^{lii} The sketch painted the picture of a populist leader and, even more, it pinpointed the gendered elements that are often part of (right-wing) populism. According to Cas Mudde and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser, masculine populist leaders tend to be associated with the “charismatic strongman,” who is virile, potentially violent, and uses simple and vulgar language. This image emphasizes action and the ability to make decisions.^{liii}
- 32 Killam's impersonation set the tone for the following Trump sketches, which continued to draw satire from Trump's populist masculinity. Hammond's and Baldwin's interpretations of masculinity had interesting differences, however. In the Republican presidential debate sketch, Hammond's Trump appeared as an arrogant and overconfident man who situated himself above the debates. His main role was to bully Jeb Bush (Beck Bennett) with such statements as “You are basically a little girl.”^{liv} Here

Hammond continued to mock Trump's self-image as a masculine leader (compared to feminine, weak competition) whose strength was based on bullying and vulgarity. This interpretation continued when Hammond played Trump after Super Tuesday. In a victory speech, Trump described his Republican competition as sad and desperate, and he ended by bragging, "I have a great, huge, big dick."^{lv} These sketches mocked the populist ideal of masculinity, while at the same time the reframing functioned on the comic level of caricature instead of openly challenging the political logic behind this masculinity.

- 33 Alec Baldwin's approach to the same topic was more openly critical toward Trump's populist image. For example, in the sketch which addressed Trump's admission of grabbing women by the pussy, Trump was unable to apologize, because "I never would do that." Instead he continued, "Women, if you get me a chance, I promise, I can do a whole lot more than just grab it—I can bop it, twist it[.]"^{lvi} The portrayed attitude perpetuated ideas of vulgarity and a macho "alpha-male" image, and the tone emphasized Trump's aggressiveness toward women. Aggressiveness was a wider trend in Baldwin's interpretation. For example, while all impersonations of Trump highlighted his never-smiling mien (Killam's version emphasized the foolishness of Trump's personality and Hammond's pout often suggested arrogance), Baldwin's expression was made up of pursed lips and wrinkled brows, communicating harshness and anger.



- 34 Picture 4. Pouting Trumps by Killam (on the left), Hammond (in the middle), and Baldwin (on the right).^{lvii}
- 35 Alec Baldwin's version not only underlined the aggressiveness of the candidate, but also his nastiness. In the first debate sketch, which was also Baldwin's debut as a Trump impersonator, he used multiple sexual references, such as "I am going to be so calm and so presidential that all of you watching are going to cream your jeans."^{lviii} At the same time, public discussion had focused on Trump's attitude toward women, and the sketches started to reframe virility and vulgarity as a form of harassment. This was highlighted in the third debate sketch, where both the studio audience and the global viewing public were pictured as laughing at Trump's comment that "nobody has more respect for women than I do."^{lix} Trump was also shown as demanding space, both physically (see the shark-attack scene in the second debate)^{lx} and by constantly interrupting Clinton (see the "nasty woman" comment in the third debate).
- 36 Although these elements were open to readings of masculine power and strength, Baldwin constantly questioned them by drawing parallels between populist masculinity and incompetence. The debate sketches focused on Trump's failures to argue clearly and

to the point. Instead, he was depicted as babbling absurdly, and in the sketch of the first debate his tweeting was compared to finishing his business on the toilet.^{lxii} The second debate sketch continued where the first one left off, when Baldwin's Trump opened with "I'm going to huff, I'm going to puff, and I'm going to blow this whole thing."^{lxiii} By adding Clinton's joyful glee to the picture, the debate sketches painted the image of Trump as an unprepared candidate.

- 37 These references to incompetence were further highlighted after Election Day, when Alec Baldwin adjusted his impersonation. He still used the pursed lips, but instead of signaling aggressiveness, these now expressed inexperience with an almost child-like pout and insecure look. The first sketch of President-elect Trump showed him preparing for his new job. Throughout the sketch, different collaborators visit his office, requesting how he is going to fulfill his campaign promises. Time after time, Trump ends up looking lost and overwhelmed. He keeps asking, did I promise to bring back every single job, did I say that I have a plan for military action, did I say we are going to cancel healthcare? He realizes that empty words and avoidance of the issues might not work anymore, and yet he has nothing else to offer. In the end, he asks if Vice President Mike Pence could do all his work for him.^{lxiiii} Whereas the aggressive look may have served a purpose for Trump's public image as masculine leader, the more uncertain and overwhelmed version of Trump did not.
- 38 Several sketches of President-elect and President Trump have also suggested that he might not be the true leader of the country. Instead, *SNL* has introduced a topless Putin (Beck Bennett), who is often found sitting behind the President's desk in the Oval Office.^{lxiv} Putin's masculine image has been a source of satire for years, and here the inversion of Trump becoming a childish figure and Putin becoming the true alpha male also symbolically transfers power away from Donald Trump.
- 39 The impersonations of Trump have reframed his character through an emphasized use of populist masculinity. However, while Killam and Hammond treated it as a comic caricature, Baldwin's interpretation moved from aggressiveness to incompetence. In particular, the latter has challenged the whole notion of Trump's masculinity, thus calling his power into question. Whereas the notion of masculine leader could resonate with Trump supporters and create a positive sense of "in-group" experience, the incompetent image is political. It can cause varied reactions, as positive interpretations are more difficult to find and a sense of shared experience and understanding of group identity needs to be sought from the victimization of the joke's target.

4. "In-group" Experiences—Relationships with and within Viewers

- 40 Through the use of humor, a certain sense of "in-group" can be created. Laughter becomes a mark of social understanding—namely, around what is funny—and by sharing an understanding with a real or imagined audience, opinions can be created and a group identity can be performed. While this is an inclusive process, from the perspective of those who are laughed at, the same process becomes an "othering" device. Inclusion and exclusion also make humor not only a social, but also a political process.^{lxv}
- 41 The analysis of impersonations in *SNL* reveals difference in the presumed relationship between each candidate and *SNL* audiences. There was a difference between the voters

that Trump and Clinton were addressing: Trump was courting Republican and conservative (male) audiences, whereas the primary target for Clinton (as well as Sanders) was a Democratic, liberal audience. While *SNL*'s main demographic is 18–44 years old, the show is also known for its liberal social agenda.^{lxvi} Thus, Clinton's viewers were more likely to follow this mainstream television comedy, while Trump audiences may have had a more critical attitude toward the values behind the program. Accordingly, it appears that a division in the audience and politics of belonging became an issue. When Clinton strategically engaged the comedy show, she knew that her appearance would reach possible voters. For Trump, the situation was more complicated. The decision to visit *SNL* brought him visibility, and he was able to address viewers who were not among his main target audience, yet many of his supporters were likely not following the show.

- 42 While all media have their target audiences that they engage with and whose concerns they listen to, humorous content adds another twist. Humor and comedy are central to social life and are often seen in a positive light, yet humor can also be ridiculing and mocking. For instance, Michael Billig is a strong critic of the view that laughter and humor are inherently good. For him, humor is a disciplinary practice that seeks to enforce social and discursive boundaries, policing both behavior and ideologies. Thus, while repetitive jokes can pretend to be harmless, they also normalize certain interpretations of the ones who are the subject of the jests. In this way, humor has real consequences in expressing, validating, or denying presented agendas on issues, persons, or groups of people. In the *SNL* sketches, the audience more often laughed with Hillary Clinton and more often laughed at Donald Trump. Similar tendencies were visible when the candidates visited the show during their campaigns.
- 43 When Clinton addressed the viewers of *SNL*, it was in her best interests to appear in on the jokes, thus sharing the values and understandings of the intended liberal audience. In this way, she participated in an already established tradition between presidents and presidential candidates and political (television) comedy. Since the 1960s, a number of presidents, including John F. Kennedy, Ronald Reagan, Bill Clinton and Barack Obama, have recognized the role of television in connecting with younger voters, even if the representations have not always been to their liking. Presidents and presidential candidates have not only participated in entertainment media, but also accepted political parody and impersonation as tools to prove their presidential capability to deal with media and publicity, and to show different, perhaps more approachable, sides of themselves.^{lxvii}
- 44 Clinton's sketch with Kate McKinnon—where McKinnon impersonated Clinton and the presidential candidate acted as a bartender named Val—was generally well received by the public. Many considered the sketch to be a sympathetic proof of her ability to take criticism and to join in on the laughter.^{lxviii} In the sketch, for example, McKinnon (as Hillary Clinton) argues that she could have supported gay marriage sooner, and Val (Clinton) self-consciously admits this as a “fair point.”^{lxix} In a *Time* interview, Kate McKinnon was asked how Clinton reacted to the sketches they had written for her, and she replied that Hillary was pleasant and cooperative, and that they had fun together.^{lxx} Clinton herself supported Kate McKinnon's impersonation and stated that she found the jokes clever and insightful.^{lxxi} In this way, Clinton showed that she could accept the comedic tendency to momentarily shift balances of power. Comedy offers its audience a

- possibility to laugh at those in power, bringing them down to earth and imposing authority over them.^{lxxii}
- 45 Donald Trump, on the other hand, had a more troubled relationship with *SNL*. In a way, Trump showed his readiness to participate in order to gain political capital.^{lxxiii} Trump had hosted the show in 2004, and he did it again in November 2015 during his campaign, being only the second candidate to ever host a show instead of only appearing in it.^{lxxiv} *SNL* was criticized for its decision to give attention to Donald Trump: in social media the show was pressured to drop Trump, and during filming protesters marched from Trump Tower to NBC's studio.^{lxxv} *SNL* was also criticized for taking a soft and apolitical approach in the episode.^{lxxvi} The strong response to Trump's performance clearly revealed reactions by liberal viewers of the show.
- 46 In the opening monologue, Trump mocked his own rhetorical style by starting with "It's wonderful to be here. I will tell you this is going to be something special. Many of the greats have hosted, as you know, this show, like me in 2004." He also announced, "Part of the reason I'm here is that I know how to take a joke. They've done so much to ridicule me over the years. This show has been a disaster for me."^{lxxvii} This comment already hinted that, even though Donald Trump recognizes the power of entertainment shows in his career, he has problems dealing with repeated parodic impersonations and ironic jokes. At the time, his impersonator Darrell Hammond was also careful about how he answered questions about Trump's visit, maintaining that Trump knows how to take a punch.^{lxxviii}
- 47 Donald Trump's relationship with *SNL* impersonations went in a more openly hostile direction in Season 42 when Alec Baldwin replaced Darrell Hammond. Whereas Hammond's interpretation of Trump caricatured him as stupid and self-centered, Alec Baldwin emphasized him as incompetent and aggressive. The change in the impersonation style did not sit well with Trump, who tweeted about the "hit job" and remarked in a press interview that his *SNL* image was too nasty, since he is actually a nice person.^{lxxix} After Election Day, the relationship came to a head. Baldwin's impersonation started to include more insecure and childlike features. One sketch, where Donald Trump was depicted following adolescent tweets, triggered a fierce reaction by the president-elect: "I watched parts of Saturday Night Live last night. It is a totally one-sided, biased show - nothing funny at all."^{lxxx} Since then, such tweets became more or less standard after *SNL* sketches of Trump.^{lxxxi} In turn, Trump's complaints triggered responses from Alec Baldwin, who has been open about his deliberate mocking of Trump. Refusing to back down or apologize,^{lxxxii} he instead said that he would only stop once Trump releases his tax records.^{lxxxiii}
- 48 After becoming unhappy with the show, Donald Trump joined segments of the audience that already felt excluded. Indeed, *SNL* ran sketches that not only mocked Trump supporters, but openly called them racists.^{lxxxiv} Some American viewers might already have felt that *SNL* was not representing their values, but treating them as outcasts. By claiming on Twitter that *SNL* was being biased, Trump created his own "in-group," which shared with his intended audience the feeling of not-belonging. This action correlates with what in humor studies is called reverse discourse, where racist humor, for example, encourages a counter-strategy in the form of laughing back.^{lxxxv}
- 49 In his public refusal to accept the parody by *Saturday Night Live*, Donald Trump departed from the tradition of presidential candidates playing along with entertainment media in order to reach audiences. Instead, Trump utilized his Twitter responses to create

sympathy and support for his feelings of being treated in a biased way. He trusted a direct communication channel with possible voters as being more effective than the tradition of late-night comedy. In this way, his strategy was quite different than that of Hillary Clinton or many other candidates before him. Taking into account the show's projected viewership, however, the strategy is understandable.

- 50 The notion of creating alternative belongings for different groups also calls into question the impact of *Saturday Night Live*. The show tended to favor Clinton over Trump, although she received her share of mocking as well, but the audience who received and more or less shared the show's viewpoint was demographically more likely to vote for Clinton in the first place. Thus, while elements of comedy's political engagement have been praised, a biased educational aspect has also been criticized. What concerns some is that younger viewers often treat soft programs as their news sources and that comedy content is biased. Thus, these viewers learn to take sides, because unlike traditional journalism, comedy shows are not required to be objective.^{lxxxvi} In the case of late-night comedy, comedians and viewers may share perspectives, but *SNL* does not speak either for the entire American audience or for all voters. Different reactions from Clinton and Trump can be partially understood on the basis of the inclusion and exclusion processes of humorous entertainment, yet questions about the content of the political impersonations also remain.

5. Conclusion

- 51 Comparing the images of an aggressive and angry Donald Trump versus an approachable and entertaining Clinton, *Saturday Night Live* appears to have ridiculed these characters in different ways. They were both mocked in terms of their personal features, political goals, and current events in the election, but there also was a desire to empathize with Clinton. Her cynicism was recognized as a by-product of a woman in politics, and singing and dancing interpretations sought to humanize her personality. By contrast, Donald Trump was openly ridiculed for his aggressive and populist masculinity, where issues and competence are overruled by uncontrolled emotions. Thus, it appears that the show used physical aspects of the impersonations of Trump to increase the audience's critical attitude toward him, whereas it provided Clinton with a softening of her image.
- 52 In relation to *SNL*'s earlier election sketches, this election cycle appeared to follow Tina Fey's politicized impersonation. The interpretation of an approachable Clinton for a liberal audience addressed the voters not only at the comic level, but also at the political level. It reframed the aspect of Clinton's character which in public discussion had often been recognized as her weakness, namely, her reputation as an uncharismatic person. Therefore, Clinton's way of dealing with political satire by playing along with the jokes is understandable. For her, the show was one way to approach possible voters. For Trump, *SNL*'s impersonations were a different issue. In particular, Alec Baldwin's impersonation has been recognized as highly political because of its constant contemporary criticism in the form of irony. By refusing to accept the comic satire, instead challenging the ridiculing of his populist masculinity as biased and unfair treatment, Trump placed himself outside of the presented interpretation. And by approaching his supporters through tweets, Trump gave them a different frame to interpret the sketches. Both Clinton and Trump recognized that humor can have real consequences in expressing, validating, or denying presented agendas.

NOTES

- i. *Saturday Night Live*, October 15, 2016. Steven Spielberg, *Jaws*, film, Universal Pictures, 1975.
- ii. Screen shot: *Saturday Night Live*, “Donald Trump vs. Hillary Clinton Town Hall Debate Cold Open,” NBC, October 15, 2016.
- iii. Donald J. Trump (@realDonaldTrump), “Watched Saturday Night Live hit job on me. Time to retire the boring and unfunny show. Alec Baldwin portrayal stinks. Media rigging election!” *Twitter*, October 16, 2016, accessed November 2, 2016, <https://twitter.com/realdonaldtrump/status/787612552654155776>.
- iv. Donald J. Trump (@realDonaldTrump), “Just tried watching Saturday Night Live - unwatchable! Totally biased, not funny and the Baldwin impersonation just can't get any worse. Sad,” *Twitter*, December 3, 2016, accessed January 8, 2017, <https://twitter.com/realDonaldTrump/status/805278955150471168>.
- v. A.J. Calloway, “Donald Trump Explains Why Alec Baldwin’s ‘SNL’ Portrayal Is ‘Inaccurate,’” *Extra*, October 28, 2016, accessed November 2, 2016, <http://extratv.com/2016/10/28/donald-trump-explains-why-alec-baldwins-snl-portrayal-is-inaccurate/>.
- vi. Josh Compton, “Live from DC: Saturday Night Live political parody references in presidential rhetoric,” *Comedy Studies* 7, no. 1 (2016), 65. See also Ben Voth, “Saturday Night Live and Presidential Elections,” in *Laughing Matters: Humor and American Politics in the Media Age*, ed. Jonathan S. Morris (New York & London: Routledge, 2008), 238.
- vii. The program was titled “NBC’s Saturday Night” until March 26, 1977, after which it claimed the better-known title “Saturday Night Live”.
- viii. Compton, “Live from DC,” 934–939.
- ix. Stephen Neale, “Sketch Comedy,” in *The Television Genre Book*, ed. Glen Greeber (London: Bfi Publishing, 2001), 62–65.
- x. On relief theory in humor studies, see, for example, John Morreall, *Comic Relief: A Comprehensive Philosophy of Humor* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 15–22.
- xi. See Lisa Gring-Pemle & Martha Solomon Watson, “The rhetorical limits of satire: An analysis of James Finn Garner’s Politically Correct Bedtime Stories,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 89, no. 2 (2003), 132–153.
- xii. Voth, “Saturday Night Live,” 237–238.
- xiii. Julie Fancher, “Bush family ‘played enormous part’ in defining ‘SNL,’ creator Lorne Michaels says before Dallas visit,” *Dallas News*, February 26, 2016, accessed January 10, 2016, <http://www.dallasnews.com/news/news/2016/02/26/qa-with-snl-creator-lorne-michaels>.
- xiv. See, for example, Gail T. Fairhurst & Robert A. Sarr, *The Art of Framing* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1996).
- xv. Compton, “Live from DC,” 73. This has been recognized as a general impact of impersonations which emphasizes recognition over criticism. See Christopher P. Wilson, *Jokes: Form, content, use and function* (London: European Association of Experimental Social Psychology, 1979), 194–195.
- xvi. Sarah Esralew & Dannagal Goldthwaite Young, “The Influence of Parodies on Mental Models: Exploring the Tina Fey-Sarah Palin Phenomenon,” *Communication Quarterly* 60, no. 3 (2012), 338–352; Arhlene A. Flowers & Cory L. Young, “Parodying Palin: How Tina Fey’s Visual and Verbal Impersonations Revived a Comedy Show and Impacted the 2008 Election,” *Journal of Visual Literacy* 29, no. 1 (2010), 47–67.

- xvii.** Yet, the show's ratings are significantly lower than in the late-1970s and have been declining since the mid-1990s. Based on Nielsen's ratings, *SNL*'s highest rating is from the 1979–1980 season (13.5/household rating); in the 1980s the rating crossed 7, but since the mid-1990s the ratings fell to around 6, and in the twenty-first century the rating among the households that own a television has been around 4.5–5.8. Although the rating is a long way off the popular years, the rating is still acceptable. See Tony Maglio, “‘SNL 40’: Inside the NBC Sketch Show’s Roaring Ratings Highs and Looming Lows,” *The Wrap*, February 13, 2015, accessed January 31, 2017, <http://www.thewrap.com/snl-40-saturday-night-live-tv-ratings-nbc-lorne-michaels/>.
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- xx.** Amy B. Becker & Don J. Waisanen, “From Funny Features to Entertaining Effects: Connecting Approaches to Communication Research on Political Comedy,” *The Review of Communication* 13, no. 3 (2013), 161–183.
- xxi.** Jody Baumgartner & Jonathan S. Morris, “The Daily Show Effect: Candidate Evaluations, Efficacy, and American Youth,” *American Politics Research* 34 (2006), 341–365.
- xxii.** Xiaoxia Cao & Paul Brewer, “Political Comedy Shows and Public Participation in Politics,” *International Journal of Public Opinion Research* 20, no 1 (2008), 90–99.
- xxiii.** Matthew A. Baum, “Sex, lies, and war: How soft news brings foreign policy to the inattentive public,” *American Political Science Review* 96 (2002), 91–109; Josh Compton, “More Than Laughing? Survey of Political Humor Effects Research,” in *Laughing Matters: Humor and American Politics in the Media Age*, eds. Jody C. Baumgartner & Jonathan S. Morris (New York & London: Routledge, 2008), 39–65; Markus Prior, “Any good news in soft news? The impact of soft news preference on political knowledge,” *Political Communication* 20 (2003), 149–171; Young Mie Kim & John Vishak, “Just Laugh! You don’t Need to Remember: The Effects of Entertainment Media on Political Information Acquisition and Information Processing in Political Judgment,” *Journal of Communication* 58 (2008), 338–360.
- xxiv.** Baumgartner & Morris, “The Daily Show Effect,” 341–365.
- xxv.** Baumgartner & Morris, “The Daily Show Effect,” 341–365.
- xxvi.** Becker & Waisanen, “From Funny Features.”
- xxvii.** Laura Bradley, “How Hillary Clinton Became the Hero of Her Own Story on Saturday Night Live,” *Vanity Fair*, September 12, 2016, accessed January 31, 2017, <http://www.vanityfair.com/hollywood/2016/09/hillary-clinton-on-snl-over-time>.
- xxviii.** On incongruity theory in humor and comedy studies, see, for example, John Morreall, *Comic Relief*, 9–14.
- xxix.** *Saturday Night Live*, October 3, 2015.
- xxx.** *Saturday Night Live*, December 19, 2015.
- xxxi.** *Saturday Night Live*, May 16, 2015.
- xxxii.** Philip Elliott, “How Saturday Night Live Makes Kate McKinnon Into Hillary Clinton,” *Time*, October 8, 2015, accessed November 29, 2016, <http://time.com/4065217/hillary-clinton-kate-mckinnon/>.
- xxxiii.** See, for example, Eran Shor, Arnout Rijt, Charles Ward, Saoussan Askar & Steven Skiena, “Is There a Political Bias? A Computational Analysis of Female Subjects’ Coverage in Liberal and Conservative Newspapers,” *Social Science Quarterly* 95, no. 5 (2014), 1213–1229; Michelle C. Blich,

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xxxvii. *Saturday Night Live*, December 20, 2015.

xxxviii. *Saturday Night Live*, September 21, 2013.

xxxix. *Saturday Night Live*, March 7, 2015.

xl. *Saturday Night Live*, April 11, 2015.

xli. *Saturday Night Live*, May 21, 2016.

xlii. *Saturday Night Live*, May 16, 2015.

xliii. *Saturday Night Live*, October 4, 2015.

xliv. Screen shot: *Saturday Night Live*, "Hillary Campaign Ad", NBC, March 12, 2016.

xlv. *Saturday Night Live*, October 1, 2016.

xlvi. *Saturday Night Live*, October 15, 2016. On reactions, see, for example, Diana Pearl, "Twitter Noticed the Fly That Landed on Clinton's Face — and More Social Media Debate Reactions," *People*, October 10, 2016, accessed January 10, 2017, <http://people.com/politics/twitter-noticed-the-fly-that-landed-on-clintons-face-and-more-social-media-debate-reactions/>.

xlvii. *Saturday Night Live*, October 22, 2016.

xlviii. Screen shots: *Saturday Night Live*, "Donald Trump vs. Hillary Clinton Debate Cold Open," NBC, October 1, 2016; *Saturday Night Live*, "Donald Trump vs. Hillary Clinton Third Debate Cold Open," NBC, October 22, 2016.

xlix. *Saturday Night Live*, November 12, 2016.

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iiii. Cas Mudde & Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser, *Populism: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 63–68.

liv. *Saturday Night Live*, December 19, 2015.

lv. *Saturday Night Live*, March 5, 2016.

lvi. *Saturday Night Live*, October 8, 2016.

lvii. Screen shots: *Saturday Night Live*, "Donald and Melania Trump Cold Open," NBC, October 3, 2015; *Saturday Night Live*, "GOP Debate Cold Open," NBC, December 19, 2015; *Saturday Night Live*, "VP Debate Cold Open," NBC, October 8, 2016.

- lviii.** *Saturday Night Live*, October 1, 2016.
- lix.** *Saturday Night Live*, October 22, 2016.
- lx.** *Saturday Night Live*, October 15, 2016.
- lxi.** *Saturday Night Live*, October 1, 2016.
- lxii.** *Saturday Night Live*, October 15, 2016.
- lxiii.** *Saturday Night Live*, November 19, 2016.
- lxiv.** See, for example, *Saturday Night Live*, January 21, 2017; *Saturday Night Live*, December 24, 2016.
- lxv.** See, for example, Simon Weaver, *The Rhetoric of Racist Humour: US, UK and Global Race Joking* (London & New York: Routledge, 2011), 34–38; Martina Kessel, “Introduction. Landscapes of Humour: The History and Politics of the Comical in the Twentieth Century,” in *The Politics of Humour: Laughter, Inclusion, and Exclusion in the Twentieth Century*, eds. Martina Kessel & Patrick Merziger (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2012), 3–21.
- lxvi.** See, for example, Nick Marx, Matt Sienkiewicz & Ron Becker, “Introduction: Situating Saturday Night Live in American Television Culture,” in *Saturday Night Live and American TV*, eds. Nick Marx, Matt Sienkiewicz & Ron Becker (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013), 7; Jim Whalley, *Saturday Night Live, Hollywood Comedy, and American Culture: From Chevy Chase to Tina Fey* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2010), 20–39.
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- lxxiv.** The first candidate to host SNL was Rev. Al Sharpton in 2003.
- lxxv.** Associated Press, “Live from New York, Donald Trump hosts SNL amid protests,” *CBCNews*, November 8, 2015, accessed December 12, 2016, <http://www.cbc.ca/news/entertainment/donald-trump-host-snl-1.3309558>.
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tid=a_inl&utm_term=.c2ac5f3eab6c; Laura Hurley, "Why Donald Trump As SNL Host Wasn't Funnier, According To A Current Cast Member," *CinemaBlend* 2015, accessed December 12, 2016, <http://www.cinemablend.com/television/Why-Donald-Trump-SNL-Host-Wasn-t-Funnier-According-Current-Cast-Member-100517.html>.

lxxvii. *Saturday Night Live*, November 8, 2015.

lxxviii. Matt Wilstein, "SNL's Darrell Hammond on Transforming Into Trump: 'He Can Take a Punch,'" *The Daily Beast*, June 28, 2016, accessed November 2, 2016, <http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2016/06/28/snl-s-darrell-hammond-on-transforming-into-trump-he-can-take-a-punch.html>.

lxxix. A. J. Calloway, "Donald Trump Explains."

lxxx. Donald J. Trump @realDonaldTrump, "I watched parts of @nbcSNL Saturday Night Live last night. It is a totally one-sided, biased show - nothing funny at all. Equal time for us?" *Twitter*, November 20, 2016, accessed November 21, 2016, <https://twitter.com/realdonaldtrump/status/800329364986626048>.

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lxxxiv. For example, in the "Voters for Trump" sketch, the voters had Nazi and KKK symbols with them, *Saturday Night Live*, March 5, 2016.

lxxxv. Simon Weaver, "The 'Other' Laughs Back: Humour and Resistance in Anti-racist Comedy," *Sociology* 44, no. 1 (2010), 31-48.

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ABSTRACTS

The sketch comedy show *Saturday Night Live* is known for political impersonations. During the 2016 U.S. presidential election, these impersonations were widely followed and debated, and it can be argued that they had an influence on public and political discussions about the election.

This article analyzes how Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton were impersonated, interpreted, and reframed on *Saturday Night Live*.

INDEX

Keywords: political comedy, impersonation, Donald Trump, Hillary Clinton, 2016 U.S. Presidential Election, Saturday Night Live