This paper looks into what ought to be expected from political satire distributed by mass media. Specifically, I want to focus on whether it is right to expect satire to change people’s minds. To maintain a narrow and philosophical focus, I am going to specifically consider how satire theoretically persuades *as satire*. This is going to leave to the side other ways that satire may directly or indirectly influence political opinion. (For instance, research done in 2004 suggested that while Saturday Night Live coverage of the US election may not have directly influenced viewer opinion, it did affect how news media covered the candidates and that coverage, in turn, did influence viewer opinion.)

My argument in this paper is the following: The main function of satiric criticism is to target someone or something for being ostracized, or otherwise rendered outside of an ingroup. Accordingly, satiric criticism should only be expected to be effective insofar as the target cares about being a member of the criticizing group, or otherwise meeting that group’s standards. My argument will be presented in the following sections.

1. I will adapt the lit-theoretical idea of the satiric triad to speech act theory, and use this to present a relationship between the satiric work and the audience.
2. I will briefly relate the argument that satire criticizes through the use of humour (specifically humorous misrepresentation).
3. Humour may be either affiliative or disaffiliative. My argument applies to satire that trades in disaffiliative humour.
4. Mass media satire, owing to the dynamic of seeking to attract and maintain viewer-consumers, has a strong tendency towards identifying the audience as the in-group, and target an outgroup that is not represented within the audience.
5. This leads to mass media satires acting as a sort of preaching exclusively to the converted.
6. I will look at three concrete cases — satire within the culture war; satire and concrete action; and satire building an ingroup.
7. The “satiric triad” is the name given by Paul Simpson to the idea that satire fundamentally involves three parties — the satirist, the audience (which Simpson calls the “satiree”) and the target (which Simpson calls the “satirized”). I take it that these three positions are best understood as roles, rather than distinct and discrete groups. This means that any two roles may be occupied by the same person. Either audience or satirist may be the target, the satirist may be his own audience, and so on. One person may even occupy all three roles, in the case of a satirist performing a self-satire, for themselves.

Given that Simpson is a discourse theorist, a discipline that was built on top of the work of JL Austin, it is not surprising that his formulation of the triad maps very well on to a speech act style account. The satirist plays the role of utterer and the audience plays the role of audience. The target of the satire is determined by the content of the utterance. Accepting a roughly Gricean approach to speech acts and communication, the goal of the satirist (qua satire) is to convey the disapprobation of the target to the audience.

1. Satire criticizes its target through the use of humorous misrepresentation. (I can discuss this more in Q&A.) The misrepresentation is essential to articulating and directing the criticism, but here I want to focus on the humour and how it works. I should note that in this case I’m looking at not just the satire-essential humour — this is to say that humour that makes a work satirical — but also the humour that is typical of satirical shows. This is all humour that is directed at the satirical target, even if some of it may just be humorous invective. A paradigmatic example of the latter, to my mind, are Lewis Blacks’ old rants on the Daily Show. These were not satirical — there was no subtlety or misrepresentation — just a torrent of abuse.
2. In sociological terms, humour marks a target as “laughable,” which is to say it is apt to be laughed at. Even when humour is not the sort that actually engenders laughter — for example the subtle wit one may find it a novel — it nevertheless marks the target as the sort of thing it is correct to laugh at. If one were to laugh, one would not be having an inapt response. Laughter may be considered to be either “affiliative” or “disaffiliative.” In lay terms, this is the difference of “laughing with” and “laughing at.” Laughing with may be understood as inclusive laughter, while laughing at may be understood as exclusive laughter. For the purposes of this paper I am only interested in the sort of satire that deals in disaffiliative humour, although I believe that my argument can be easily used to make sense of affiliative humour.

Satire that makes use of disaffiliative humour is often going to be what is referred to as “Juvenalian” satire. This satire is defined by being more aggressive and mean-spirited, in contrast to what may be considered as the more light-hearted and forgiving Horatian satire. This is satire that casts its target’s vices, and often the target itself, as something that is the enemy, or the other, or otherwise someone or something to be opposed. In the language of the satiric triad, disaffiliative satire is seeking to create an opposition between the audience and the target. What the satirist identifies in the target is a reason for the audience to reject the target.

1. I want to now turn to a specific sort of satire: that distributed through mass media. By mass media I have in mind the network of media institutions including print, television, and film. Within this group I will focus on mock news shows distributed over network television, since that has been the subject of the preponderance of empirical research, although I believe that most of my argumentation applies broadly.

By mock news shows I mean shows in the vein of The Daily Show or the Colbert Report. They may be largely non-fictional and quasi-serious, like Last Week Tonight with John Oliver, or wholesale fictions like The Opposition.

Michael Mulkay presents an analysis of mass media humour that I will argue suggests that mock news should be expected to be Juvenalian satire, which is to say the mock news trades in disaffiliative humour. The main goal of mass media humour, writes Mulkay, is to attract and retain viewers. In the case of network television, this is a week-over-week problem, where showrunners need to create enough novelty to bring viewers back, while not creating something so different that viewers will lose what brought them to the show in the first place. Furthermore, this all takes place in an industrial setting where a new show needs to be produced each week, meaning that writers or producers do not have much time to work with.

Mulkay, writing about sitcom-style satire (specifically Yes, Minister), writes that the effect of a short turnaround while needing to maintain familiarity “rends social situations static.” This is to say that for all the social criticism a satire may levy, since the show must go on, not too much may change. Importantly, the dynamics that define the show must remain unchanged.

This brings me to mock news programs. By focusing on current events these shows have a steady source of novelty, but nevertheless face similar constraints. They have an audience that they must retain, sponsors and patrons that they must not alienate, and must create a show that gives them enough of a structure that they can do this week over week.

The requirement for the show to attract and keep an audience is a strong pressure to create a show that affirms the audience. In mocking the news of the week, the show must affirm the audience. This means that the satiric targets will be treated in ways that affirm the audience — targets that are aligned with the audience will be treated with affiliative humour, and targets that are aligned against the audience will be treated with disaffiliative humour. In the case of disaffiliative humour, the satirist is aligning themselves with the audience, and against the target. By identifying the target *as a target* for disaffiliative humour, the satirist is identifying the target as not belonging to the in-group of the audience.

Altogether, the demands of mass media require that satiric shows, to succeed within the mass media setting, cultivate and maintain an audience. These shows will pick targets for their satires, and in the case of satire that works through disaffiliative humour, this will involve marking the target as outside of the audience’s group. In the context of political satire, this will tend to mean marking the target as outside of the audience’s group for social or political reasons.

1. The requirement of creating and maintaining an audience has two closely related effects on mass media satire. The first is that it creates a strong pressure to create a show that just preaches to the converted — which is to say that the regular audience already accepts the group dynamics presented by the show — and this in turn limits the possibility of the show changing people’s minds. The second is that if viewers accept the group dynamics that the show presents, but do not accept the morality or judgements of the satirist, then the satire will also only solidify those group identities. A sort of obverse cousin of preaching to the converted.

The first point, about preaching to the converted, is important because it speaks to what we ought to expect from satire. While I do not want to commit so far as to say that there is no value to be gained from a political entertainment show aimed at an already-established and unchanging ingroup, the fact that mass media satire is aimed at maintaining an already-existing ingroup of viewers limits its ability to persuade. Its audience, in other words, are the audience because they do not need to be persuaded. If mass media satire should not be expected to change the minds of the people watching it regularly, it should not be expected to change very many minds at all.

The second point concerns a subgroup of potential audience members who are not part of the show’s targeted audience. These potential audience members accept the group delineation presented by the satirist, but rather than identifying with the group of the target audience, they identify with the group of the satiric target (if they are not the satiric target outright). Recall that satire works through humour, and that the focus of this paper is disaffiliative humour. The satiric target, by being marked as the satiric target, is rejected from the group.

This sort of power exercise, of targeting someone or something for ostracization from a group, only has power insomuch as the target either wants to be part of the group or otherwise cares about meeting the group’s standards. However, there are any number of cases where the satiric target has no reason to care about the ingroup standards, and no desire to adhere to them.

I want to now turn towards three case studies to expand upon these two related points about how mass media satire is extremely limited in its potential effect. The first is about satire and culture war. Specifically this is about how particular cultural dynamics may create a situation where the satiric targets not only do not identify with the satirist, but view the satirist as some sort of political opponent and, accordingly, view violating the satirist’s standards as something good. The second is about mass media satire and concrete action, and how that obviates some of the problems with mass media satire. The third is about mass media satire that attempts to construct an expansive and inclusive ingroup, and what the limitations may be of that sort of approach.

1. “Culture war” is the term that has come about to describe a certain cultural dynamic from the US that was dominant from roughly the mid 80s through the mid 00s, although expressions of it still remain. It refers to a sort of political bifurcation of class where class is defined by, instead of wealth or material realities, cultural preferences and activities. The best expression of this is found in a 2006 advertisement by the Club for Growth, attacking Howard Dean by describing him as “latte-drinking, sushi-eating, Volvo-driving, New York Times-reading, body-piercing,” and “Hollywood-loving.” These characteristics all seem to be clustered around a vague idea of someone coastal, urban, and metropolitan, and put in contrast (as the imagery of the advertisement suggests) some ambiguous down-homey, old-timey, common-sensey something.

Which brings us to mass media satire. Owing to the nature of mass media production, major mock news shows are produced in coastal centres (LA and New York in the American context, Toronto in Canada, and London in the UK), and distributed by major companies which are in turn coastally based. In short, in a context where many viewers buy into the dichotomies of a culture war narrative, the satirists that run mock news shows will find themselves squarely in one camp. The alignment of mock news shows will be furthered by the fact that the audiences for these shows strongly trend towards young people, either college students or college-educated, who are at least vaguely cosmopolitan in their outlook.

The particular dynamic I want to get at here is that in these culture war contexts, mock news shows should not only not be expected to convince or persuade their satiric targets, but that they should be expected to solidify their targets’ beliefs. As I argued earlier, disaffiliative satire works by setting up a group dichotomy – an us and them – and identifying the target as outside of the group. In a culture war context, the satiric target accepts the group dichotomy, but views the opposite group of the satirist and audience as the outgroup whose standards should be eschewed.

I want to put this analysis in the concrete context of former Toronto mayor Rob Ford. Ford ran for mayor as a populist, claiming that he would “stop the gravy train,” and he gathered his support from the city’s periphery. He was also an idiot and a buffoon – while video of him smoking crack would not surface until after he was elected, even at the time of campaign he was known as a drunken idiot prone to falling down, a slob and utterly disrespectable. He displayed a unity of bigotries, he dealt marijuana, and he skipped ethics orientation for council members because he believed he did not need it, since his uncle had been a member of provincial parliament. In other words, for the mock news shows, and anyone else who drew their livelihood from the intersection of humour and politics, he was manna from heaven.

Much of the humour directed at Ford made it clear that he did not belong. He lacked the temperament and capabilities to govern. He was disreputable – he was not the sort of person that Torontonians would want to represent Toronto. Following from my previous analysis, I want to argue that this should be understood as satirists putting forwards that Rob Ford is ‘not the right sort of person’ and that he ‘violates our standards’. To the city’s periphery, that he was not the right sort of person for the perceived downtown elite was a virtue. Him being satirized by someone who Ford supporters viewed as being the opposite side in a culture war style dichotomy reaffirmed to them that Ford was on ‘their’ side.

The upshot of this analysis is that the political potential of mass media satire is extremely limited. What I would like to do now is look at two examples where mass media satire may find ways to be politically effective by making use of being a mass media production.

One way that mass media satire may attempt to have political impact is by tying its satire to some sort of direct action. This can turn the satire into a sort of large-scale prank that allows the audience to participate and, just a bit, take on the role of satirist. (There are also more simple calls for direct action, but that does not seem to allow for any sort of unique comment particular to satire.) Last Week Tonight with John Oliver has occasionally taken on direct action-prank projects. One example would be, springing from an episode on the subject of tobacco marketing in the global South, Oliver debuted the mock mascot “Jeff the diseased lung.” Billboards featuring Jeff were then purchased as advertisements in Uruguay. It is unclear if there was any eventual success in this case, although there was in another, featuring This Hour has 22 Minutes and Stockwell Day. In the 2000 Canadian election Stockwell Day, leader of the Canadian Conservative Reform Alliance Party, campaigned on a promise that if 3% of the electorate signed a petition, that petition would be put to a national referendum. On the weekly mock news show This Hour has 22 Minutes, Rick Mercer presented a petition that Stockwell Day should have his name legally changed to Doris. The petition quickly surpassed 350 000 signatures, and not too long thereafter Day withdrew the idea.

It’s worth noting that what let the 22 Minutes stunt be successful, while the Oliver stunt was ambiguously successful, is that the 22 Minutes stunt had a very clear goal: the withdrawal of the proposal. Exactly what would constitute success for the Oliver stunt is unclear. Most obviously, I suppose, would be some sort of concrete legislative action by the Uruguayan government, or a change in approach by Philip Morris. But something as vague as a general change in attitudes is harder to measure. The relevance of goals to activity can be further drawn out by looking at The Daily Show’s Rally to Restore Sanity in 2010. The goal of this rally was some nebulous value of The Discourse, whatever that may be, and that The Discourse may be treated with respect, and people would act more responsibly within it. What that meant or entailed is brutally unclear, and several years later it is difficult to see it as having had any effect.

Another way that mass media satire may attempt to have political impact is by attempting to craft an expansive ingroup that is determined by something other than particular political or ethical positions. This would attempt to create a situation where the satiric targets, despite falling afoul of the standards of the satirist, may still be motivated to adhere to those standards. The case here would be the Rick Mercer Report, a mock news show that ran on Canada’s national broadcaster for 15 years. Interpersed with the satire would be bits where Rick would travel around the country, meet people, and generally do things that would fit into a broadly nationalistic narrative.

I’m not sure how one would go about tracking the effects of such an approach, but it is worth noting that the Rick Mercer report has the reputation for being particularly tepid, even by the standards of mass media mock news. The attempts to be inclusive defang the show, since a priority is put on not alienating anyone.

Altogether, these examples support the idea that the context of mass media pushes satire towards preaching to the converted, and this in turn limits what satire can achieve. The culture war case shows how the ingroup-outgroup dynamics of satire may map on to a concrete political context. The other two cases – of concrete action and expanding the ingroup – show that mass media does not render satire completely hopeless, but its attempts to overcome the constraints of the mass media context are half-measures at best.

1. My goal in this paper is look at what we ought to expect from mass media satire. To this end, I have related a sketch of how satire works, and applied it to some of what is known about mass media. This has led to a twofold conclusion. The first is that the dynamics of satire and mass media suggest a scenario where mass media will be preaching entirely to the converted, which in turn limits its potential to convince. The second is that the group dynamics of satire suggest that there are many situations where satire can lead to reaffirming, and solidifying the satiric target that it is attempting to attack. Altogether, this suggests that mass media satire should not be expected to be much of a political praxis – in the grand scheme of politics and political action, it will always be subordinate to both more concrete forms of politics, and more concrete forms of political media. To my mind this conclusion doesn’t do much more than reaffirm what Kurt Vonnegut noted in 2003 about Art and the Vietnam War:

# “During the Vietnam War, every respectable artist in this country was against the war. It was like a laser beam. We were all aimed in the same direction. The power of this weapon turns out to be that of a custard pie dropped from a stepladder six feet high.”

There is also some empirical work nominally supporting this conclusion. Research done by Amy Becker in 2012 suggests that other-directed humour from politicians in political campaigns is effective in changing political evaluations, but self-directed humour is not. Research she conducted two years later, in 2014, further suggests that humour attacking the political opposition increases a subjects “felt political efficacy.” While this shows the effects of political humour on a subject’s own feelings, research by Dannagal Young in 2004 suggested that changes in judgements about a candidate’s characteristics may be changed by humour, this has no apparent effect on candidate support or approval.