

FRIDAY, APR 1, 2016 10:45 AM CDT

I dared criticize Fox News and speak up for Samantha Bee. This is how the right roared back at me

"You're probably a Lesbian but if you have any kids I hope they die in the next Islamic terror attack," I was told

SOPHIA A. MCCLENNEN



Megyn Kelly, Samantha Bee, Bill O'Reilly (Credit: AP/Reuters/Brendan McDermid/Evan Agostini/Kathy Willens/Photo montage by Salon)

Most people think that comedy is about laughter and fun. But that's wrong. Some comedy, like satire, is about provoking. It is about showing a view of the world that is missing. It is about speaking truth to power. That is why satirists like Jon Stewart, Stephen Colbert and Bill Maher get less out-loud laughs than a non-satirical comedian like Jimmy Fallon.

Silly comedy like Fallon's can be a distraction from life. Satire, in contrast, is designed to point out the stupidity, folly, and farce that is ruining our lives. It's sharp, witty, and depends on the creative use of irony. If you get the joke, you will feel smart and engaged. But, if you feel attacked by the joke, it can lead to aggressive blowback. And that blowback can be aimed at not just the comedians but also those that defend them.

Take this example. I recently wrote [a piece that described a Fox News comedy show's failed effort to slime Samantha Bee's "Full Frontal."](#) In addition to explaining that Bee's show had immediately drawn the ire of the right, I pointed out that she had been called [vulgar anti-Christian](#), [vile](#) and [an actual witch](#). Needless to say, my piece pissed off the same people Bee does. Here was one troll's message to me:

You're probably a Lesbian but if you have any kids I hope they die in the next Islamic terror attack you Commie scum whore you and Hildabeast and Samantha Bee the Canadian skank ought to catch cancer of the twat and die horrible deaths die bitch die die die I hope you get raped by one of the Syrian scum your God Obama brought over you'd probably love it Go Trump bitch we're tired of scum like you destroying this country it should legal to put you down like the rabid dog you are I hope you're on the next plane they blow up bitch.

Now we know that the troll world is dark and filled with exceptionally angry people who exhibit extreme misogyny, practice flawed logic, and lack basic grammar skills. That's not the story here. The story is why such anger over a piece on satire?

When the attacks on the French satirical magazine Charlie Hebdo took place [many speculated that perhaps the magazine had crossed the line](#). While critics wouldn't directly say it, the idea was that maybe Hebdo had it coming.

They had been warned, after all, via firebombs and other attacks, that they had infuriated extremist groups that felt targeted by their cartoons depicting the Prophet. They knew they were targeted. But rather than back off, they kept on publishing the same secular satire that was their trademark.

The debate over Hebdo was often over whether they deserved free speech protections or whether they should have practiced a form of humor that was more "politically correct" and less incendiary. [But, as I've argued elsewhere, maybe the debate worth having is why satire can incite such violent anger?](#)

Think about it. On the list of targets published by the Al-Qaida magazine Inspire that included Hebdo chief editor, Stéphane Charbonnier, three out of eleven targets were satirists. Two others were editors of a newspaper that had published satire. Not one target was a member of the military. Not one was even a politician.

This means that a cartoon can feel more threatening than a drone.

The Hebdo case may be extreme, but it does point to another side of satire. This is the side where the person not only doesn't get the joke, they threaten violence over it.

Here at home we have the example of Michael Moore who likely wins the award for most violently threatened satirist. He suffered a series of attacks, including a failed attempt to bomb his house. He even had Clint Eastwood threaten to kill him. Twice. Then we had Bill Maher get fired from ABC in 2002 for making the un-ironic comment that the 9/11 attackers could be called many things, but coward wasn't one of them. It was a level of nuance that had to be punished.

The irony is rich. The very form of comedy most supportive of critical thinking also leads to the most ignorant attacks.

Satire is a specific form of humor that depends on fostering critical thinking and encouraging the audience to question the status quo. The relationship between the satirist and its audience is one of collective critical engagement. It's a moment of revelation where we all see that the emperor is, indeed, naked. But, if you are the emperor or his minion, the joke is going to piss you off.

This, of course, is exactly what happened when Colbert brazenly satirized George W. Bush to his face in 2006 in one of the most extraordinary moments of political satire in our nation's history. But, even though he angered a sitting president and his supporters, Colbert's speech at the White House Correspondent's Association served to create a following for Colbert.

Colbert dodged the bullet, so to speak, but it's worth speculating if the same would be true today. Satire may run the risk of alienating its targets, but in the Tea Party, Trump era of rampant anger, everything is ramped up a notch.

While it would be easy to chalk this new level of anger off to the long-term effects of right wing talk radio, Fox News's political agenda, and the viciousness of the trolls they spawn, there is more at stake here.

The attack on satire is a symptom of a larger attack on nuance, sophisticated thinking, and complex logic. If satire is the smartest form of humor, then these attacks go after an entire way of thinking. We now have ample evidence that one of the gravest problems facing this nation is not the battle between right and left, between Trump and Sanders, or between the 1 percent and the rest; it is the battle between critical thinking and arrogant stupidity.

There is a convergence across these categories so that it turns out that it is, in fact, those on the right that defend the 1 percent who do tend to be less able to use their brain. It's important to note that this synergy was not always true and that it explains why moderate conservatives, [like Bruce Bartlett, criticize the anti-intellectualism of the party.](#)

[Brendan Nyhan and Jason Reiffler have shown us that we have now entered an era where Republicans won't adjust their ideas despite significant correcting information.](#) And [Chris Mooney has documented the fact that the Republican brain shuns nuance and attaches to emotional thinking.](#) But [satirical comedian Lee Camp reminds us that in the end the war is on stupid more than it is on ideology.](#)

The rage over satire, though, is not just anger over intellectual attacks on ignorant ideologies; it is also about the power of art and creativity to spark the imagination in ways that resonate far beyond "straight" communication. It is why Michael Moore can provoke in ways that Noam Chomsky might not.

It is also why the satire of Samantha Bee on "Full Frontal" is making so many right wing trolls lose it. She combines a number of their favorite targets: left, feminist, satirist—and Canadian.

But the real issue is that she has a "full frontal" way of addressing stupidity, hubris, and faulty logic that is creative and provocative. She is referred to as vile and vulgar but all she is doing is seeking entertainingly comedic ways to expose the vile and vulgar realities around her. The means the violent response to her new show is both ironic and really scary.

[*Sophia A. McClennen is Professor of International Affairs and Comparative Literature at the Pennsylvania State University. She writes on the intersections between culture, politics, and society. Her latest book, co-authored with Remy M. Maisel, is, Is Satire Saving Our Nation? Mockery and American Politics.*](#)