

Stepping backwards with disability humor? The case of NY Gov. David Paterson's representation on 'Saturday Night Live'

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Keywords:

blindness, disability humor, TV comedy shows, skit comedy, politicians

Abstract

In the modern era, discerning TV viewers know the shows that trade in cheap laughs by making fun of people with disabilities are not tapping into much creativity. So it was a surprise in 2008 when the highly regarded comedy show Saturday Night Live (SNL) stooped to that level by ridiculing the blind governor of New York, David Paterson, in a series of sketches lasting two years. This article analyzes the way humor narratives about a high-profile blind politician on television, like those depicted in the SNL skits, may have influenced larger cultural themes about blindness. Because the East Coast news media reported on the SNL skits every time an episode aired, this project undertook a textual analysis of all aspects of the controversy including the content of the SNL skits, the repeated responses from Gov. Paterson and the blindness community, and the news media framing of the SNL-Paterson skit story. This analysis examines the intertextuality of the event, revealing that the blindness community had a very different reading of the SNL skits, due to concerns about continuing media narratives that devalue and stereotype them.

In the modern era, discerning TV viewers know the shows that trade in cheap laughs by making fun of people with disabilities are not tapping into much creativity. So it was a surprise in 2008 when the highly regarded comedy show *Saturday Night Live* (SNL) stooped to that level by ridiculing the blind governor of New York, David Paterson, in a series of sketches that lasted two years.

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This article analyzes the way humor narratives about disability on television, like those depicted in the SNL skits, influence larger cultural themes about a disability like blindness. Blindness is a particularly interesting disability to assess within television content because it is one of the more feared disabilities and is even more feared than premature death, according to a (2008) study cited by the National Council for the Blind of Ireland.

Background on Paterson as Governor

The first SNL skits making fun of Paterson aired in December 2008. Paterson, who happens to be blind, became governor in March 2008 when Gov. Eliot Spitzer resigned in the midst of a prostitution scandal. Presumably because of Spitzer's disgrace, Paterson, who was previously lieutenant governor, began his time in office with what seemed like a bit of honesty. He and his wife both admitted to having extramarital affairs, and he said he tried cocaine when he was a young man, Joe Mahoney wrote in the *NY Daily News* (2008).

Paterson was lauded by the blindness community for being the first blind governor who would be running a powerful state. (A blind man served as interim governor of Arkansas for 11 days in the 1970s). But Paterson had only a brief honeymoon period as governor, because by July 2008, NY State faced its worst fiscal crisis since the 1970s. Gov. Paterson faced criticism from many in the state from that time on.

Textual analysis as method

This analysis is based on a technique set forth by Alan McKee (2003) in his book on textual analysis. It uses a post-structuralist approach, which embraces the idea that various cultures and subcultures make sense of the world differently, that there is neither a right nor a wrong way to interpret a text, and because of cultural differences, people from different lived experiences may have a unique sense of their reality.

This is particularly relevant to the analysis of media texts regarding the disability community in general or specific groups like the blindness community. Being born with or acquiring a physical difference means the disabled person will experience the world in a unique way. Additionally, many people in the disability community through activist work, organizational membership, or art creation, come together to create disability culture. Steve Brown (1994), co-founder of Disability Culture Institute, explained that disability culture is "to exclaim pride in the condition of disability" (p. 10).

In the case of the *SNL* skits about Gov. Paterson, the response from the governor and the blindness community are central to the interpretation of a humor narrative about a blind person, especially when the humor arises from making fun of the condition of blindness. Sighted viewers or others without connection to the blindness community may understand the *SNL* humor narrative in a different way.

The post-structuralist approach focuses on the audiences' reading of the text, instead of the author of the text. This shift of analytical focus is sometimes called the destabilizing or decentering of the author. Therefore, the analysis examines other sources for meaning, including intertextuality. In this case, cultural norms about humor directed at disabled people, the reaction of Gov. Paterson, the response from blindness organizations, journalistic interpretations of the *SNL* skits, and news headlines are examined.

Within this analysis, we are looking for likely interpretations of the text, not necessarily a right one. The context of the text will also be considered; in other words what does it mean when an iconic comedy show is making fun of a blind person in a disability rights-oriented country like the United States? America, although far from perfect, is known around the world as having strong disability rights laws and many success stories of people with a variety of disabilities having fulfilling professional careers, according to a (2002) report from Eric Rosenthal and Arlene Kanter on disability rights laws in the United States and internationally. And of course, the United States is also known for its huge entertainment television industry that is influential around the globe. Therefore, we argue that a textual analysis of the *Saturday Night Live* skits about Gov. Paterson and the controversy surrounding them will give use insight into U.S. cultural narratives about humor, disability, and politicians.

Humor and disability

Disability and humor have an uneasy relationship. Social norms tell members of many societies not to laugh at people who are physically different. Some theorize that humor, in general, represents an incongruity, or that humor arises from something unusual or out of place, as John Morreall (2009) writes in his book *Comic Relief*. Many times nondisabled people who create humor narratives about disability use what they perceive as the abnormality or oddness of disability to invoke the incongruity that signals humor. Related to the concept of narrative prosthesis developed by disability studies scholars David Mitchell and Sharon

Snyder (2001), disability becomes the representational "crutch" that props up the humor in many comedy narratives created by nondisabled people.

In addition, many non-disabled people, who perceive having a disability as tragic, pitiable, or just plain sad, may be uncomfortable about humor related to disability. Bruce Baum (1998) in the British disability organization's publication, *The Bridge*, explains, "There is little that is intrinsically humorous about having a disability. Concomitantly, there is little that is inherently morose, sorrowful or tragic about having a disability. Many people in the community at large perceive disability with sympathetic and lamentable attitudes. Because of that, they resist or oppose attempts to juxtapose humor and disability" (p. 3). Disability studies scholar Gary Albrecht (1999) says disability humor "raises a hidden paradox that makes people feel uncomfortable. What is so funny about having a disability when others think it is a tragedy?" (p. 67).

This paradox arises because historically disabled people also have been a source of amusement for non-disabled people, such as their historic use as court jesters, as exhibits of curiosity in "freak shows," or as Mr. Magoo-style cartoon characters. "Most of us have experienced negative forms of humor where we have been laughed at rather than laughed with," explains Baum (1998). Constructive positive humor "creates positive environments where people support each other, promote self-esteem and create mutually beneficial connections. Destructive humor does the opposite," Baum writes (1998, p. 4).

Destructive humor sets disabled people apart by poking fun at what are seen as their inadequacies. Humor scholar Alan Dundes (1987) argues that the growing visibility of disabled people in American society spawns joke categories that focus on them. He explains that sick jokes about quadriplegics "attempt to recognize and articulate the public's discomfiture in the presence of armless, legless, or otherwise disabled individuals" (p. 18). Mac Barrick (1980), who studied Helen Keller jokes, believes these genres provide a similar purpose in society: "Like a classical drama, it has had the cathartic effect of erasing the pity normally felt toward the disabled, so that the joke teller and his listener now accept these people on equal terms... How can you hate someone who makes you laugh?" (p. 449). However, Barrick's thesis does not account for those missing in the construction of the jokes or humor, essentially people with disabilities. These types of disability humor are typically created by non-disabled people for a non-disabled audience. Without disabled people involved in the creation of humor, these jokes can be read as insulting and patronizing.

One change that came to disability humor in the late 20th and early 21st centuries, which has the potential to revolutionize humor, is the addition of disabled humorists, comedians, and cartoonists. For example, the humor from quadriplegic John Callahan (1990, 1998) grew from his individual cartoons in print media to books and cartoon TV shows like *Quads* and *Pelswick*. Callahan's humor merges sick jokes and disability themes, coupling them with the powerful message of being drawn by an artist with a disability. "This exploration of bad taste in disability imagery could be seen as the antidote to tragic imagery, mocking and teasing,

instead of displaying misery," according to British disability language scholar Jenny Corbett (1996, p. 53). Callahan "confronts disability with a raw humor in newspaper and magazine cartoons that have drawn praise and condemnation, with people who have disabilities taking both sides," wrote Bill Keveney in *USA Today* (2000, p. 5D). Other disabled humorists have also taken control of "sick humor." Sharon Wachsler (2002), a cartoonist with chronic fatigue syndrome and multiple chemical sensitivity, on her Sick Humor website wrote, "As I was confronted with the daily frustrations, indignities, and peculiarities of life with chronic illness, I started drawing cartoons that depicted my experiences — transforming my anger into comedy." Most disabled humorists believe they get their messages across when their work is both hated and loved.

However, disabled humorists must contend with the legacy left by Helen Keller jokes and sick humor that sometimes these jokes and humor are laughed at only by children or insensitive adults. Most adults are expected to know better than to laugh at such things. Fred Burns (Coddon, 1996), a disabled comic, said in the *San Diego Union-Tribune*: "The thing I found from the beginning is that when you're disabled, unlike other comics, audiences don't want to laugh at you. They're taught all their lives not to make fun of handicapped people. That was the challenge - to get them to laugh at their concepts of people who are disabled" (p. 8).

Rick Boggs, a blind actor and performer, says a focus on disabled people as inspirational, or only in the context of a serious subject, means society does not get to see the diverse qualities of people with disabilities, especially that they like to laugh and have fun just like anyone else (Tillotson, 1997). Boggs tried to counteract this in a series of cell phone commercials in which he told the audience of the virtues of cell phone service from a chili dog stand, a museum, a Las Vegas wedding chapel and behind the wheel of a convertible, which was hooked up to his friend's tow truck. Boggs said in the *Minneapolis Star-Tribune*, "There are a lot of roles out there that portray how admirable people with disabilities are, but we need more like my character, someone who's not only capable, but fun. Someone you'd really want to know" (Tillotson, 1997, p. 1F).

An international disability organization, Rehabilitation International (RI), reports that when done correctly humor can build bridges between disabled and non-disabled people. Barbara Kolucki and Barbara Duncan wrote in the RI publication, *Working together with the media: A Practical Guide for People with Disabilities* (1994), that humor is a good way to convey "messages concerning the assumptions that non-disabled people make about life with a disability or people with disabilities. Humor is a bridge over the awkwardness many people feel when approaching a new or unfamiliar situation" (p. 9). Their article also suggests messages received through humor are remembered longer than those presented without.

Additionally, humor has long been a way for many groups to confront oppression. A number of ethnic and social groups have used humor as a way to protest against those who would put them down. A folklore study by D.C. Simmons (1963) identified seven forms of protest humor among oppressed groups:

First and most basic is the belief that personal salvation is to be found strictly within the group and that acceptance of the customs of the majority group will lead to heavy personal loss. The second utilizes a favorite form of retaliation, the trickster motif, whereby a minority member scores by countering a specific insult delivered by a member of the majority. Third, a parody is devised against an alleged somatic or cultural image. The fourth logically follows the majority group's thinking but twists the conclusion to allow for the minority group to escape. The fifth derides the majority group by either depreciating its high status, demonstrating the inferiority of a majority group member, or disclosing how the majority member actually feels toward the minority. Sixth, the close relationship between the minority group and a prized majority personality is emulated but mimed. Last, the entire scene is reversed so that the images appear topsy turvy and the minority group emerges triumphant (1963, pp. 46-47).

Some disability humor mirrors type five in which cartoons in disability publications attack the helping and health professions by illustrating how little they understand the disability experience. For example, the disability rights publication, *Mouth*, regularly runs cartoons by Scott Chambers, who often confronts the medical profession. One of his cartoons shows a doctor at a psychiatric hospital extracting a patient's brain, saying, "You won't need this anymore!" Chambers mocks the views of some mental health professionals who believe they always know best, even when it hurts the patient (2001, pp. 36-37).

For many people with disabilities, comedy becomes a way to vent frustrations, as well as laugh at the world that does not easily accommodate a person who is physically different. Blind people are also making their mark in the world of comedy. "Why don't blind people sky dive? It scares the crap out of their guide dogs!" jokes Brian Fischler, a comedian who is legally blind and performs regularly in NY City comedy clubs, according to his website (Fischler, 2010). WLS-TV in Chicago aired a profile piece on Jim Bernardin, a student at Chicago's famous Second City improv comedy troupe (Meyer, 2011). He has Stargardt disease, from which he has gradually lost his sight. "I love making people laugh," he says, "and the more I'm here, the more I realize, 'Wow, this is something I could really do forever.'" And Tommy Edison, who has a growing online presence as the Blind Film Critic, created a YouTube video (2012) called "Shit Sighted People Say to Blind People" to poke fun at the ridiculous things people have asked him. "Are you really blind or are you just stoned?" is one of them. All these comedians are practicing what is called constructive humor; Bruce Baum says that "it is humor arising from their experiences as disabled people that teach the audiences about their lives" (1998, p. 4).

TV political comedy and fake news

Saturday Night Live, premiering in 1975, continued a political comedy tradition started by other TV programs like *Rowan & Martin's Laugh-In* (1968-1973), which

satirized political events and politicians, while also providing politicians with a comic stage and an outlet for successful self-mockery and ridicule. In fact, some have suggested that Nixon's 1968 four-second delivery of the classic "Sock it to Me?" line finally humanized the candidate and that Democratic rival Hubert Humphrey's failure to respond might have cost him the election, Elizabeth Kolbert explained in *The New Yorker* (2004).

In the case of *Saturday Night Live*, it has been a part of the political landscape since Chevy Chase first portrayed a clumsy and bumbling President Gerald Ford. *SNL* combines timeless comedy skits with parodies of up-to-the-minute political news. In fact, its longest running skit is its Weekend Update fake news segment that pokes fun at current events.

The cast members on *Saturday Night Live* have prided themselves on *nailling the impersonation* of these politicians, writes political humor scholar Jeffrey P. Jones (2009); the show's classic parodies of key political figures vary from Chevy Chase's Gerald Ford, to Dan Akroyd's irritable Richard Nixon, to Will Ferrell's inarticulate George W. Bush — present highly critical, aggressive, and judgmental satires of these former presidents, say rhetoric scholars Chris Smith and Ben Voth (2002, p. 117). In fact, Tina Fey's 2008 portrayal of then Republican vice presidential nominee Sarah Palin offers a recent example of a carefully constructed and yet highly critical political parody or impersonation. While some politicians have eventually embraced the attention bestowed upon them by the cast of *Saturday Night Live* and even made appearances on the comic stage themselves (including David Paterson and notably in 2008, Sarah Palin and John McCain), the impersonations remain controversial and are still primarily seen as hostile — not friendly — attacks.

While *Saturday Night Live*'s ratings have varied considerably over the years (with 2008 and the Fey parodies of Palin concluding a banner year for the show), the program continues to exert an influence on political life and the electoral process, offering itself up as a stage for politicians looking to show their humorous side, political humor scholars say. Rhetoric scholar Ben Voth says that at the political candidate level, "these parodies may influence the public's feelings about the candidates" (2008, p. 230). Therefore, it seems clear that a parody of a blind man like Gov. David Paterson might sway some public attitudes about blind people in general or Paterson in particular.

The *SNL* skits about Gov. Paterson

The first skit in December 2008 featured *SNL* regular Fred Armisen as Gov. Paterson. The skit, as were all the skits, was set up as a news segment with the Gov. Paterson character being interviewed on Weekend Update. Armisen portrayed Paterson as bumbling and unaware of what he was doing. For example, Armisen's Paterson held a statistical chart upside down when discussing unemployment figures, and in the last minutes of Weekend Update, the Paterson character wanders back onto the set and crosses in front of the camera,

supposedly unaware of where he is going. This wandering in front of the camera was to be an ongoing sight gag in the subsequent skits as well. (The subsequent skits were in September 2009, April 2010, and September 2010.)

Several jokes from the 2008 skit included Seth Meyers asking the fake Paterson what criteria he has for choosing someone to fill Sen. Hillary Clinton's Senate seat: "It's time we get someone from Utica, Syracuse or Schenectady - towns where people have something a little off about them. I mean, they don't have to be blind. I just need someone with like a gamey arm or maybe the giant gums with the tiny teeth."

In the next joke, Armisen's Paterson says that he only became governor because of former Gov. Eliot Spitzer's prostitution scandal: "Whoever is appointed senator must - like me - be caught totally off guard and be comically unprepared to take office. Come on, I'm a blind man who loves cocaine who was suddenly appointed governor of New York. My life is an actual plot from a Richard Pryor movie."

An analysis of these jokes reveals an underlying questioning of a blind man's fitness for political office. His portrayal as bumbling easily disoriented and unable to simply hold a chart right-side up indicates the comedy writers' ignorance of the many techniques blind people use to orient themselves and move around in space.



Image Of Actor Fred Armisen As Gov. David Paterson On "Saturday Night Live" In 2008.

The joke about Utica, Syracuse and Schenectady allows the comedy writers to use a disabled character to convey New York City snobbery about the kind of people whom they believe live up-state, i.e. that they are unsophisticated rubes with physical "deformities." Finally, the writers turn the real Gov. Paterson's honesty against the SNL Paterson character by bringing up his admitted youthful drug use, as well as adding a racial dimension by comparing him to known substance abuser, comic actor Richard Pryor.

Probably the lowest blow in that skit's jokes was that he was "caught totally off guard and comically unprepared to take office." Paterson has a long history as a

NY politician, beginning with serving in the State Senate in 1985. He worked in the District Attorney's office in Queens County, N.Y. and served on Mayor David Dinkins staff. He is a Columbia University graduate and has a law degree from Hofstra University (Salmon, 2008). He is well-known for his support of same-sex marriage and required NY state to recognize marriages from other states before NY passed its law allowing same-sex marriage (Stashenko, 2008). And he and Spitzer won their ticket in what was considered a landslide, with 69% of the vote, CNN reported (2006). Paterson had been working in NY state politics for more than 20 years when he stepped in as the governor, so he was far from "comically unprepared."

Why blindness comedy instead of race?

Disability studies has been called "white disability studies" (Bell, 2006) because so little research focuses on the intersection of race and disability. Bell (2011) has critiqued African American studies for forgetting about the intersection of disability and race as well. For example, only disability studies scholars have explored the implications of Harriet Tubman having a seizure disorder (Wallace, 1990), or that Emmett Till whistled to mitigate a speech problem from polio, so he probably wasn't whistling at a white woman, for which he was murdered in 1955 (Finger, 2006). And when James Byrd was dragged to his death by racists in Texas in 1998, it was also an attack on his disabled gait from arthritis (Davis, 2002).

In the area of media representations of race and disability, few scholars have looked at this intersection. Nickel (2004) studied race message films with disabled black male characters, and he argues that new stereotypes arose as white liberal filmmakers tried to combat racist stereotypes. "It was the black disabled figure's unique combination of virtue and victimization, strength and weakness, that made his situation so poignant and real. The character never appeared to be a charity case. But the white spectator's overflowing of compassion masked another feeling, a sense, though not conscious, of being superior. Race-disability films seemed to have a subliminal effect. While humanizing black America for white audiences, the images of disabled African Americans reinforced the notion that all men are not really created equal; some are not as able-bodied or able-minded as others" (Nickel, pp. 33-34). It appears that representations of disabled African Americans have been about making white people comfortable. No humor research has investigated race and disability together, but interestingly Banjo's study of white identity and black entertainment (2011) makes the suggestion that "future [humor] research should examine the motivations of enjoyment of humor that disparages persons with disabilities or religious groups. For example, an individual's sense of superiority or privilege may explain the pleasure derived from watching disparaging representations of persons with disabilities" (p. 156).

So what are the implications for race and disability studies when a long-running comedy show mostly ignores race and directs the humor toward disability? Is the show trying to placate the white audience? Is racial humor too politically incorrect? In the Paterson *SNL* skits, the comedy never focuses on Paterson being African

American, but on his blindness. Only Paterson himself made a racially focused joke, when he finally came onto *SNL*: "You poked so much fun at me for being blind, I forgot I was black." We believe timing might have been the reason that *SNL* forgot about Paterson's race. It was the "No drama Obama" effect that began when the first African American president took office in January 2009. "'People don't know what to do with Obama,' says impressionist Frank Caliendo. 'The race issue is obvious. People don't know what's OK to laugh at'" (Strauss, 2009, p.2). "There seems to be a lot of concern how to handle jokes aimed at Obama's ethnicity, Kimmel told viewers in a re-airing [January 20, 2009] of one of his show's post-election bit in which, tongue-in-cheek, he asked African Americans what's acceptable when it comes to Obama and humor" (Strauss, 2009, p. 2). Paterson's race may have been off-limits just as President Obama's was.

Saturday Night Live writers said they struggled with how they should mock the newly elected President Obama.

[Fred] Armisen has Obama's look and voice patterns down, but *SNL*, which has targeted presidents for 33 years, has yet to find the foibles of his predecessors: Bush's malapropisms, Bill Clinton's appetite for fast food, and Gerald Ford's pratfalls. Instead, *SNL* played off Obama's no-drama persona in the jazz-infused 'cool' sketch. 'What's hard is Barack doesn't give you a lot of things that you can get at right away,' says *Saturday Night Live* writer James Downey, whose political skits date back to *SNL*'s early days. 'We know him mainly from speeches, and those are always tough' to work off of' (Strauss, 2009, p.2).

In the big picture, it appears that *SNL* pushed racial comedy to the back burner in favor of the easier "sell," which is ableist comedy. In the majority non-disabled society, ableist comedy is barely understood to be offensive because of ignorance about the day-to-day experiences of people with disabilities. However, the reaction from Gov. Paterson, the blindness community and even the news media about the *SNL* Paterson skits did serve to educate the larger society about the offensiveness of making comedy out of someone's disability.

Response from Gov. Paterson and blindness organizations

This analysis acknowledges the freedom of speech all comedy shows like *Saturday Night Live* have to make whatever jokes they would like, and this analysis recognizes that politicians are fair game for all types of humor. However, our argument is that the humor regarding Gov. Paterson would have much more resonance if it was a critique of his political behaviors, rather than poking fun at something someone cannot change about his physical being — that he happens to be blind.

Gov. Paterson agreed with this notion and said he had no problem being attacked as a politician but was concerned about the impact on the larger blindness community because of the blindness ridicule. He told reporters after the 2008 *SNL* skit that he felt the *SNL* skit could lead viewers to believe that "disability goes hand-

in-hand with an inability to run a government or business" (Li, 2008). Paterson said he worried that with 70% of U.S. blind people unemployed, the *SNL* skit reinforced incorrect and negative stereotypes about their ability to work.

"I can take a joke," Gov. Paterson told the *Daily News*. "But only 37% of disabled people are working and I'm afraid that that kind of third-grade humor certainly adds to this atmosphere. Let's just say I don't think it helped" (Gaskell, 2008, p. 4). His perception is that these jokes about his blindness feed the public's already negative attitudes about the abilities of disabled people: "There is only one way that people [who are blind] could have an unemployment rate that's six times the national average — it's attitude," Paterson told the disability website Disaboom (2008). "And I'm afraid that the kind of third-grade depiction of individuals and the way they look and the way they move add to that negative environment."

Blindness and disability groups also agreed that a governor is fair game for political comedy, but they were upset that most of the jokes in the skit poked fun at Paterson's blindness, not his behavior as a politician and governor. Chris Danielsen, a spokesman for the executive office of the National Federation of the Blind (NFB) in Baltimore, said in Stephanie Gaskell's *NY Daily News* story (2008), "The biggest problem faced by blind people is not blindness itself, but the stereotypes held by the general public. The idea that blind people are incapable of the simplest tasks and are perpetually disoriented and befuddled is absolutely wrong" (p. 4).

The president of the National Federation of the Blind Marc Maurer also weighed in about the *SNL* comedy (2009): "The language of the skit indicates that the governor cannot be expected to perform adequately in office because, after all, he has used cocaine and he is blind... The point of the skit was that blind people are incapable of participation in the activities that others manage with ease and grace. *Saturday Night Live* made fun of the governor *because* of his blindness." Maurer wants the world to know:

Blind people are not humorless, touchy malcontents. Finding the humor in life provides relief from the emotional pressure that often surrounds us, and humor lifts the spirit and frequently offers perspective. If, however, the humor is intended to belittle—to express superiority for the sake of domination—its value is eclipsed by the damage it causes. However, humor has other aspects. It can be employed to bring a group together to express a common spirit. It is one tool in the arsenal for creating a community (Maurer, 2009).

The American Foundation for the Blind (AFB) in NY City also weighed in, saying the skit "suggests that people with disabilities are from the 'freak bin'" (2008a). Gov. Paterson was affiliated with AFB, serving on its Board of Trustees from 1997-2006. AFB has always emphasized Gov. Paterson's many strengths:

Governor Paterson, who has had an impressive academic and political career, is known as a witty politician who brings people together. He has accomplished many firsts in his life, becoming the first non-white New

York State Senate legislative leader in 2003, the first visually impaired person to address the Democratic National Convention, and the first African American Governor of New York. As a legally blind public figure, Governor Paterson has challenged public perceptions about what it means to have a disability and shown the world that people with vision loss can be great political leaders (AFB, 2008b).

The statements from Paterson and blindness advocates are an excellent example of the post-structuralist's notion of intertextuality, i.e. that they are pulling a completely different kind of meaning from the *SNL* skits, one that doesn't even contain humor. These audiences' "reading" of the *SNL* text destabilizes the central focus of the *Saturday Night Live* writers, because instead of comedy they read it as an insulting attack on blind people. How that divergent reading made it into media coverage of the *SNL*-Paterson skit controversy provides other texts for analysis: news media stories and headlines.

Print news coverage

The 2008 *SNL* skit mocking Paterson was covered widely by major NY and East Coast newspapers. Many of the stories latched onto Paterson's quote calling the *SNL* skit a "third-grade depiction of people and the way they look." *The Miami Herald* (2009) even mentioned the quote in Fred Armisen's wedding announcement to Elisabeth Moss (p. 8). By emphasizing that quote, the print media lent credence to Gov. Paterson's contention that the skit was juvenile and misdirected.

Another theme in the newspaper coverage was focused on the quote about many blind people being unemployed and how the negative stereotypes in the skit might feed further employment discrimination. That theme was backed up with consistent use of quotes and comments from blindness organizations like NFB.

Within the text of the media stories, many included content that showed support for Paterson over the course of several *SNL* skits making fun of him:

- *Newsday* (2010, p. A2): "Skits that mocked his blindness"
- *The NY Times* (Peters, 2008, p. A28): "portrayed as disoriented & buffoonlike" and "mocked the governor's blindness throughout the 4-minute segment."
- Gawker.com (Tate, 2008): "Easy shots at his visual impairment."
- *NY Daily News* (Rush and Molloy, 2009, p. 18): "his buffoonish portrayal."
- *The NY Times* (Confessore, 2010, p. 17): "Improbably clumsy figure who walks into cameras."
- *Newsday* (2010, p. A12): "mocked ... as a clueless blind man."
- *The NY Times* (Peters, 2009, p. 17): "Adding insult to injury, a buffoonish caricature of Mr. Paterson was revived on 'Saturday Night Live Weekend Update.'"

One of the most interesting stories about the *SNL*-Paterson controversy was by Mark Sommer (2008) in the *Buffalo News*. That newspaper took the initiative to find out what comedians thought about the skit. One comedian, while carefully acknowledging that *SNL* has every right to do the skit, said: "I think it's kind of creepy to nod and wink and snicker at a blind man who can't see the jokes being pulled at his expense. There's something cruel about this. I'm used to this being what passes as the cutting edge for humor. It has this feel of being real daring and outrageous, and what they're really doing is hitting you on the back of the head with the broad side of a shovel" (p. A1).

A number of opinion writers also weighed in with criticism of the skits and support of Gov. Paterson. *NY Times* columnist Clyde Haberman (2009) profusely criticized the 2009 *SNL* skit, saying "We're witnessing a creepy side effect to the Paterson phenomenon. Comedy writers with frat-boy sensibilities seem to feel they have a license to go for cheap laughs about blindness, as if Mr. Paterson were Mr. Magoo come to life... The shabby blind-man humor comes by way of '*Saturday Night Live*'" (p. A20). The columnist makes an important point about humor that is based on clichéd stereotypes rather than well-crafted parody or satire.

A *NY Daily News* (2008) editorial deftly attacked the *SNL* skit by comparing it to the real David Paterson, who is known for his humorous quips. That editorial concluded: "Real Paterson is funnier. A blind man could see it. Who's writing the jokes at *SNL*? Seven-year-olds?" (p. 30). And Chris Rovzar in *New York Magazine* called Paterson "Governor Awesome" and wrote the *SNL* skit was "weak, pat and lazy," adding "There are a thousand reasons why Governor Awesome is ripe for spoofing on *SNL*, but his blindness and a trumped-up hate of New Jersey are not among them" (Rovzar, 2008). Legally blind freelance writer Kathi Wolfe said in a (2008) commentary in *The Progressive* that the skit feeds prejudice against blind people. "The skit suggested that blind people are incompetent, a prejudice that Gov. Paterson fought against his whole life," she wrote. "It is just this prejudice that sets blind and disabled people back" (Wolfe, 2008). *New York Magazine* thought *SNL*'s political skits were so unfunny that they put them in the despicable-lowbrow dimension of the magazine's Approval Matrix, which said: "Never funny, always outdated in the Internet-Daily Show era. Why bother?" (2011, p. 156).

Finally, some in the media even smelled far-fetched conspiracy with the humor directed at Gov. Paterson, questioning whether *SNL* mocking Paterson was *SNL* producer Lorne Michaels' payback for the governor not appointing his friend Caroline Kennedy to replace former Sen. Hillary Clinton, according to *NY Daily News* columnists George Rush and Joanna Molloy (2009).

In terms of repeating jokes from the first skit, many media stories included the joke in which the Paterson character says his life is "an actual plot from a Richard Pryor movie." That joke had nothing to do with blindness but at its underpinning was about negative stereotypes regarding African Americans and drug use. The textual analysis of these media stories and commentaries illustrates mainstream's media acceptance of the Paterson-blindness advocates reading of the *SNL* skits. These

print journalists seemed to understand that some of the skit's humor was misdirected toward blindness more than politics.

Headlines and terminology

But the copy editors who wrote the headlines for those stories were less sensitive to the topic of what terms are preferred by disabled people. These copy editors and writers fell into the usual pun traps and inappropriate wording they often do when writing about disability, especially blindness. The following is a list of headlines that played on the other uses of the word "blind:"

- *NY Post* (Li, 2008, p. 4): "Paterson In A Blind Rage Over *SNL* Skit"
- *NY Daily News* (Gaskell, 2008, p. 4): "Gov's Not Laughing Over *SNL* Blindside"
- *NY Daily News* (Lovett, 2009a, p. 6): "Dave Blindsides Critics with Wrath"
- *Toronto Star* (2008, p. L9): "Short-sighted skit"
- *NY Daily News* (Lovett, 2009b, p. 6): "It's a vision thing with Paterson, sez S.I. Poll"
- *NY Daily News* (Shapiro, 2010, p.5): "Paterson Shows He Isn't Blind To Humor On *SNL*"

Joe Grimm (2008) writing for the journalism education organization Poynter Institute questioned whether journalists should use jokes and puns when writing about humor that some people find offensive. He cited a number of news stories about the controversy that were filled with jokes and puns about blindness: "The lead of the *New York Post* story said 'Gov. Paterson didn't see the humor,' and the headline took it a step further: 'Paterson in a blind rage over *SNL* skit.' 'Don't See the Humor' made it into at least one other Web headline. *TMZ.com* (2008) headlined the objections, 'NY Gov Won't Turn Blind Eye to *SNL* Bash.' An NBC news site (O'Neill, 2008) (part of the same corporation as *SNL*) called it: 'Blinding Mad: Gov. Paterson Rips *SNL* for Skit.'"

Inside the text of some of the stories, some writers also violated the requested terminology of *The Associated Press Stylebook* (2007), which lists three terms for use: blind, visually impaired or person with low vision (74). A writer for the TV Zone website (2009) called Paterson "the sight-challenged guy." In *The NY Times*, Clyde Haberman (2009) wrote about Paterson's election, saying "it gave the sightless new reason to take heart" (p. 20). And *NY Daily News* columnist Joanna Molloy (2008) wrote: "We've been making fun of challenged politicians for quite some time. When George W. Bush waved to Stevie Wonder, who was the impaired one?" (p. 15).

Terminology is important to many disability groups because so many disability terms are used in other contexts that can further stigmatize people with disabilities (Haller, 2010). S.E. Smith (2008), writing for the Feministe blog, explains why the media need to understand the importance of terminology to the disability community: "Disability rights activists fight for the right to self-identify, to resist

ableist language, and to confront problematic framings of disability embedded in the way we talk about disability. The disability rights movement is much older than many people realize and from the start, people were tackling, confronting, and challenging language."

In the blindness community, other definitions of blindness are considered by many as an additional stigma blind or visually impaired people already face. James Omvig (2009), an Iowa lawyer who is blind, talked about the problems from these other definitions of "blind" in *The Braille Monitor*. "There are some misuses of the term, of course, which are not desirable at all and which perpetuate negative impressions about blindness. These include such commonly accepted dictionary definitions as: 'unable or unwilling to perceive or understand'; 'not based on reason or evidence'; or 'lacking reason or purpose' as in, 'he ran blindly off the cliff.' (Omvig, 2009).

These concerns are not about "political correctness" but about the different "reading" the blind and visually impaired community has of mass media content that uses the term blind to mean something that reflects on them negatively. In addition, some terms are just linguistically incorrect. For example, to call someone "sightless" is inaccurate because the majority of blindness community has some vision, which is why the term visually impaired is usually the most appropriate one to use.

Conclusions

This article analyzed the way humor narratives about a high-profile blind politician on television, like those depicted in the *SNL* skits, may have influenced larger cultural themes about blindness. Because of the heavy news media coverage of the controversial skits, we were able to gain an understanding of the intertextuality of the event. This analysis revealed that the blindness community had a very different reading of the *SNL* skits, due to their concern about continuing media narratives that devalue and stereotype them.

However, the news media coverage of the skits revealed the news media are beginning to understand the boundaries of humor and when they are directed at the wrong target. Because *SNL* hung the comedy on blindness rather than skewering the fair game topic of political ineptitude or scandal, the news texts embraced the narratives from Gov. Paterson and the blindness community. This analysis illustrates that sometimes TV comedy "gets it wrong."

In its own way, *SNL* seemed to confirm that it "got it wrong" when its producers invited Gov. Paterson to appear on the show in December 2010. In the current world of comedy, the ultimate way to apologize appears to be letting the target of the jokes make fun of you. The skit with the real David Paterson was funny because the target was a long-running comedy show that had had its ups and downs for more than 35 years.

Another part of this new apology style is that it lets politicians and other public figures appear to be "good sports." They get to prove they have a sense of humor so the public will think well of them. (See Mark Zuckerberg appearing on *SNL* with the actor who portrayed him in "The Social Network" in 2011). Paterson was rewarded for being a good sport by getting to slam *SNL* with one of the funniest jokes of that episode: "Ladies and gentleman, I wanted to come here tonight before my time as governor of the great state of New York ends to tell you that working in Albany is just like watching *Saturday Night Live*. There are a lot of characters. It's funny for 10 minutes, and then you just want it to be over."

Although the humor in *Saturday Night Live*'s skits about Gov. Paterson did represent a step backward for disability humor because of its juvenile focus on making fun of blindness, the controversy surrounding the skits served as a kind of educational narrative about blindness. The print news media easily embraced the criticism of the skits from Paterson and blindness organizations and published information about the employment discrimination many blind people face and deconstructed some wrong-headed stereotypes about blindness. This phenomenon of a disability community gaining more empowering news coverage after controversy is not uncommon. For example, Haller and Rao reported (2004, pp. 1-2) on how people with psychiatric disabilities in New Jersey saw an in-depth series on mental health appear in *The Trentonian*, after they complained when that newspaper published an unfunny headline about a fire at a psychiatric hospital titled "Roasted Nuts." So even when comedy about a disability group is found to be lacking, it may lead to more awareness of disability issue. Journalists and the general public may not yet have a true understanding of disability, but they do know that comedy directed at a person's physical difference is potentially offensive and shows little creativity from the humorist.

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ISSN: 2159-8371