Satirical Visions with Public Consequence?: Dennis Miller's Ranting Rhetorical Persona

Don Waisanen
Baruch College, City University of New York

ABSTRACT

As a political comedian, Dennis Miller has been a staple figure in American public discourse across the last two decades. This essay identifies and evaluates Miller's ranting rhetorical persona, and examines comic texts produced by Miller before and after his political conversion, exploring the ways in which his politics may influence his satire. Using a distinctive methodological approach for humor research, I find there are more similarities than differences in Miller's discourse over time, and that some elements of Miller's post-conversion rhetoric may demonstrate a conservative satire. Ultimately, it is argued that Miller's ranting rhetorical vision holds paradoxical promise for the public sphere and political engagement. These findings have several implications for our understanding of comic advocacy in politics.

KEYWORDS: Rhetoric; Comedy; Persona; Conversion; Dennis Miller

Don J. Waisanen is an Assistant Professor, Baruch College, City University of New York, School of Public Affairs. Send correspondence to Don Waisanen, Baruch College, City University of New York, School of Public Affairs, One Bernard Baruch Way, Box D901, New York, NY, 10010; phone: 646-660-6825; e-mail: don.waisanen@baruch.cuny.edu

Different than prior eras, the political battles of our age are fought not only on executive, legislative, and judicial grounds—but on comedic ones too. A defining feature of contemporary public discourse is the extent to which politics and comedy continue to cross in late-night talk shows, on the Internet, and even in politicians' own speeches. There is a growing recognition of the role that such comic discourses play in political life. Commenting on the influential role of his own show, for instance, one *Saturday Night Live* writer recently stated that "satire has a role in the democratic process . . . the right sketch can be worth more than 1,000 words in Foreign Affairs Quarterly" (Cavna, 2008, para. 3). Radio and television networks now even battle for political publics with different comic tastes. Recently, a conservative entertainment network was launched hoping to build upon the successes of *Fox News* and Rush Limbaugh (Bauder, 2010). As politics and comedy continue to inform (or intrude upon) public sphere events, there are perhaps more stakes than ever involved in understanding what role comedians play in the rhetorical dynamics of modern politics.

Various issues are invoked for communication inquiry and practice. Many studies have already outlined new paths for understanding the evolving types of comedic communication forms that continue to develop and impact the public sphere (Baym, 2005, 2007a, 2007b; Feldman & Young, 2008; Holbert, 2005; Jones, 2005; Pfau, Cho, and Chong, 2001; Shifman, 2007; Smith & Voth, 2002; Waisanen, 2009; Xenos & Becker, 2009). Scholars have also found that different types of comedy can be characterized as either relatively radical or conservative (Christiansen & Hanson, 1996; Greene, 2008; Thompson, 2009). Drawing a link between comedy and democratic practices, Peters (2005) finds that political humor involves "transcendental buffoonery," serving the civic need to know "the gap between profession and being" in public communication, and affording citizens "relief from pomp or sobriety" (pp. 275, 277-278). Comedic structures can certainly dismantle hierarchal norms, but may also constrain publics through gendered languages and practices (Atakav, 2010; White, 2010; Lavoie, 2010), functioning to unite *or* divide audiences (Meyer, 1997, 2000). A critical scholarly task is to tease out the different conventions and forms operating in comedy toward these differing ends.

Forwarding these research lines, there are some critical questions with which to wrestle. Rhetorical scholarship has focused on the kind of personae that rhetors create to advance their views and causes. My primary question in this analysis thus asks, what kind of public personae do comedians use, invite their audiences to adopt (see Black, 1970), or even employ to submerge, silence, or deflect various phenomena from political attention (see Wander, 1984; Morris, 2002)? Comedic communicators ask their audiences to ingest certain structures of thinking and choices of interpretation—but we know little about what these structures and choices may look like, or what their consequences may be.

We also know that there are various typologies demonstrating how entertaining communication influences politics (Holbert, 2005). My second, exploratory question in this analysis asks, oppositely, how might one's political perspective influence his or her comedy? Gray, Jones, and Thompson (2009) note that political comedy in the past several years, such as Stephen Colbert's appearance at the *White House Correspondents Dinner*, illustrates "how the presence of 'humor' in political humor can rely quite heavily on one's political worldview" since "multiple commentators criticized the speech for not being funny" (p. 4). Furthermore, while there is some evidence that liberal and conservative audiences react differently to political

comedy (Lamarre, Landreville, & Beam, 2009), a question remains—are there distinctly liberal, conservative, or other kinds of political satires in discursive acts?

This essay explores these questions by examining the texts of Dennis Miller, a political convert or "liberal-turned-conservative comedian" (Weinraub, 2004, para. 1). Miller was a former leftist and star on *Saturday Night Live* from 1985 to 1991, hosted the syndicated *The Dennis Miller Show* and *HBO* show *Dennis Miller Live* from 1992 to 1996, and *Monday Night Football* between 2000 and 2002 (Dennis Miller, 2005). Yet the comedian became a prominent advocate for the right after the events of September 11, 2001. Miller was subsequently hired as a weekly commentator for the conservative *Fox News* show *Hannity and Colmes* in 2003 and another right-wing comedy show on *CNBC* in 2004 (Dennis Miller, 2005). On an *HBO* special, Miller (2006) shares a type of coming-out story in his vote for President Bush. He has made numerous public statements about his conversion, such as: "when I kept hearing liberals equating [former New York City Mayor Rudolph] Giuliani with Hitler—that's when I really left the [liberal] reservation" (Dennis Miller, 2003). Miller currently employs his comedic skills through media such as *The Dennis Miller Show* on conservative radio and as a commentator on other programs (Gold, 2006). Bill O'Reilly has complained that conservatives do not have their own comedians, and has also been instrumental in advancing Miller's comic critiques on his own *Fox News* show *The O'Reilly Factor* (Frederick, 2010).

Miller has undergone both criticism and praise for his conservative turn. Reviewing Miller's *CNBC* program, Cass (2004) writes that the previously "left-leaning" comic's show "is all out of whack, and I suspect the cause might be the host's well-advertised political transformation. In case you haven't heard, Dennis Miller is now a conservative" (para. 3, 2). Reina (2007) opines that "on nine-eleven, Miller looked down at the wet spot on his pants and discovered not shame but salvation. He would cash in on the country's post-attack hysteria and proclaim himself a reformed liberal" (para. 5), now providing "another one-note, right-wing rant" on *Fox News.* Even bloggers spread the news that "the smarmy, smirky, obscure-reference-loving comedian/commentator Dennis Miller has recently RADICALLY REINVENTED himself as a smarmy, smirky, obscure-reference-loving right wing radio host" (Braden, 2007, para. 1). On the other hand, journalists on the right supported Miller's conversion (Currie, 2003; Hirsen, 2004). While Miller identifies as a conservative convert, he still retains some liberal views on social issues such as gay marriage (Dennis Miller: 9/11, 2004). Overall, though, for the last two decades, across many television shows, four best-selling books, regular stand-up performances, and the plethora of programs he now occupies, Miller has continued to cross the realms of politics and popular culture from largely different political perspectives.

Some work finds that Miller uses a form of postmodern humor in which allusions, self-referentiality, equivalencies between high and low culture, comic metaphors, and recognition of mediation are common themes (Dunne, 2000). Jones (2005) argues that Miller is a "Mad Prophet of the Airwaves" whose "rant[s] . . . primarily established him as a political commentator" in American discourse (pp. 95-96). Even Miller describes his comedy in terms of a "rant" (Miller, 2001). Rants have been described as "speak[ing] or shout[ing] at length in an angry, impassioned way" (Rant, 2011). Given my own reading of Miller's rhetoric, I would describe his rants as extensive, observational and satirical monologues in which the comic primarily channels anger and sarcasm toward a wide range of topics. This style might be differentiated from other

comedians whose acts are driven more by characters, one-liners, or non-sequitirs, for instance. "Satire" is the most fitting term for Miller's ranting rhetoric, as "a particular kind of humor that makes fun of human folly and vice by holding people accountable for their public actions" (Marc, 2009, p. ix). One unique feature of this analysis will be to bring out more detailed characteristics of Miller's ranting rhetorical persona through a close study of his language.

Examining representative comic texts produced by Miller before and after his political conversion, this essay identifies Miller's diachronic and thematic, socio-political vision of the world, while exploring how Miller's politics might influence his satire. I find that there are more distinctive similarities than differences in Miller's discourse over time, but some elements of Miller's post-conversion discourse may demonstrate a conservative satire. Ultimately, it is argued that Miller's ranting rhetorical vision holds paradoxical promise for the public sphere and political engagement. Miller invites citizens to ingest certain structures of thinking and choices of interpretation that both limit and advance political potential. These findings have several implications for our understanding of comic advocacy in politics. In the next section, I address a methodological approach amenable to this investigation.

Method

I created two transcripts of Miller's nearly hour-long *HBO* specials, *Mr. Miller Goes to Washington* (Miller, 1988) and *All In* (2006). These specials provide the widest lens for examining a professional comic's vision. Carter (2001) explains that in the world of stand-up, an *HBO* special typically represents the culmination of about five years of a comedian's best work (p. 110). Each word in the performances was documented to create two separate texts for Miller's rhetoric.[1] While this study was conducted, *Mr. Miller Goes to Washington* was Miller's very first *HBO* performance and *All In* was his most recent special. These two discourses are thus taken as representative of both Miller's early comic work and his later rhetoric as a conservative. While Miller has been quite outspoken about his post-9/11 conservative conversion, and has migrated to shows such *The O'Reilly Factor,* a close reading of the texts also provides some support for Miller's change. In the first text, Miller does not talk about politics as much as in the second special, but does take opportunities to poke fun at President Reagan and first-lady Nancy Reagan, and current governmental problems such as an out-of-control federal deficit. In the latter text, Miller comes out strongly as a conservative—critiquing issues such as global warming, defending President Bush's presidency and policies, and attacking liberal figures such as Dennis Kucinich, Howard Dean, and James Carville.

This study assumes that if politics is a "struggle over alternative realities, then language is the medium that reflects, advances, and interprets these alternatives" (Callaghan & Schnell, 2005, p. 2). I analyzed the language of each transcript with the word-analysis program DICTION 5.0, to characterize the rhetorical themes by which Miller's socio-political vision is organized. Hart (2001) explains that DICTION brings out patterns in language choices, clusters of lexical and contextual associations in one's thinking, a rhetor's epistemological assumptions, synchronic and diachronic keywords, communicative culture/s, verbal tone, proportionality, and intertextual "continuities and discontinuities" in use (p. 44). Overall, DICTION has the effect of "de-rhetoricalizing" a text (56). The program has been through various scholarly iterations and advanced updates, drawing upon thirty-one dictionaries and analyzing around 10,000 search

terms ("none of which are duplicated in the program's routines" [Hart & Lind, 2010, p. 357]) in 35 categorical lists—including such dimensions as "numerical terms," "cognitive terms," and "past concern," which are used to create five master variables that have no statistical relationship among one another (Hart, 2001, p. 45).

These five master variables, steeped in various scholarly literatures, are "certainty" (telling us about the rigidity or absoluteness of one's language), "optimism" (a language of endorsement and positivity), "activity" (involving movement, change etc.), "realism" ("describing tangible, immediate, recognizable matters that affect people's everyday lives"), and "commonality" ("language highlighting the agreed-upon values of a group and rejecting idiosyncratic modes of engagement") (p. 46). Out of the base 35 categories, DICTION also computes four calculated variables that "result from calculations rather than dictionary matches"—measuring "Insistence (a measure of code-restriction), Embellishment (the ratio of descriptive to functional words), Variety (a measure of linguistic dispersion), and Complexity (word size)" (DICTION 5.0, 2000, p. 15).

There is a wealth of scholarly research using DICTION to unearth various characteristics of public texts (see Research, 2010). Given the program's range and power, DICTION has been used in diverse fields such as journalism (Cho et. al, 2003), education (Graddy, 2004), diplomacy (Bashor, 2004), religion (Eidenmuller, 2002), management (Finkelstein, 1997), and political campaigns (Hart & Lind, 2010). As far as I can tell, the program has never been used to analyze stand-up comedy texts. Though there are certain limits to the program, there are many reasons why DICTION is a suitable method for examining discourses like satire systematically. Hart (2001) addresses several questions about meaning that may also be raised regarding the adequacy of DICTION to analyze comic discourses. We know, for instance, that simply because a word is used ten times rather than once does not necessarily make that word more meaningful. But Hart points out that "computerized language analysis makes quantitative what others would leave qualitative, and this is both its strength and weakness" (p. 52).

A related but larger objection to the program involves its "assumption of semantic independence" or "imagining that words are meaningful outside their original contexts" (p. 52). DICTION breaks a text into individual words and associates those words with foreign databanks so that sentences such as "the dog bit the man" and "the man bit the dog" (p. 53) become lexically identical. Yet Hart argues that DICTION is concerned with the "co-occurrence" of animals and people in these sentences, so that we could note "that people more often take their dogs to the park than their microwave ovens" etc. (p. 53). By highlighting the quantitative rhetoric at play in a communicator's text, DICTION thus draws attention to what contextualists often ignore. Hart also argues that context is evanescent, so that "each encounter with a text is a nonreplicating event; each textual inspection is a maiden voyage; each new text becomes nestled in a matrix of other texts (as the Rodney King videos so vividly remind us)," demonstrating that people, contexts, and texts do not stand still (p. 54). On the other hand, DICTION contains little mystery, operationalizing words in an analysis, providing some "conceptual stability across rhetorical forms" (p. 55), and hence "reproduces context post hoc" (p. 56). Stability in emotion and style can be found in language choices, which are not "dazzled by context, by close-space observations . . . see[ing] that which near-sightedness occludes" (p. 58).

Similarly, it may be objected that discursive forms such as irony and satire, which are frequently used by comedians, contain levels of meaning that are not amenable to this kind of statistical analysis. That there may be further associations or levels of meaning to the words that Miller speaks, however, does not undermine the specific word choices and associations he *is* bringing up in his discourses. When Miller states, "I think that the environment has become a political football I honest to God do, politicians need something to act as a cudgel. . . . I cannot believe the men and women who we have chosen to be our leaders" (Miller, 2006)—we find particular first-person nouns (e.g. three uses of the word "I"), negative modal verbs (e.g. "cannot"), and concrete language choices (e.g. "football," "cudgel") that are not at all implicit or submerged. Attending to these choices can provide us with a new perspective on the patterns of consciousness by which comic discourses may be organized. As such, I would argue assumptions about the hiddenness and deeper meanings inherent in comic forms often do not hold, but also do not forgo our ability to track the important linguistic selections and comparisons that are quite overt in comedy. I would propose, furthermore, that as a comedian Miller uses relatively *stable* forms of satire and irony (see Booth, 1974). His language is anything but indirect in many of his comic critiques—for example, when he claims, "Harry Reid from here in Nevada. Listen I do not know much about him, I do know that he is possibly the most boring human I have ever seen in my life" (Miller, 2006).

In the following Miller passage, which contains what might be categorized as more indirect language, DICTION further brings together a variety of domains: "I do not want to say Reagan is senile but I think I read this morning where he is now eligible for pre-boarding Air Force One. Seventy-seven at the end of this next term, seventy-seven and he has access to the button? You know my grandfather's seventy-seven, we will not let him use the remote control for the TV set all right?" (Miller, 1988). While DICTION may not pick up on the connotations of a word such as "button" in this passage, it would likely note the focus upon senility, numerical terms, and the concrete vision that a word like "button" may invoke. We lose some specific meanings in the passage, but gain insight into some of Miller's larger rhetorical patterns. As such, by honing in on these repetitions, I propose that DICTION has the further effect of stabilizing language choices which, in isolation, might be conceived as more unstable.[2]

The goal of this analysis is to apply an empirically rigorous, diachronic technique to a stand-up comedian's texts. DICTION has both humanistic and social scientific value, systematically surveying thematic communication bypassed by simple content analysis or close-textual reading, while still incorporating both methodological techniques. Much of the communication research about comedy to date examines audience effects or engages in interpretive readings of comic artifacts. This essay finds a middle way between these approaches by engaging individual texts through more systematic language analysis. This method is thus particularly amenable to studying a comedian's socio-political vision of the world. Ohmann (1959) reminds us that "patterns of expression, when repeated with unusual frequency, [are] the sign of a habit of meaning, and thus a persistent way of sorting out the phenomena of experience" (pp. 13-14). At the same time, communication critics need to focus on structural rhetorical forms, or "certain ways of thinking, of viewing the world . . . that are not necessarily implied by the substance of the discourse" (Hahn, 2003, p. 70).

Results and Analysis

There are more similarities than differences between Miller's two *HBO* performances. All in all, 24 of the 35 main DICTION categories demonstrate these similarities, while 11 of the 35 evidence differences across the 18 years of Miller's stand-up and political conversion. The continuities tell us much about Miller's rhetorical persona and socio-political vision, while the discontinuities give us some insight into how his persona and vision may have been modified toward his present, conservative satire.

Similarities in Miller's Rhetoric

Figure 1 provides a list of DICTION variables with roughly similar scores across the two performances. It is not the purpose of this analysis to focus at length on every DICTION variable, but rather to draw out the distinctive categories and themes that bear public consequence. The variable findings are abductively organized and explicated through several general trends into which Miller's ranting rhetoric fits.

Figure 1: Similarities in Miller's Rhetoric

Self-Reference	16.66	18.67	0.00/15.10
Tenacity	36.64	37.76	23.32/39.76
Leveling Terms	5.40	5.45	5.02/12.76
Collectives	5.82	5.08	4.04/14.46
Praise	6.15	7.81	2.77/9.59
Satisfaction	19.18	9.15	0.47/6.19
Inspiration	0.49	1.69	1.56/11.10
Blame	3.50	2.80	0.06/4.16
Hardship	2.97	4.46	1.26/10.48
Aggression	1.78	1.67	1.07/9.79
Communication	3.06	5.15	2.21/11.79
Spatial Terms	4.11	6.22	4.17/19.85
Familiarity	101.33	112.42	117.87/147.19
Temporal Terms	15.66	18.47	8.36/21.82
Present Concern	15.18	14.70	7.02/16.60
Human Interest	40.10	52.36	18.13/45.49
Past Concern	2.82	3.38	0.97/6.19
Centrality	1.51	0.58	1.19/7.54
Cooperation	0.33	0.35	0.36/8.44
Diversity	0.95	0.61	0.07/3.81
Liberation	0.18	0.66	0.00/4.72
Embellishment	0.59	0.65	0.18/1.10
Variety	0.51	0.53	0.45/0.53
Complexity	4.00	3.82	4.31/5.01

Activity	49.99	48.05	46.74/55.48
Certainty	46.35	44.43	46.90/51.96
Commonality	49.39	49.11	46.86/52.28

Note: The Calculated and Master Variables are provided in the second and third sections of this table, respectively; DICTION lists "low" and high" ranges for each variable, which are provided in the far-right hand column of the table.

First, Miller asserts an individualistic-yet-uncertain communicative vision into the contemporary public sphere. The high *self-references* across both performances demonstrate a public vision whereby "the locus of action appears to reside in the speaker and not in the world at large" (DICTION 5.0, 2000, p. 43). This finding matches Dunne's (2000) analysis of Miller, but further shows that the comic has maintained a diachronic commitment to this self-driven rhetoric. At the same time, Miller's self-focus parallels low levels of *leveling* words that would "ignore individual differences" and "build a sense of completeness and assurance," *collective* words which "reflect a dependence on categorical modes of thought," moralizing, *inspiring* words focusing on "abstract virtues deserving of universal respect," and terms of *centrality* that denote "institutional regularities and/or substantive agreement on core values" (DICTION 5.0, 2000, p. 43). Since the locus of action is so much upon the self, Miller's discourses maintain an uncertainty and irresoluteness about the social and physical world in which he finds himself. Indeed, the low *spatial* terms in both performances, which highlight geographical locations, distances, and terms of scale and measurement (p. 46) reflect minimal extrapolations to places beyond the self and its present concerns.

Stand-up is a mode of communication emanating from singular performance, focusing on that which is baffling about the world (Carter, 2001). That the master variable of *certainty* was so low in both 1988 and 2006 further supports the continuity of this self/world vision. The 1988 text shows that out of 8181 words total, 4205 words were different. In the 2006 text, out of 8198 words analyzed, 4096 words were also different. One of DICTION's assumptions is that "repetition of key terms indicates a preference for a limited, ordered world, an important dimension of the Certainty variable" (Hart, 2001, p. 50). While it might be expected that comedians engage in acts of judgment more than other public figures, we find here a language of disorientation about the world beyond the self, suggesting that (at least in Miller's case) dogmatism is not a comic virtue.

Yet Miller's high levels of *satisfaction* and mid-to-high levels of *praise* (affirmations based on adjective counts in both texts) illustrate that, whether on the political left or right, his satirical tools are not focused exclusively on cynical negation—a charge that Peters (2005) finds democratic theorists often level against comedy. Still, words of *blame* that "designate social inappropriateness" and "downright evil" make up a large part of both Miller's specials. Part of the comic's repertoire is to maintain this focus, excoriating society's ills and absurdities, however tentative.

Second, Miller's terms reflect little concern for community and human action. Across both performances, there are relatively low *communication* terms, which refer to social interaction, and moods and modes of intercourse (DICTION 5.0, 2000, p. 45). These exclusions

are undoubtedly related to Miller's self-driven rhetoric. There are also very low levels of *cooperation* terms across the two stand-up acts. These are words "designating behavioral interactions among people that often result in a group product" (p. 47). Only medium levels of the master variable of *commonality* or "language highlighting the agreed-upon values of a group and rejecting idiosyncratic modes of engagement" (p. 47) appear in the texts.[3]

Given his disorientation about the world, Miller largely neuters human action and political possibilities. Miller's low level of *liberation* terms describing the "maximizing of individual choice" and "rejection of social conventions" appear to suggest that, while Miller is an individualist to the core, his is an individualism grounded more in fate than human agency. There are low to medium-low levels of the master variable *activity* in both cases, too, which is language "featuring movement, change, the implementation of ideas and the avoidance of inertia" (p. 44).

Third, as much as Miller's language exhibits social-behavioral inaction, there is a parallel commitment to observational innovation, variety, and exacting descriptions about the present—demonstrating a deep complexity within comic discourses. Across both performances, Miller has very low-levels of *familiarity*, which relies on Ogden's (1968) analysis of the most commonly used words in the English language (DICTION 5.0, 2000, p. 46). As such, Miller's rhetoric focuses intently on novel language use. The high levels of word *variety* also indicate "a speaker's avoidance of overstatement and a preference for precise, molecular statements" (p. 43). In a political climate often driven by hyperbolic commentary, Miller's rhetoric demonstrates a high concern for accuracy, qualification, and meticulous observation. This finding may be surprising, given how much comedy relies upon techniques such as exaggeration (in fact, Miller only employs medium levels of *embellishment* in his texts). All in all, Miller's *may not be a rhetoric of sociality, but it is a language of analysis.*

Indeed, both Miller's performances possess low levels of *complexity*, which focus on the "average number of characters-per-word in a given input file," advancing Flesch's (1951) notion "that convoluted phrasings make a text's ideas abstract and its implications unclear" (DICTION 5.0, 2000, p. 47). Such would appear to be a particularly characteristic communication mode in stand-up comedy, where abstract jargon would impede the everyday discursive translations and mainstreaming necessary to understand both setups and punchlines. A lack of clarity in such processes may obstruct the comic act, which targets broad audiences, but also possibly forgoes the ability to rise above circumstances and comment in the more technical terms by which understandings can also be advanced.

By and large, references to political events and popular culture make up a good portion of Miller's comic allusions. Both Miller's discourses spotlight high levels of *present-concern* indicating "present-tense verbs" corresponding to "general physical activity," "social operations," and "task performance" (p. 46). This finding also adds the nuance that Miller's discourses are quite active in present descriptions, but inert about future possibilities, focusing on claims of fact rather than policy. The performances demonstrate high levels of *human interest*, too, grounded in the idea that "concentrating on people and their activities gives discourse a life-like quality" (p. 47). In the same way, Miller's approach to comedy is highly topical, driven by references to the latest fads, celebrity figures, and cultural trends.

Differences in Miller's Rhetoric

There are several communicative differences in Miller's genesis from the political left to the right between 1988 and 2006. It should be noted that some of these differences involve matters of degree that supplement rather than supplant the similarities between the texts, but some large changes are also present across the two discourses that may establish the existence of a conservative satire. However, causation should not be imputed to these correlational differences—the relationship between Miller's changes and his conservatism are exploratory at best, and there could be other factors involved in these rhetorical variations. It could be the case that there are other specific reasons or variables involved in Miller's change, such as an evolving point of view or comedic style. Still, given Miller's own claims to conservative conversion and my findings from a close reading of the texts, this analysis finds compelling differences and heuristic value in testing Miller's pre- and post-conversion comedy, with political parallels and themes emerging that would appear to be more than simply suggestive. A list of DICTION variables with different scores across the two performances is provided in Figure 2.

Figure 2: Differences in Miller's Rhetoric

Numerical Terms	19.66	4.49	0.30/15.04
Ambivalence	15.28	24.39	6.49/19.21
Accomplishment	7.83	1.67	4.96/23.78
Cognition	4.65	11.64	4.43/14.27
Passivity	8.16	2.66	2.10/8.08
Concreteness	23.01	12.72	10.70/28.50
Rapport	2.19	0.69	0.42/4.26
Exclusion	1.95	0.23	0.00/4.31
Denial	5.03	10.77	2.57/10.35
Motion	7.05	2.90	0.17/4.35
Insistence	112.26	21.36	9.15/111.15
Optimism	54.74	50.45	46.37/52.25
Realism	50.95	52.45	46.10/52.62

Note: The Calculated and Master Variables are provided in the second and third sections of this table, respectively; DICTION lists "low" and high" ranges for each variable, which are provided in the far-right hand column of the table.

First, while retaining a general orientation toward comic concreteness, some variables demonstrate Miller's use of more cognitive, universalizing abstractions after his conservative turn. There was a significant decrease in *numerical terms* across the two discourses, which involve "any sum, date, or product specifying the facts in a given case" (DICTION 5.0, 2000, p. 43). Overall, this category carries the presumption that "Numerical Terms hyper-specify a claim, thus detracting from its universality" (p. 43). Some of the other categories also support the point that Miller's discourse has become a bit headier and less tangible than in his 1988 performance.

Miller's move from low to high levels of *cognitive* words, involving forms of mental and "cerebral processes, both functional and imaginative" (p. 45), highlight the more intellectual features of the 2006 text. This change in the cognitive variable may reflect Miller's shift from his early career mostly in stand-up comedy and on *Saturday Night Live*, into the realm of political commentary on conservative talk shows.

Although only one variable, Miller's move from high to low *concreteness* highlights that his post-9/11 political conversion appears to be more charged by abstractions than previously. The concreteness variable is derived from "a large dictionary possessing no thematic unity other than tangibility and materiality" (p. 47). At the same time, the master variable of *realism*, which focuses on "the tangible, immediate, recognizable matters that affect people's everyday lives" (p. 46), shows a slight increase across the two discourses. Miller's topical humor derives much of its fuel from the comic's high references to the world of popular culture and politics, so this is not surprising. Since the individual variables provide a more nuanced expression of the texts than the master variable (which incorporates eight variables into its equation), however, some movement toward a more abstract language, separated from these references, appears to also be evident.

Second, as a post-9/11 conservative comedian, Miller finds his world even more disorienting than in the past. Miller's change from medium to very high levels of *ambivalence* from 1988 to 2006 carries political consequence. These are terms "expressing hesitation or uncertainty, implying a speaker's inability or unwillingness to commit to the verbalization being made" (p. 43). It was already noted that both Miller's discourses have high levels of uncertainty. As a conservative, Miller's ambivalence may indicate how much more befuddling he finds the world. That Miller's insistence score, which "is a measure of code-restriction which calculates a texts dependence on a limited number of often-repeated words" (DICTION 5.0, 2000, p. 39) went from very high to low between the two conditions suggests that there appears to be more confusion in his language than previously.[4]

Third, there is more negativity in Miller's post-conversion discourse than before. Despite the continuity of Miller's *praise* and *satisfaction* terms, he demonstrates a noteworthy turn in his move from medium to high levels of *denial* or negative terms, which consist of "standard negative contractions," "negative function words," and "terms designating null sets" (p. 44). There was a parallel decrease in the master variable of *optimism* between the two discourses involving "language endorsing some person, group, concept or event or highlighting their positive entailments" (p. 43). The increased *ambivalence* and *negative* terms may appear contradictory, but these concepts may actually comport with one another. One way of interpreting this finding may be that negative and ambivalent words share a paradoxical relationship in stand-up comedy, so that Miller can communicate both "this is stupid" and "I don't understand how this could be happening?" In this way, negativity and ambivalence may share a reciprocal relationship as the comic's increased negativity leads to less certainty, and less certainty leads to more negativity. Perhaps as a conservative, additionally, Miller has an even more pessimistic view of politics, given the disorienting nature of events such as 9/11.[5] Importantly, Miller's *ambivalence* and *negative* terms comport with his change from medium-low to very low levels of *accomplishment*, or "words expressing task-completion" and "organized human behavior" (p. 45). In the 2006 performance, quite simply, Miller has much

less confidence about the potential for collective human actions to make a difference in the world.

In fact, the 2006 text demonstrates more inertia than the 1988 text, in its moderate decrease in *motion* words (from high to medium-high), which connote human movement (p. 45). The decrease in movement terms, in conjunction with the majority of other findings here about *ambivalence, negative terms, accomplishment*, and a more *cognitive*, abstract language than in the previous performance, may suggest Miller has ingested a worldview marked more by comic resignation than hope. Moreover, while both Miller's discourses bear an aversion to communitarian terms, from 1988 to 2006 his monologues went from medium to low *rapport* words that involve "terms of affinity," "assent," "deference," and "id identity" (p. 48).[6]

These changes should not be overstated. While there may be some critical, satirical differences that go into Miller's conversion to conservatism, all in all, we are given far more insight into the consistency of the comic's ranting rhetorical persona across nearly two decades. Understanding this particular vision illuminates the ways in which one prominent comedian constructs the socio-political world, with public consequences that surpass his potential liberal or conservative differences.

Conclusion

As one of America's most prominent political comedians, Dennis Miller's humor should be taken seriously. This study has demonstrated that, across nearly two decades of discourse production, Miller's "ranting" comic persona invites audiences to inhabit an individualistic-yet-uncertain vision of the world. It is a worldview with little concern for community and human action, and a social-behavioral inertness about future possibilities. At the same time, Miller's comedy heralds observational innovation, variety, and exacting descriptions about the present, engaging the world with a cognitive, analytical lens.

While much of Miller's socio-political vision has remained the same, his conservative conversion runs parallel to a few diachronic differences between 1988 and 2006. Retaining a general orientation toward comic concreteness, Miller has employed more cognitive, universalizing abstractions after his conservative turn. He finds his world even more disorienting, and there is more negativity in Miller's post-conversion discourse than previously. I find that there are a number of important implications proceeding from this study's methodology and findings.

First, at least in Miller's case, stand-up comedy is a deeply complex art form, holding paradoxical promises for political life. In-depth analysis of the comic's language reveals a highly self-driven rhetoric that is somewhat distanced from political action. Such might be expected from a figure who engages in so much public commentary, but the larger point is that the interpretive framework of Miller's language itself constructs little space for individual or collective action. That the stand-up act is so singular and monological may further compound this problem, narrowcasting audiences into the comic's clique.

Scholars are increasingly focused on how certain media spaces foster messages that resonate among in-group audiences, but face little chance of rebuttal or alternative viewpoints (Jamieson & Cappella, 2008). Miller's insulating rhetoric is thus potentially problematic as an act of *social* address. Jones (2005) finds that "political humor. . . . lacks the didacticism that political rhetoric and argumentation can easily be saturated with" (p. 99). Miller's uncertainty demonstrates a tentative language about the physical and social world. But it is a different consideration to examine the modeling behavior that such comedians exhibit when their whole textual actions, rather than their selected individual arguments, are considered over time. Miller invites audiences to inhabit a language that is perhaps *too* uncertain, providing little ground for sustained political community.

Miller's stand-up involves a tenacious commitment to dissecting the world, however. The comic is not just a photographer of knowledge, but rather manipulates that knowledge to view the world from a variety of different angles. At once, then, there is reason to be ambivalent about Miller's linguistic constructions, which simultaneously generate critical social insights yet neuter socio-political action. As Scarpetta and Spagnolli (2009) relate, one potentially positive feature of deft comic discourses includes how "the interactional context of a joke is constantly oriented to and shaped to be an informal environment where jokes on sensitive topics, such as sex and race, can be accepted more easily" (p. 210), opening space for political discussion on important societal matters. In a similar manner, the findings of this essay demonstrate that Miller's rants enlarge a sphere of critical commentary on a variety of public topics. At the same time, while many citizens learn about political information from comic discourses (Goldthwaite-Young, 2004; National Annenberg Election Survey, 2004; Pew Research Center, 2000, 2002), we should not fail to ignore what kinds of personae and visions are invited in that learning. Ultimately, Miller's rhetoric urges such citizens to ingest certain structures of thinking and choices of interpretation that both limit and advance political potential.

Second, there may be some critical differences between liberal, conservative, and other types of political comedy. It is likely the case that not all comedy is created equal. We know that humor can be conservative or radical (Greene, 2008; Munro, 1963)—it can be incorporated into the status quo or used as a mechanism for social change. Yet, while exploratory at best, this study provides some evidence that one's political affiliation may influence her or his comic act. As both a liberal and conservative, Miller's act is fueled by topicality, but noteworthy changes are evident in his moves to an even more abstract, heady, disoriented, and negative performance following his post-9/11 conversion.

Miller's disorientation could indicate a healthy uncertainty about the political realm or be a means of expressing civic resignation. Miller's slightly more universalizing discourse in his second performance may reflect a general orientation within conservatism for deontological, deductive approaches to politics (see Lake, 1984). But Reed (1992) and Garver (1994) hold that rhetorical understandings of contingency and uncertainty can also play a vital role in opening spaces for public discourse. Considering the increased negativity in Miller's rhetoric, however, his turn to conservatism may involve less balance between constructive and critical acts, which are both necessary to engaged public criticism (see Ott & Bonnstetter, 2007).

Jones (2005) argues that "Miller is as interested in stating what is right with America as what is wrong" (p. 99), but I find that the weight of this equation has shifted over the course of the comedian's political conversion. Conservative rhetoric often presumes a pessimism and inward direction that places reason and agency outside of a rhetor's repertoire (Goodnight, 1980). Miller's rhetoric has been continuous in this kind of approach, but apparently more so as a conservative commentator. I would even speculate that Miller's individualistic and increasingly negative language may have created the conditions for his political conversion to the right.

Third, there is much value in analyzing the language of comic texts more systematically than has previously been the case. Without the rigorous applications of a program like DICTION to comic texts such as Miller's, it might be easy to get taken in or lost in the minutiae of topical references, satirical asides, and the relaxed tone of the rhetor—thus missing out on the larger patterns of consciousness by which the details of these texts are organized. In an era when sound bites are a norm in political reporting and commentary, it is important for scholars to attend to the broader contours of what comic rhetors choose to focus on in these pervasive discourses, and the total linguistic acts created to address certain situations.

This study should act as a springboard for further communication inquiry into comic portrayals of the world, and the types, causes, and effects of humor demonstrated by various political movements. The ubiquity of stand-up comics in contemporary politics and media begs further analysis of other humorists' discourses, both individually and as part of larger groups. If it is the case that, in the words of Miller, "I rant, therefore I am" (Miller, 2001), we would do well to know where this ranting happens, what it means for rhetors and audiences—and perhaps, why we should be ranting for or against such ranting.

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Notes

[1] A few qualifications were applied to the final transcripts: I took out the filler words "um," "uh," "woh," and "huh"; all numbers were spelled out—except if they were proper nouns (e.g. "2:30pm in the afternoon"). I also did not include sounds (such as when Miller made a Star Trek "phaser" sound in one of the specials); and replaced all contractions like "don't" with "do not" for easier analysis (with the exception of "ain't," which has a variety of definitions, but is also picked up by the computer program used in this study).

[2] As was noted, Miller sometimes employs obscure references in his comedy. In my own reading of the two transcripts, Miller's use of words like "Daddy Warbucks," "Goober" (1988), or even "Jiffy Pop" (2006) may raise the question of how DICTION 5.0 is coding some of these terms. At the very least, I assume that the sheer breadth of DICTION's automated language analysis greatly outweighs any missed coding—since the importance of this method lies in "cast[ing] a broad net" (Hart & Jarvis, 1997) and seeing the forest more than the trees (Hart, 2001, p. 57-58). As Hart and Jarvis (1997) explain, "because DICTION examines a text from so many different perspectives simultaneously, it permits an unusually comprehensive examination of a given passage" (p. 1097). Hart and Daughton (2005) demonstrate that there are always a number of lexical features being measured in a passage's words (i.e. so that each is being coded in many different ways), such as how repetitious, common, or large the terms are in comparison with others. The authors provide a figure and table demonstrating how the DICTION program would search a presidential speech (see pp. 165-173), noting that while "it ignores all words except those it has been instructed to 'look' for . . . it never forgets what it has 'learned' about any message" and "can track many kinds of words simultaneously (i.e. it can tell which portion of a text is highly Certain and which is *both* Optimistic and Certain)" (p. 168; emphasis in original). Furthermore, different than anecdotal reports or criticism that has "not been established with anything approaching sufficient validity and reliability," the program is informed by a huge database of previously analyzed texts "that lets a researcher quickly distinguish between idiosyncratic and normative behavior" (Hart & Lind, 2010, p. 357).

[3] I have chosen not to incorporate the variable of *diversity* in my interpretation of the findings, as DICTION is clear that these "words describing individuals or groups of individuals differing from the norm" can create distinctions that are neutral, positive, or negative (DICTION 5.0, 2000, p. 48). That Miller's rhetoric demonstrates low levels of diversity words across both acts thus tells us little about what these absences may imply.

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[4] The *insistence* finding is distinct from simple counts of the number of different words in the texts, telling us about particular words that have been employed at least three or more times (DICTION 5.0, 2000, p. 15).

[5] This does not necessarily mean that Miller has become less partisan as a conservative. The *passivity* dimension demonstrates one curious exception to the general trends we find here, as Miller moved from high to low on these terms "ranging from neutrality to inactivity" (DICTION 5.0, 2000, p. 45). It is perhaps the case that Miller has become a more active proponent of his political philosophy after 9/11, but the form that this rhetoric takes assumes a world that even more fatalistic, disorienting, inert, and pessimistically derived than previously.

[6] I have not pulled the category of *exclusion* into this analysis since it is a difficult concept to situate. Exclusion describes "the sources and effects of social isolation" but it is also "often a dialectical concept: *hermit vs. derelict, refugee vs. pariah, discard vs. spurn*" (DICTION 5.0, 2000, p. 48; emphases in original).