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Effect of Political Comedy Shows vs. Hard News Shows on Political Knowledge

Structured Abstract

OBJECTIVE: The purpose of this study is to determine whether the viewing of political comedy television shows increases political knowledge more than the viewing of hard news programs.

BACKGROUND: Political comedy shows such as *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* and *The Colbert Report* are radically breaking the mold when it comes to news broadcasting. Baym (2005) claims that *The Daily Show* is pioneering a new form of journalism, "one that uses satire to interrogate power, parody to critique contemporary news, and dialogue to enact a model of deliberative democracy." This brings up the question of whether these fake news shows could be as effective at informing their audiences as hard news sources.

METHODS: Participants will be placed into two groups through random selection and given a pre-test of their political knowledge. One group will be asked to watch a video clip of *CNN Newsroom* every day for a month. The other group will be asked to watch a video clip of *The Daily Show* every day for a month. Participants will then be given a post-test on the main political events that occurred during the time the study took place. The difference between their scores on the pre-test and post-test will be used to determine their increase in political knowledge.

RESULTS: I expect to find that the political comedy group will have a higher average increase in political knowledge from the pre-test to the post-test than the hard news group.

CONCLUSIONS: The implications of this study would be that it shows that not only can political comedy programs be informative, but they are also capable of educating their viewers better than typical news formats. These results suggest the notion that a combination of news and entertainment would be a more effective way of communicating to mass audiences. Humor should be recognized as a very powerful tool for getting a message across.

Literature Review

Cable news programming has become a genre all its own in the world of television, with a 24/7 news cycle and multiple networks that viewers can choose from to keep up-to-date with current events. However, in a poll conducted by *Time* magazine in 2009, the man voted America's Most Trusted Newscaster was Jon Stewart, who is in fact a comedian (Linkins, 2009). Baum (2002) states that programs focused mainly on entertaining, or "soft news media", can inform viewers that are normally uninterested in politics. Straddling the border between informing and entertaining are comedy news programs such as *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* and *The Colbert Report*. These are both Emmy-winning television shows that air on Comedy Central. They are often referred to as fake news because while their formats are similar to cable news shows, they are in fact parodying these types of programs. However, Baym (2005) claims that *The Daily Show* is pioneering a new form of journalism, "one that uses satire to interrogate power, parody to critique contemporary news, and dialogue to enact a model of deliberative democracy" (p. 261).

While these shows air back-to-back and both use satire to make a statement about politics and the news media, their formats differ somewhat. On *The Daily Show*, Jon Stewart plays the role of a news anchor, relaying the top headlines of the day while also providing a humorous commentary on them. He is accompanied by a team of correspondents, who either join him in the

studio or are featured in pre-recorded segments. In this way, the show follows the style of a standard news report (Baym, 2005). *The Colbert Report*, on the other hand, is an imitation of personality-driven cable shows that serve as an outlet for the star's opinions. Stephen Colbert serves as the newscaster and is the only one featured on the show. As conservative pundit "Stephen Colbert", he plays an outspoken and uninformed character by using deadpan delivery (LaMarre, Landreville, & Beam, 2009).

By radically breaking the mold when it comes to broadcasting, both shows have indelibly left their mark on both politics and pop culture. Baym (2005) says that one of the main ways *The Daily Show* has impacted media is through discursive integration, "a way of speaking about, understanding, and acting within the world defined by the permeability of form and fluidity of content" (p. 262). He describes how the discourses of news and entertainment have started to blend together and are no longer distinct from each other, and uses *The Daily Show* as a prime example of this combination. The show blends elements from the traditional nightly news and late-night talk shows in a way that complements each other instead of clashing (Baym, 2005).

The main element that separates *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report* from normal cable news shows is the comedic aspect. People process humor differently than they do more serious messages. Young (2008) conducted a study about humor and cognition. When political messages are presented humorously, this leads to a reduction in argument scrutiny. This is due in part the discounting cue hypothesis. If the viewer of a political comedy program labels the program as entertainment, they are less likely to think critically about the point being made. (Young, 2008).

Baum (2002) claims that these entertainment-oriented programs have value in that they inform viewers who watch them as an alternative to hard news shows. These people may not

want to take the time and effort to keep up with the latest in world affairs. Soft news tends to "piggyback" political information onto their reports by framing it as entertainment, therefore their viewers learn passively about current events as an incidental by-product when tuning in. (Baum, 2002). Even though the main goal of these shows is to make people laugh, they are also introducing the world of politics to an audience who might not read the newspaper or watch cable news. Baum (2002) states that "in effect, piggybacking might, on occasion, render any trade-off between being entertained and learning about politics moot by, in effect, transforming a select few of the major political issues of the day into the entertainment that people seek" (p. 96).

What makes these two programs unique, however, is that they don't simply criticize politicians, but they also denounce and make fun of the news media itself. Although people often question the role their shows play in comparison to other news shows, Stewart and Colbert insist they are nothing more than comedians. What they do make **a** point of, though, is holding newscasters and pundits who are actually claiming to report the news accountable to provide viewers with accurate information (Painter & Hodges, 2010). Stewart and Colbert fill the much-needed role of press critic, pointing out falsehoods and inconsistencies present in news broadcasts and making them more apparent to the public. By bringing attention to common news conventions and giving their viewers a better look at how news is really made, these shows are advising the audience to be skeptical of how networks present stories (Painter & Hodges, 2010).

These shows achieve this mainly through the use of archival footage from other news shows. Showing video clips from other news broadcasts is essential to the premise of *The Daily Show* because it creates continuity or brings attention to lack of continuity (Gaines, 2007). Gaines states that continuity is key to effective social discourse. Similar to typical news shows, using archival footage helps to establish continuity by providing context for events in relation to

other events (Gaines, 2007). It is assumed that the audience does not have a historical perspective when it comes to understanding what's happening in the news today. They can quickly educate their viewers and bring them up to speed by showing clips from previous news broadcasts as necessary. Through historical continuity, a narrative is created that connects stories together and explain the significance of events in the present in relation to the past (Gaines, 2007).

However, unlike regular news shows, *The Daily Show* also uses archival footage to point out discontinuity. When a reporter or politician says something that contradicts an earlier statement they had made, playing a clip from the past makes this clear and the host can incorporate it as part of their comedy. This process reveals a noticeable gap in the logical continuity of these programs they target. Because a large portion of fake news shows consists of commenting on reused clips from other programs, they are not just discussing the news, but also how the news is reported (Gaines, 2007).

More than just calling out the mistakes of reporters, these programs are mocking the genre of television news as a whole, and their tendency to focus on "the construction of televisual spectacle at the expense of understanding," as Baym describes it (2005, p. 270). Colbert takes this to an extreme, with his entire show revolving around his over-the-top ultra-conservative persona. *On The Colbert Report*, he tends to take the topics at hand and make them all about him by injecting his personal opinion. Although he's using satire when he makes such ignorant and ridiculous statements, a study by LaMarre, Landreville, and Beam (2009) shows that conservatives are more likely to think that Colbert truly believes in what he is saying.

Because of Colbert's commitment to his character and straight-faced delivery known as deadpan, it is up to the viewer to decide whether Colbert is being sincere. Therefore, the show "is

of particular relevance to understanding the intersection of political entertainment and motivated message processing" (LaMarre, Landreville, & Beam, 2009, p. 217). One of the factors in how someone interprets Colbert's message is their political ideology. Conservatives who watched a segment of the show had a greater tendency to see it as targeting liberals and to perceive Colbert as a Republican. Oppositely, liberals were more likely to report that Colbert was using satire and wasn't being serious. This demonstrates that viewers have a tendency to see what they want to see when the source is ambiguous, as deadpan often is (LaMarre, Landreville, & Beam, 2009). This is an example of selective perception; the viewer interprets the show in a way that confirms their existing beliefs.

Another significant possible effect of watching these fake news shows is that viewers may seek out more information from other sources about a certain news event after seeing them covered on the show. In a study by Xenos & Becker (2009), subjects with low political interest who were exposed to a particular issue in a humorous context were more motivated to follow the story and more likely to pay attention to that issue later on. In this way, "exposure to such programs facilitates the acquisition of political information from hard news sources, particularly among less politically sophisticated comedy viewers, thus serving as a gateway to political attention and knowledge" (Xenos & Becker, 2009, p. 317).

As explained, there has been much through analysis of *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report* and their important contributions to news media. There have also been multiple studies conducted about the effects of watching these programs on audiences. However, while there have been studies done about how political comedy programs help to inform viewers as a supplement to hard news, there has not been much research done on whether someone could become educated on political matters and current events by viewing these types of shows alone.

It is still unclear whether regular viewing of political comedy programs could cause a substantial increase in the political knowledge of the viewer if they did not receive news from any other sources.

Political comedy shows have opened up the possibilities for reporting the news. By framing top stories in an entertaining and funny way, they grab the viewer's attention in an unconventional manner that sets them apart from other news reports. These programs do not use media tricks to fool their viewers, but instead point them out on other shows and hold these shows accountable for using them. However, it has not yet been determined whether these fake news shows can hold their own as a person's sole source of news in comparison to hard news. I believe that the viewing of political comedy television shows such as *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report* will increase political knowledge more than the viewing of hard news programs.

Method

Participants

Participants will be selected from those who respond to an advertisement posted in various locations around a large city. By sampling from an urban population, there will be a greater chance of studying a diverse group of subjects. The ad will say that researchers are recruiting subjects to participate in an online study about media and politics and list an email address to contact for more information if interested. It also states that participants can take part in this study from home and will be paid for their time. Participants will be split into two equal groups through random selection. The variables of gender, age, race, education, political ideology and news consumption habits will be controlled for. Participants will need Internet access to take part in this study. Since the advertisement for the study states that it is online and

they will be participating from home, it is assumed that all subjects would have access to the Internet.

Measures/Materials

Video clips from both political comedy television programs as well as hard news programs will be used in this study. The political comedy show used will be *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* and the hard news show used will be *CNN Newsroom*. These two shows were chosen because they are actually very similar in content and format. They both feature a news anchor and correspondents, show video clips, and talk about the headlines. This makes for a good comparison where the only main difference is humor. *The Daily Show* uses comedy and satire to explain the story while *CNN Newsroom* gives a straightforward report of the events. The study will take place over the period of one month. The clips from these shows will change every weekday of the study and both will cover the top story of the day, e.g. presidential debates or the State of the Union address. Each clip will be no more than 10 minutes long.

An online questionnaire will be given to each participant at the beginning of the study. It will contain questions about demographic factors such as age, gender, race, education, and political ideology. The questionnaire will also ask subjects about their news consumption habits. Questions about this will include "How many hours of news programming do you watch a day?" and "How many times a week do you read the newspaper?" Participants will also take a pre-test online to determine their current political knowledge. Questions will focus on recent prominent issues, so that a person who keeps up with the news regularly would most likely know the answers. If the pre-test were given today, sample items may be similar to "Who is running in the Republican primaries?" and "What did Obama's birth control mandate entail?" The questions would all be multiple choice so there would be a clear right answer. The questions would change

depending on the time period the study is taking place to reflect current events. A higher score indicates a higher level of political knowledge.

At the end of the study, participants will be given an online post-test which will be scored the same way as the pre-test. Questions in the post-test will be very similar to those in the pre-test except for they will focus on the main political events that happened in the month during which the study occurred and that the clips focused on. Along with the post-test, subjects will be ask to rate on a scale of 1 to 10 how entertaining they thought the program they watched was, with 10 being very entertaining and 1 being not entertaining at all.

Design/Procedure

Subjects will participate in this study online from their own homes or a location of their choice. Participants will receive an email from the researchers containing a link for them to click on. The link leads to an informed consent notice that they must agree to before being directed to the questionnaire. The questionnaire will contain questions about demographic variables and news consumption habits as well as the pre-test on current political knowledge. After they submit their answers, they are sent a second email with a second link. The link they receive depends on whether they are in the political comedy group or the hard news group, which they have been placed in through random selection. Either link will direct them to a webpage made by the researchers where they have posted a video clip. The subjects in the political comedy group will be directed to a page with a clip from *The Daily Show* and the subjects in the hard news group will be directed to a page with a clip from *CNN Newsroom*. A new video clip will be posted at 8:00 AM each weekday and will be about the main news event of the day.

At the top of both pages there are instructions to visit the website every weekday for a month and watch the clip that's posted. They would only be able to watch the video once a day.

Subjects would not be told that they were going to be tested on the information in the video because then those in the political comedy group would focus on learning from the clips instead of enjoying them. At the bottom of both pages there is a place for the subject to type their name and submit it to the researchers each day so they can keep track of whether subjects are watching the clips regularly. Subjects are also asked to stay away from other forms of news as much as possible.

After a month, the researchers will take down the website and send out one last email to both groups with a link to another questionnaire. This will include the post-test on the political events discussed in the clips and will also them to rate the entertainment value of the program they viewed. Once they have finished the final questionnaire, participants will then be thanked and told they have completed the study and that they will be compensated for their time. The difference in scores between the pre-test and post-test for each participant will then be calculated to measure the change in political knowledge.

Discussion

I expect to find that the political comedy group will have a higher average increase in political knowledge from the pre-test to the post-test than the hard news group. Among those in the political comedy group, the more entertaining they find the program, the higher the increase in their political knowledge will be. These results support the notion that fake news shows should be considered a legitimate source of information. It shows a person can keep up with current events even if political comedy shows are their only source of news. This would help to prove the point that these programs are capable of educating its audience, sometimes even better than regular news shows.

These results would also exemplify Baym's concept of discursive integration. As the media landscape continues to change, perhaps a combination of news and entertainment would be a more effective way of communicating to mass audiences. This could lead to a gradual shift from depending on traditional news broadcasts to instead coming up with more creative formats of news programming. Although theories such as the elaboration likelihood model state that humor is a peripheral cue that isn't very effective, this study would show that humor should be more recognized as a very important tool for getting a message across. It makes a statement that comedy should not be discredited; it could serve a larger purpose other than making jokes and fooling around.

However, there are multiple limitations to this study. First, participants are chosen through a convenience sample instead of a random sample. Depending on the respondents, there might not be much diversity in the sample. This could cause the results to be unrepresentative of the larger population. Also, there is no way to really know if the participants actually watched the video every day, even if they submitted their name. Even if they did watch, it's not certain they gave the video their full attention. There's also no way to control that participants avoided all other sources of news. Even if they tried their best, it would still be very difficult unless they avoided any type of media altogether, which would be almost impossible. There's a good chance they would receive some information from outside sources. Subjects with high-powered jobs may be more likely to be exposed to outside news sources, especially if they are used to reading the newspaper or watching the news as a part of their everyday life. These factors could greatly affect their scores on the post-test.

This study also opens up many other questions related to political comedy and learning that could be looked into for possible future research. One of these is the difference that political

ideology might make on entertainment value and change in political knowledge. Would liberals enjoy the political comedy shows more because these programs tend to have a liberal bias, or would conservatives find them just as entertaining? If they don't agree with the views of the show, would conservatives be less likely to learn from them? Another factor to look at is how the subject's level of intelligence might matter when watching these two types of shows. Perhaps those with lower levels of intelligence might not understand the satire of political comedy shows and would therefore learn more from hard news because it is more straightforward. When it comes to media, politics, and humor, there is still much more to study to figure out how to best inform audiences. This study is a step forward in determining the true potential of political comedy.

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