

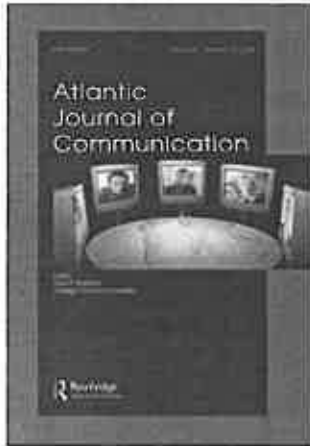
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Sizing Up *The Daily Show*: Audience Perceptions of Political Comedy Programming

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Sizing Up *The Daily Show*: Audience Perceptions of Political Comedy Programming

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As young Americans increasingly turn to political comedy programs like *The Daily Show*, scholars should seek to understand viewers' perceptions of these shows. To study audience perceptions, we draw on the theoretical lens of the "third-person effect," examining audience evaluations of *The Daily Show* in comparison to evaluations of hard news programming (Davison, 1983). The analyses presented in this research are based on data from an experimental study conducted with undergraduate participants ($N = 332$) at a major Midwestern university in the spring of 2007. Our findings reveal a significant third-person effect pattern for comedy programming, distinct from that observed for traditional hard news, among a key segment of the political comedy audience. A subsequent evaluation of hostile media effects connected with *The Daily Show* broadens our investigation of the perceived impacts related to viewing political comedy. We conclude by discussing the ways that this pattern of findings helps illuminate the direct effects of political comedy.

INTRODUCTION

While appearing on CNN's *Crossfire* in October 2004, Jon Stewart argued that *The Daily Show* is simply an entertainment program whose creators are charged with presenting humorous fake

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news to entertain their audience. Although Stewart maintains that the traditional news media are currently failing to meet the civic needs of the American public, he does not see *The Daily Show* as the fix that will repair the average American's deepening distrust of the mass media. For Stewart, *The Daily Show* is not supposed to inform or shape the public discourse; rather, it is simply designed to entertain and amuse.

Although Stewart's appearance on CNN attracted much public attention and continues to be viewed regularly on YouTube (with more than 1 million viewers by late 2008), it is worth noting that the assessment of the show offered by its host stands in contrast to the approach political communication scholars have taken to studying programs like *The Daily Show*. Indeed, a growing body of research has examined the impacts of attention and exposure to entertainment programs featuring political content on a variety of political attitudes and behaviors, particularly among younger viewers, who make up a large part of the political comedy audience (Moy, Xenos, & Hess, 2005; Young & Tisinger, 2006). With some exceptions, this literature appears to cut against Stewart's characterization of his program as merely a vehicle for political humor, suggesting that exposure to such content can influence levels of political awareness and knowledge, affect attitudes toward political figures and institutions, and even be related to levels of civic and political engagement (Baum, 2002; Baumgartner & Morris, 2006; Hollander, 2005; Moy, Xenos, & Hess, 2006; Prior, 2003; Xenos & Becker, 2009). Thus, contrary to the assessment of Jon Stewart, one of the most visible figures in the production of such content, communication scholars view political entertainment programming as significant—although a clear picture of its effects has yet to emerge.

In this article we argue that important insights about the role of political humor programs like *The Daily Show* in the political process can be gained by temporarily bracketing questions concerning direct effects. As such, our primary goal is to provide valuable insights about the role of political humor in influencing political behavior by first focusing on the pressing issue of how such content is perceived by audiences. Although there is a lack of consensus on the nature of any direct effects at present, there are good theoretical reasons to pursue questions concerning perceptions of political comedy, namely, that this research may contribute to subsequent and more focused research on direct effects (Holbert, 2005).

To study audience perceptions, we draw on the theoretical lens of the "third-person effect," examining audience evaluations of *The Daily Show* in comparison to evaluations of hard news programming (Davison, 1983). Specifically, we draw on well-known patterns within the robust literature on the third-person effect to suggest possible deductions about how late-night comedy content is perceived. Our findings reveal a significant third-person effect pattern for comedy programming, distinct from that observed for traditional hard news, among a key segment of the political comedy audience. We conclude by discussing the ways that this pattern of findings may help illuminate future research on the direct effects of political comedy and contribute to the growing body of research on political humor.

STUDYING VIEWER PERCEPTIONS OF POLITICAL COMEDY

In a recent review of the literature on entertainment television and politics, Holbert (2005) contended that although research in this area is important, present efforts suffer from a lack of a clear conceptual scheme for understanding how research on different kinds of entertainment

programs may be related, and a paucity of connections to foundational theories of media effects. As a partial remedy to the latter problem, Holbert suggested that communication scholars might more fruitfully approach questions concerning the effects of political entertainment programming by first understanding viewers' expectations and perceptions. By adding information on how viewers understand such content, we might begin to see a number of ways in which broader theories of media effects might inform our own understanding of how entertainment programming on political topics affects viewers' behavior. Zillman's (1980, 1983) disposition theory represents one possible area in which these connections could be made. Depending on what is learned about viewer perceptions of political comedy, a variety of other connections may also be possible.

A handful of efforts have already made substantial progress in this area by considering the relationship between viewer perceptions and expectations about comedic or entertaining political content and relevant behavioral outcomes. For example, Prior (2007) argued that it is first important to understand an individual's relative entertainment preference before analyzing behavioral outcomes related to exposure and attention to television content. For example, soft news is preferred by some over more traditional hard news content simply because the genre is more engaging and entertaining. At the same time, however, soft news programs including *The Daily Show* are often perceived as less credible than traditional news content by the same entertainment friendly audience. Further, Nabi, Moyer-Guse, and Byrne (2007) demonstrated that humorous messages can often be perceived as persuasive or convincing depending upon the nature of their construction and the perceived credibility of the source (see Young, 2008, for a similar discussion).

In this study, we attempt to further an understanding of how political comedy programming is perceived by audiences, in an effort to identify new ways its direct effects may be grounded in relevant theoretical frameworks incorporating audience perceptions. Specifically, we contend that understanding perceptions of *The Daily Show* within the theoretical context of the third-person effect may be particularly illuminating as a first step in understanding audience perceptions of political humor programs. This may be especially true given comparisons to similar effects linked to more traditional hard news content. We chose to compare *The Daily Show* to network television hard news content, given that material presented on *The Daily Show* is often a direct critique of network television news broadcasts. In addition, this comparison seemed natural given that both programs share common properties attributed to the medium of television. In sum, this inquiry should provide explication of our central research question:

RQ1: How is political comedy programming like *The Daily Show* perceived by its audience?

POLITICAL COMEDY AND THE THIRD-PERSON EFFECT

The third-person effect suggests that individuals will perceive that particular forms of mass communication have a greater persuasive effect on others rather than on themselves (Davison, 1983; Perloff, 1999). As such, the third-person effect measures indirect effects, or individual reactions to the perception of media influence, rather than any direct measured change in behavior or attitude (Perloff, 2002). Given the controversial nature of the political satire presented in *The Daily Show*, analyzing the program within a third-person effects framework is

a valuable undertaking. Doing so allows for a better understanding of common interpretations of political comedy compared with interpretations of hard news programming. Drawing on the volume of prior third-person effects research that analyzes controversial media programs (Gunther, 1995; McLeod, Eveland, & Nathanson, 1997; Paul, Salwen, & Dupagne, 2000; Salwen & Dupagne, 2001) allows us to offer the following first hypothesis:

H1: Individuals will perceive the effects of *The Daily Show* to be greater for others than for themselves.

POLITICAL COMEDY VERSUS HARD NEWS

Recent research has defined a number of corollaries that are useful in studies of perceived third-person effects. We are primarily interested in two of these corollaries: (a) the negative influence corollary, emphasizing the *desirability* of the media content under examination, and (b) the presence of a high-exposure or vulnerable audience. Specifically, we focus primarily on understanding any perceived negative influence that might be connected with consumption of political comedy like *The Daily Show* while also paying attention to the fact that undergraduates, and young adults more generally, are often characterized as a high-exposure or vulnerable audience (Eveland, Nathanson, Detenber, & McLeod, 1999; Lambe & McLeod, 2005; Sun, Pan, & Shen, 2008).

A third-person effects analysis of political comedy serves to augment existing knowledge on perceptions of negative media influence while contributing to the growing body of research on the effects of political comedy. Prior research in the field of mass communications has shown that the more socially undesirable the media content under evaluation, the greater the estimate of a third-person effect (Gunther & Storey, 2003). Conversely, when the media content being evaluated is of a more desirable nature, a first-person perception effect is seen, suggesting that the content is perceived to be more persuasive for the individual, rather than the other (Duck, Terry, & Hogg, 1995; Gunther & Mundy, 1993; Hoorens & Ruiter, 1996). The same dynamic may be present in our evaluation of late-night political comedy, especially when juxtaposed against a similar evaluation of hard news content.

McLeod, Detenber, and Eveland (2001) additionally showed that the greater the perceived susceptibility of the target group, the larger the gap between the measurements of perceived media effects on the self versus the other. In our study, we presume that undergraduates will perceive political comedy to be more influential on other undergraduates than content from hard news programming. In essence, we suggest that although undergraduates are reluctant to see themselves as susceptible to persuasive material present in political comedy, despite their high exposure to this type of programming, they are more likely to think that similar others are more easily influenced.

A discussion of perceived third-person effects in relation to evaluations of hard news content is a bit more complicated given the less controversial nature of hard news programming itself. Although political communication scholars like Cappella and Jamieson (1997) and Zaller (2003) have shown that Americans increasingly distrust the mainstream media and have a cynical view of journalists, the content on these programs is still ultimately seen as straightforward and factual. Our evaluation distinguishes hard news from political comedy shows, calling for

a discrete analysis of both types of television programs, while recognizing the similarity in presentation formats as a useful base for comparison. Although Americans may continue to contest the credibility and reliability of the information presented by the major news networks, being persuaded by hard news content is seemingly not as undesirable as being persuaded by the jokes and mockery of political comedy. Given the presence of perceptions of possible negative influence and the regard for vulnerable audiences connected with viewing political comedy, we offer the following second hypothesis:

H2: The third-person effect will be greater for political comedy than for hard news.

THE DAILY SHOW AND EVALUATION OF HOSTILE MEDIA BIAS

A discussion of the possible presence of any hostile media perception is also relevant in this study, given that an audience that perceives media content to be biased is more likely to exhibit an accentuated third-person effect (Gibbon & Durkin, 1995). In the case of *The Daily Show*, understanding perceptions of hostile media bias for political comedy content versus hard news is appropriate, given the show's perceived liberal bias and the highly partisan, satirical nature of the content presented on the program (Coe et al., 2008; Stanley, 2007; Steinberg, 2006). Although Jon Stewart takes aim at politicians on both sides of the aisle, audience members and the mass media still suggest that the show has a more liberal orientation.

The hostile media perception, first successfully measured by Vallone, Ross, and Lepper (1985), counters claims supporting the biased assimilation of messages and argues against the default position of examining the influence of controversial media messages under the cognitive consistency paradigm (Festinger, 1957). Further, the hostile media perception suggests that partisans, or those with deep-seated opinions and active issue participation, are more likely to perceive neutral media coverage as hostile to their viewpoint than nonpartisan individuals (Dalton, Beck, & Huckfeldt, 1998; Tsfati & Cohen, 2005).

Other scholarship has extended the theoretical scope of hostile media perception, evaluating the persuasive influence of the press, and the psychological processes that underlie the phenomenon, including selective recall and selective categorization (Gunther & Chia, 2001; Gunther & Christen, 2002; Gunther & Liebhart, 2006; Schmitt, Gunther, & Liebhart, 2004). This work suggests that not only can neutral messages be perceived as biased but that partisans may also find bias in politicized messages that promote the viewpoint of those on the other side of the issue. Given this scholarship, it is clear that there is merit in examining perceptions of media bias for both types of presentations—neutral and partisan—in an effort to examine the full extent of hostile media bias perceptions (Gunther & Schmitt, 2004). Given the undertheorized and fairly undeveloped nature of the field's evaluation of political satire and political comedy, applying traditional mass media effects arguments like the third-person effect and the hostile media perception broadens our understanding of these new programming formats.

In the case of *The Daily Show*, Democratic viewers should be less likely to perceive a third-person effect for political comedy as the program is generally seen to be consistent with their political views. The same should be the case for chronic viewers who tune into *The Daily Show* more often, having greater exposure to the show's content. However, for other viewers, namely, those who view the show less regularly, it may be that *The Daily Show* is intended

to “persuade rather than inform” with its liberal political point of view, and as a result, the program should be evaluated within this framework (Gibbon & Durkin, 1995). Republican viewers may see Stewart as more disagreeable and biased against their political position, as he took pains to malign former president George W. Bush. Considering the partisan orientation of the show and its intersection with differing political orientations, we therefore put forth the following and final set of hypotheses for viewers who may be more likely to view *The Daily Show* favorably:

- H3: Democrats will be less likely to exhibit a third-person effect for political comedy than for hard news.
- H4: Chronic viewers will be less likely to exhibit a third-person effect for political comedy than for hard news.

METHODS

Our data were gathered during an interactive experiment conducted at a major Midwestern university using the Media Lab software platform. The experiment was a 2×2 between-subjects factorial design allowing for a separate examination of stimulus effects by condition. The uniform platform of the software ensured that all participants received the same experimental environment and used the same technology throughout the entire study. Participants were randomly assigned to one of the four conditions by the software program. Three conditions received a video clip: (a) hard news only, (b) comedy, or (c) a mixed clip with both hard news and comedy material. The fourth condition was treated as the control group and did not receive any video stimulus.

Before the video stimulus, participants completed a pretest questionnaire that measured levels of political interest, ideological self-placement, partisan identification, media attention, and generalized campus and political participation. Some of these items were used in the regression analyses featured in related work (see Xenos, Moy, & Becker, 2009). After viewing the video clip, participants spent 5 min interacting with a simulated Web browser designed to measure information-seeking behavior. An analysis of the information-seeking behavior that is connected with exposure to late-night comedy versus exposure to traditional news is the focus of another article (see Xenos & Becker, 2009). A posttest survey followed in all four-study conditions, measuring the perceived third-person effect for both hard news and comedy, the potential for issue specific political involvement, and individual levels of political cynicism toward both the media and politicians.

The stimulus material was based on television content that aired during the time of the February 2007 Congressional House debate over a nonbinding resolution calling for the removal of American troops from Iraq. Hard news coverage was compiled by pulling material from evening news broadcasts on NBC and ABC during the beginning of February 2007 to produce a video clip approximately 5 min in length. The comedy video manipulation was created by capturing content from the “Dance, Dance Resolution” story aired on *The Daily Show* in early February 2007. The comedy video clip was approximately 5 min in length and even featured some of the same content presented by NBC and ABC in the hard news clip. For example, reported testimony from the House debate on the nonbinding war resolution showcased many

of the same representatives in both the news and comedy clips. The mixed video clip was also approximately 5 min in length and combined approximately 2½ min of news and 2½ min of comedy content. This approach was used to create the most realistic video clips possible for the experiment. Overall, the primary goal of the experiment was to investigate attitudinal and behavioral responses to more prolonged exposure to political comedy content. The video stimulus clips served as a prime for the participants in the experiment.

A total of 332 undergraduate participated in the experiment between February 23, 2007 and March 9, 2007. Participants were recruited from communications courses at the university. In addition to capturing basic demographic information, the survey instrument measured key variables used in the analyses that follow.¹ The relevant measures are defined next.

Key Measures

Partisan identification. To better understand the intersection between partisan identification and third-person media effects, participants were asked to indicate their partisan identification based on the following scale: 1 (*Democrat*), 2 (*Republican*), 3 (*Independent*), and 4 (*Something else/none of these*). The final sample was 56.6% Democrat, 26.2% Republican, and 9.0% Independent; 8% of participant did not indicate a preference for a particular political party.

Political interest. Interest in following matters related to politics and government ($M = 1.73$, $SD = .73$) was measured on a 4-point scale ranging 1 (*most of the time*), 2 (*some of the time*), 3 (*hardly at all*) and 4 (*never*). Those who indicated that they were never interested in matters related to politics and government were recoded as 0 in the data set.

Media use. Participants were asked to assess the frequency, from 0 (*never*) to 7 (*seven days a week*), with which they followed news about politics and public affairs in the past week across a wide range of media outlets. The measures examining viewing patterns for “national network news programs, such as *ABC World News with Charles Gibson*, *NBC Nightly News with Brian Williams*, or the *CBS Evening News with Katie Couric*” ($M = 1.29$, $SD = 1.34$) and for “late-night comedy programs, such as *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* or *The Tonight Show with Jay Leno*” ($M = 1.28$, $SD = 1.66$) were employed in the analyses that follow.

Perceived Effects Measures

Perceived effects items. Participants answered a battery of questions that attempted to assess differences in perceived effects for hard news versus political comedy content on the individual and for a similar other, that is, another university student. In all cases, participants were asked to consider the relative amount of perceived influence viewing content from the particular media type (hard news vs. political comedy) would have on either themselves or others on a 7-point scale from 1 (*no influence at all*) to 7 (*a great deal of influence*). Specifically,

¹Given the relative demographic similarity of the participants, demographic variables like age, gender, or parents' education levels were not included in the analysis.

the questions addressed three main concepts related to media effects: trust in the media, trust in politicians and public officials, and knowledge about politics and public affairs.

The individual items were then combined to form four indexes: *perceived influence of comedy on self* ($M = 3.88$, $SD = 1.34$) with a Cronbach's alpha of .82, *perceived influence of comedy on others* ($M = 4.90$, $SD = 1.22$) with a Cronbach's alpha of .83, *perceived influence of hard news on self* ($M = 4.50$, $SD = 1.24$) with a Cronbach's alpha of .82, and *perceived influence of hard news on others* ($M = 4.48$, $SD = 1.16$) with a Cronbach's alpha of .83. These measures were later used to analyze the differences in the perceived third-person effect for political comedy and any perceived third-person effect that might have been related to viewing hard news content. Further, these measures presented a conservative test of the third-person effect by using a similar other (i.e., another university student) as a base of comparison. Given the lack of perceived social distance in this evaluative context, any resulting significant third-person effect for either media form would prove to be even more theoretically meaningful.

RESULTS

The primary goal of the data analysis was to first understand the difference between any possible perceived third-person effect associated with political comedy versus any perceived third-person effect associated with hard news. Given the robust literature on the third-person effect, evidence of such patterns may shed light on how political comedy is perceived. In addition, subsequent regression analyses examined what factors might be more likely to indicate a significant third-person effect for comedy versus factors that might be more likely to indicate a third-person effect for hard news, in line with an analysis of any perceptions of hostile media bias. The varying stimulus materials were treated as control measures in these regression analyses as they did not differ in their effects on the outcome variables of interest. Rather than suggest conditional effects, the video clips provided a lens for a broader examination of the differences in audience perceptions of political comedy versus hard news.

First, a series of six paired sample *t* tests examined the difference in estimated media effects between self and others for comedy versus hard news to first understand any relevant third-person effect for the outlets at the item level. With Hypothesis 1 and Hypothesis 2, we surmised that there would be a significant third-person effect for political comedy and that this third-person effect for comedy would be greater than any third-person effect for hard news. Initially, the analysis showed that only the mean difference for the individual comedy items (self-other distance) proved to be significant for each measure. Additional testing examined the perceived effects across the two outlets more generally. The mean of the combined comedy-other measure examining the overall perceived influence of comedy on others ($M = 4.90$, $SD = 1.22$) was significantly different from the combined measure of the influence of comedy on the self ($M = 3.88$, $SD = 1.34$). Given these results, Hypothesis 1 was supported by the research.

Second, the analysis did not present a significant perceived third-person effect for hard news as there was no significant mean difference between the perceived mean effect of television news on others ($M = 4.48$, $SD = 1.16$) and the perceived mean effect of television news on the self ($M = 4.50$, $SD = 1.24$). Given these results, Hypothesis 2 was also supported by the research (see Table 1). Further, it is worth noting the third-person effect for comedy was consistent and significant across all four experimental conditions.

TABLE 1
Means and Standard Deviations by Media Type
for Analysis of the Third-Person Effect

| | <i>M</i> | <i>SD</i> |
|-----------------------------|----------|-----------|
| News: Influence on self | 4.50 | 1.24 |
| News: Influence on others | 4.48 | 1.16 |
| Comedy: Influence on self | 3.88 | 1.34 |
| Comedy: Influence on others | 4.90 | 1.22 |

Additional analyses used multivariate linear regression to understand what type of individuals would be more likely to perceive either a third-person effect for hard news or a third-person effect for political comedy to test both Hypothesis 3 and Hypothesis 4. The first regression analysis examined which variables might suggest an increased likelihood for an individual to perceive a third-person effect for hard news. Essentially, the more an individual thinks that the media is biased in its presentation of seemingly neutral information, the more likely an individual is to perceive a third-person effect for hard news. The results show that Democrats are significantly less likely to perceive a third-person effect for hard news ($\beta = -.11, p < .05$). Of interest, individuals who are more politically interested are also significantly more likely to perceive a third-person effect for hard news content ($\beta = .19, p < .001$).

This regression model suggests that those who pay more attention to the news and to political affairs in general are more likely to think that hard news content is more persuasive for others (presumably the inattentive) than it is for themselves. Overall, this first regression model explained 6.0% of the variance in the third-person effect for hard news after controlling for media consumption behavior and exposure to varied video stimuli in the experiment (see Table 2 for complete results).

TABLE 2
Ordinary Least Squares Regression Evaluating News Gap

| | <i>News Gap</i> (Un-standardized) | <i>News Gap</i> (Standardized) |
|---|--------------------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| Political interest | .33 (.10)*** | .19*** |
| Partisan identification (Democrat) | -.28 (.14)* | -.11* |
| Days watching television news | -.04 (.07) | -.04 |
| Days watching political comedy | -.04 (.07) | -.05 |
| Combined media viewing (News \times Comedy) | -.01 (.03) | -.02 |
| News condition | -.30 (.20) | -.11 |
| Comedy condition | -.38 (.21) | -.15 |
| Both (mixed clip) | .35 (.28) | .12 |
| Constant | -.24 (.33) | |
| Adjusted R^2 | | 6.0% |

* $p < .05$. *** $p < .001$.

TABLE 3
Ordinary Least Squares Regression Evaluating Comedy Gap

| | Comedy Gap (Un-standardized) | Comedy Gap (Standardized) |
|--|---------------------------------|------------------------------|
| Political interest | -.13 (.10) | -.07 |
| Partisan identification (Democrat) | -.28 (.14)* | -.11* |
| Days watching television news | .02 (.07) | .02 |
| Days watching political comedy | -.37 (.07)*** | -.48*** |
| Combined media viewing (News × Comedy) | .06 (.03)* | .21* |
| News condition | -.34 (.19) | -.13 |
| Comedy condition | -.21 (.20) | -.08 |
| Both (mixed clip) | .33 (.27) | .11 |
| Constant | 1.99 (.32) | |
| Adjusted R^2 | | 11.5% |

* $p < .05$. *** $p < .001$.

The second regression model was designed to estimate the likelihood of an individual perceiving a third-person effect for comedy, or more specifically to determine which variables might better explain any perceived third-person effect for late-night political comedy. Initial examination centered on understanding the effects of Democratic partisanship and chronic viewing patterns to see if these variables would suggest a significant perceived third-person effect for political comedy as put forth in Hypothesis 3 and Hypothesis 4. Consistent with expectations, those who self-identify as Democrats were significantly less likely to perceive a third-person effect for political comedy ($\beta = -.11$, $p < .05$). This may be especially relevant given the increased likelihood that Democratic undergraduates are more likely to agree with the content presented on *The Daily Show* and see less of a bias in the show's presentation of issues. In addition, chronic political comedy viewers were also significantly less likely to perceive a third-person effect for the outlet ($\beta = -.48$, $p < .001$). It is important to note that the beta coefficient for Democrats was the same in both regression analyses (predicting first the third-person effect for news and then the third-person effect for comedy). Despite this, the findings still suggest that perceptions of the third-person effect, particularly for political comedy, are influenced by individual partisan identification.

Taken together, these findings support Hypothesis 3 suggesting that Democrats who presumably sympathize with Stewart will be less likely to perceive a third-person effect for political comedy.² The same is true in the case of Hypothesis 4, which suggests that those who are chronic viewers of political comedy and actively select to tune into this type of satirical programming will be less likely to perceive a third-person effect for political comedy (see Table 3 for full regression results). Overall, this regression model accounted for 11.5% of the variance in the third-person effect for political comedy, even after controlling for media consumption behavior and exposure to varied video stimuli.

²Further analysis suggested that Democrats were also significantly less likely to perceive a third-person effect for political comedy than their Republican peers, suggesting that the two sides may be viewing *The Daily Show* from differing vantage points.

DISCUSSION

Our findings lead to a deeper understanding of the way *The Daily Show* is perceived by audience members, particularly in contrast with perceptions of hard news programming. This investigation should inform subsequent research on the direct political effects of *The Daily Show*. Understanding whether audience members learn from Jon Stewart, or are even moved to take action after viewing *The Daily Show*, begins with considering perceptions of the show. Although our research uses both the third-person perception hypothesis and perceptions of hostile media bias as theoretical frameworks, we are not seeking to offer insight on behavioral implications connected with these perceptions of media content. Rather, we are suggesting that a more nuanced understanding of audience perceptions of political comedy programs should be taken into account in research examining the direct behavioral and political effects related to increased exposure and attention to programs like *The Daily Show*.

As with any experimental undertaking, there are some limitations given inherent design constraints. We know that undergraduates do not normally watch *The Daily Show* in a lab environment, preferring instead to check in from the couch, often with a group of roommates or friends. Therefore, their experience with *The Daily Show* is often socially mediated and influenced by their discussions of the program within their social network (see Bandura, 2001). At the same time, our experimental design allowed for all participants to experience the same dynamic for the pre- and posttest questionnaire and watch video content using the same technological setup. This video content served as a prime for participants who were later asked to analyze the differences between the two media forms: hard news versus political comedy.

Our selection of the video stimulus was restricted by the realities of the news cycle, forcing us to choose content from available material. Although the issue of the Iraq War troop surge is relevant in this case, we recognize that it is just one political issue—and a relatively partisan one. Although our results might have been slightly different given the presence of a less controversial stimulus issue, we also feel that the use of the Iraq War as a prime was helpful in exploring perceptions of hostile media bias and partisan orientation toward *The Daily Show*.

Although we are not surprised by the support for Hypothesis 1 and Hypothesis 2 and our finding of a significant third-person effect for political comedy over and above any effect for hard news, we think that the implications of the presence of perceptions of hostile media bias add an interesting twist to our evaluations of media influence. Given previous third-person effects research, it is understandable that undergraduates find it less desirable to be personally persuaded by political humor, connecting greater persuasion with similar undergraduate others. At the same time, evaluations of hard news further enlighten our understanding of young audience members' relationships with and trust toward the mainstream media. Together our results suggest that audience members see a clear distinction between hard news and political comedy, even if disparaging evaluations of the mainstream media persist, this distinction cannot be ignored.

There is no question that *The Daily Show* is perceived as a partisan program. Both the news summaries provided by Jon Stewart as “anchor” and the commentary from “reporters” in the field are seen as liberal in orientation. At the very least, the program as a whole is more in line with the perspectives of Democrats than the ideals espoused by Republicans, even though Stewart makes an effort to criticize leaders from both sides of the aisle (Stanley, 2007). As our research shows, this partisan orientation shapes audience perceptions of the

program. Our results suggest that Democrats along with chronic viewers, or those who more often agree with the viewpoints of Jon Stewart, are less likely to feel that *The Daily Show* has an influence on others. For these individuals, the content on *The Daily Show* is simply more agreeable or palatable. Further, it is possible that this audience assessment of the show's partisan bias may also shape more direct political effects as well (LaMarre, Landreville, & Beam, 2009). Previous research has shown that *The Daily Show* shapes perceptions of candidates and primes viewers with respect to particular political points of view (Moy et al., 2006; Young, 2004). Understanding how this partisan presentation may continue to influence patterns of information seeking and participatory behavior becomes increasingly important as mediated election campaigns intensify.

Although the political comedy video content examined in this study is drawn from Jon Stewart's presentation of the daily headlines mirroring the format of hard news broadcasts, it may also be fruitful for future research to examine the differences in the presentation formats featured on the show. Jon Stewart's interview style is fairly unique and nontraditional, mixing the satirical with the serious (Baym, 2007). Given the extended format of the interview and the freer nature of the discussion, political candidates can often express a different side of themselves than they can on traditional Sunday morning talk shows.

As Jon Stewart's success continues to grow, other programs have come to embrace the fake news format by presenting their own version of political humor. *The Colbert Report* continues to entertain audiences and push political buttons. Stephen Colbert has even come to be seen as a public commentator on the media himself, much like Stewart. In fact, Colbert's presentation at the 2006 White House Correspondents Dinner quickly became a YouTube sensation just like Stewart's 2004 *Crossfire* appearance. With Bill Maher returning to HBO as the host of *Real Time with Bill Maher* and programs like *Lil' Bush* having presented a cartoon version of a young George W. Bush, it is clear that partisan-oriented political comedy programming is here to stay.

The results of our research underscore the need to include audience perceptions of these programs in the growing field of direct effects research. Understanding individual perceptions of the persuasive effects of political humor programming, preferences for or dispositions toward this type of material, and evaluations of *The Daily Show* in contrast with hard news, broadens the field of media effects research (Zillmann, 1980, 1983). In addition, drawing connections between viewing *The Daily Show* and heuristics associated with viewing partisan media content illuminate further research questions. Overall, our findings suggest that viewers draw a measurable and pronounced dividing line between political comedy programs and hard news content. Hard news, while losing credibility, is still an acceptable form of persuasive media content. Given evidence of a significant third-person effect and perceptions of hostile media bias for political comedy, audiences offer that it is less than acceptable to be persuaded by this genre of programming. As research on programs like *The Daily Show* continues to grow, this distinction between program perceptions will continue to inform scholarship on direct effects.

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