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On: 20 September 2013, At: 08:40

Publisher: Routledge

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Review of Communication

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rroc20>

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Published online: 19 Sep 2013.

To cite this article: Amy B. Becker & Don J. Waisanen , Review of Communication (2013): From Funny Features to Entertaining Effects: Connecting Approaches to Communication Research on Political Comedy, Review of Communication, DOI: 10.1080/15358593.2013.826816

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/15358593.2013.826816>

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From Funny Features to Entertaining Effects: Connecting Approaches to Communication Research on Political Comedy

Amy B. Becker & Don J. Waisanen

This article offers points of intersection and difference across communication research on political comedy. Based on our findings, we argue that political comedy scholarship can be usefully divided into two areas: (1) features and (2) effects. Under features, we find three overlapping but distinct areas of emphasis: political comedy's rhetorical devices and conventions, its ideological and ethical functions, and its contributions to public culture. Under effects, we construct another four areas, including knowledge and learning, attitudes and opinion, cynicism and engagement, and processing, understanding, and affinity. The essay provides an overview of studies on political comedy's features and effects, before concluding with five pathways that can bridge these divides and bring conceptual clarity to future research.

Keywords: Political Comedy; Humor; Effects; Features; Public Culture

In the course of only a few decades, comedy and politics have gone from strange bedfellows to an inseparable alliance. From *Saturday Night Live's* caricatures of candidates to *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report's* commentaries on and enterings into the political process, comedy continues to flourish within the public arena. Communication scholars have followed suit, constructing insightful studies examining comic artifacts and their impact.

For as long as the topics have been studied, scholarship on humor and comedy has been an interdisciplinary undertaking in which relatively disparate trajectories have developed.¹ Given its interdisciplinarity and coherence as a subject of concern across

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institutions, conferences, and journals, communication research can avoid this problem. In this essay, we seek to bring these research lines into further conversation across the communication discipline. Seeking to first orient communication scholarship in this area, we drew from our respective understandings of the literature and conducted a thorough survey of extant studies on political comedy in peer-reviewed communication and political science journals (through databases like *EBSCO Communication and Mass Media Complete*, *Google Scholar*, and more). We focused primarily on articles published in the last two decades, using search terms like “comedy” and “political humor,” while snowball sampling related links to construct a broad picture of these research areas.

For the sake of scope, we limited our research to political communication scholarship. It should be recognized that an enormous, longstanding body of work on humor and comedy has developed in neighboring disciplines like English, where, for example, analyses of theatrical and literary comedies from Aristophanes to Jonathan Swift have underscored the political workings of such texts.² Some scholars have even approached a wider body of humor literature in and outside the communication discipline, finding that research has tended to fall into psychological and sociological camps.³ We build upon this work but have narrowed the boundaries of this project to the specific contributions of recent political communication research. There are other lines that could have been incorporated—such as the use of humor in interpersonal relationships—but we have limited this article’s range to works with seemingly “political” or “public” foci, since such a large body of literature covers these areas.

Furthermore, since the terms “comedy” and “humor” do not have “standardized, consistent usages in either everyday or analytical terminology,”⁴ we follow the research examined across this essay in sometimes using these words interchangeably. At the same time, we find helpful Weitz’s working definition of comedy as a “*genre*” or “recognizable type or category of artistic creation with characteristic features,” while humor can be conceived as a “telltale characteristic of ‘comedy’” or “*social transaction* between at least two people through which one party intends to evoke amusement or laughter.”⁵ Heller further argues that scholars should think of comedy as capturing a variety of forms that share a “family resemblance,” since the comic is an omnipresent but “absolutely heterogeneous” phenomenon.⁶ This essay thus characterizes political “comedy” as broadly encompassing of a range of traditional and evolving practices humor can take through, for example, explicit satirical rants against a public figure or more implicit, ironic jokes that mean the opposite of what is said.

Based on our findings, we argue that political comedy scholarship can be usefully divided into two areas: (1) *features* and (2) *effects*. Under features, we find three overlapping but distinct areas of emphasis: political comedy’s rhetorical devices and conventions, its ideological and ethical functions, and its contributions to public culture. Under effects, we construct another four areas, including knowledge and learning, attitudes and opinion, cynicism and engagement, and processing, understanding, and affinity. For clarification, we find the features/effects division is a more useful way of characterizing the communication literature on political comedy than “quantitative” vs. “qualitative.” It is certainly true that the vast majority of features

studies are more qualitative while effects projects possess a more quantitative bent—but this is exactly the kind of division that recent work is bypassing.⁷

This article recognizes potential points of intersection and difference across these literatures. In the following sections, we first construct an overview of studies working on political comedy features. The second section reviews recent research focused on political comedy effects. We then conclude by offering five pathways that can bridge the features/effects divide and bring conceptual clarity to future research on political comedy. These trajectories are discussed at length in the concluding section of the manuscript and include: (1) broadening our understanding of political comedy content by defining a more diverse array of comedic forms, (2) analyzing the proliferation and diffusion of comedy, particularly across various technological spaces, (3) cataloging the role and experiences of audiences, (4) situating political comedy within relevant institutional structures and the larger postbroadcast media environment, and (5) taking more longitudinal looks at political comedy to assess its impacts on public culture and behavior.

Political Comedy's Features

Research on political comedy's features has been broader than the study of its effects. This likely has to do with the literature on political comedy being more longstanding, but also because scholars have worked with broader definitions for what constitutes specifically “political” comedy—for example, through studies teasing out the political ideologies of mainstream, seemingly nonpolitical stand-up performances.⁸ Across the communication literature in this area, we find three different trajectories, including research on comic texts': (1) rhetorical devices and conventions, (2) ideological and ethical functions, and (3) contributions to public culture(s). We find a great deal of overlap between these three areas, but each can be *primarily* positioned in terms of one category over and above the others.

Rhetorical Devices and Conventions

The workings of various rhetorical devices and conventions have constituted one fundamental direction in this research line. In one sense, this is an old path charted by the ancients—from Cicero's use of particular comic conventions to Aristotle's engagement with different forms of humor in *The Poetics*.⁹ Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca followed this path in linking “the humorous use of certain types of argumentation” with how such strategies can establish “a communion between a hearer and his [sic] hearers, in reducing value, in particular making fun of the opponent, and making convenient diversions.”¹⁰

In our current age, where rhetoric can be characterized as one of the main fields for understanding how attention is allocated,¹¹ comic texts provide one avenue for understanding the discursive and nondiscursive moves that communicators make in efforts to inform, persuade, or entertain audiences. As Hart outlined, scholars need to examine the subtle workings of serious political language, but also need to take

“unserious texts seriously (Jay Leno comes to mind, as does *Politically Incorrect*)” to learn how rhetoric casts its spell in areas where we may least expect it to be operating.¹²

Researchers have focused on the structures of arguments and jokes, finding that both share features making the study of humorous conventions continually relevant.¹³ Work on presidential comedy has demonstrated how the three traditional theories of humor (incongruity, superiority, and relief) became rhetorical conventions under Ronald Reagan’s lead.¹⁴ Humor can act persuasively as a form of “political argument” in campaign contexts (Smith & Voth, 2002), and can be a rhetorical strategy for challenging gender stereotypes (Robson, 2000).¹⁵ In some cases, communication scholars have even let professional humorists identify their own rhetorical strategies.¹⁶

Not all comic strategies have been treated equally, however, with concepts like Burke’s “comic frame” dominating communication research.¹⁷ While Burke’s understanding of a comic frame is more about an overarching orientation to life’s events than the production of humor¹⁸—scholars have still employed it to focus on the specific comic devices and conventions of varying advocates. Early studies like Carlson’s analysis of Gandhi revealed how social movements can enact comedy to achieve political goals.¹⁹ An analysis of 19th-century women humorists expanded upon these notions to demonstrate both further subdivisions that might be applied to comic conventions and their limitations.²⁰

Powell’s ensuing study underscored four types of comically framed appeals in public activism: identification, spirituality, repudiation and juxtaposition.²¹ Similarly, Appel examined how Martin Luther King, Jr.’s rhetoric moved between comic and tragic genres over the course of his public career, just as Murphy showed how comic strategies were used by Nixon and Kennedy to advance more inclusive rhetorical environments.²² Moving to media texts, the comic devices of the popular television show *The Simpsons* has offered citizens spaces in which to understand their own rhetorical abilities and subjects like religion.²³ Laverseur also interrogated related Burkean conventions like the “perspective by incongruity” to deepen theoretical understandings of comic argument forms.²⁴

Comic devices and conventions can counter institutional shortsightedness, providing alternative frames for public events.²⁵ Some of the specific comic devices operating in *The Daily Show* and *Colbert Report* demonstrate “how [Jon] Stewart and [Stephen] Colbert do what they do tells us much about whether what they do is very useful.”²⁶ Scholars continue to examine the comic frame’s function as a corrective, moral device, and its capacity to widen reflective spaces about societal trends.²⁷

Another theme concerns interpretive matters, with scholars focusing either upon a text’s interpretive operations or audience responses to these textual affordances. Earlier in the literature, Booth rendered the workings of ironic rhetoric more accessible, especially in attributing degrees of stability or instability to such messages and the kinds of reconstructions they invite.²⁸ In this regard, rhetorical devices like “ironic iconicity” can toggle between original and ironically inflected texts to invite alternative understandings of media practices.²⁹ Intertextual rhetorical forms like

“parodic tourism” have also been praised for helping audiences deal with “dizzying and disorienting moments of social change.”³⁰

Other studies have further clarified how devices like irony can offer varying perspectives on unquestioned forms of administrative rhetoric like “prophetic dualism.”³¹ The “polysemic scaffolding” of discursive structures creating multiple meanings in racial humor can help audiences even “understand the discursive patterns that will eventually have their polysemic meanings activated.”³² Indeed, the different kind of reading positions or identities available in public communication has been a major part of such studies.³³ While authors have focused squarely upon the devices and conventions making up textual acts, such research has easily lent itself to more hybrid methodological studies looking at the different decoding positions audiences actually take when confronted with comic messages.³⁴

One strand of this research trajectory involves networked and content analyses. Shifman’s examination of “‘humor hubs’—large, dynamic, web sites containing verbal and visual humor” of varying types evidences how “globally oriented topics such as sex, gender and animals are [becoming] much more popular than locally oriented topics such as ethnicity and politics.”³⁵ Indeed, the Internet will continue to provide fertile ground for examining how comic strategies are reconfigured along digital lines, as in Carr’s finding that devices like “forced reflexivity” circumvent mainstream media framings.³⁶ More systematic discourse analysis programs like *DICTION* have further been used to explore what idiosyncratic or common conventions comedians tend to employ within and across their acts.³⁷

In general, studies of rhetorical strategies in political comedy could move further in the direction of looking beyond language to visual, environmental, or stylistic conventions. In much the same way that Eriksson studied how applause and laughter have been “managed” in live political interview formats, Vraga *et al.* explored how a comedic “host style” works to mitigate other behavioral moves in political talk shows, and Flowers and Young looked at the visual dimensions of Sarah Palin impersonations.³⁸ Much of this type of work overlaps with the ideological and ethical functions of such discourses, to which we turn next.

Ideological and Ethical Functions

Studies of political comedy’s features can be clustered by the weight they place upon the ideological and ethical operations of texts. The devices and conventions of these artifacts are invoked in this line of scholarship, but mostly to discuss their critical functions relative to race/ethnicity, sex/gender, and other issues of power and moral import. This line of scholarship could be characterized as mostly critical in its approaches to comic texts, with exemplars like Park, Gabbadon, & Chernin’s study of *Rush Hour 2* exploring the film’s “generic conventions and textual devices,” but largely to explore how they can undermine reflective criticism and “naturalize[s] racial differences.”³⁹

Earlier studies have been situated between Burkean applications of the comic frame (and perspective by incongruity) and ideological subversions, as in analyses of how

Larry Kramer's "1,112 and Counting" essay altered perceptions of AIDS in many gay communities.⁴⁰ Similarly, Christiansen and Hanson conducted a classic study of ACT UP's use of the comic frame to raise public awareness about AIDS⁴¹—another borderline case between rhetorical conventions and the ideological and ethical functions of movement messaging. Placing the focus of comedy more directly upon the destabilizing potentials of activism, Demo argued that comic approaches have constructed resistance methods for feminist groups like the Guerilla Girls, while other work has pointed to how comic features can illuminate problematic constructions of disability in U.S. culture.⁴² Earlier approaches even turned an ideological and ethical perspective on communication scholars themselves, finding in one instance that research had unfairly "recontextualized [Bob] Dole's 1976 debate performance and evaluated him in a context which differs markedly from the rhetorical situation he actually faced," thus advancing a myth about the public figure.⁴³ Ideological work has further claimed that Habermasian and similar forms of scholarship have suffered from overly pious emphases, for example, missing out on how such constant parts of human experience like laughter might figure into deliberative and rhetorical theories.⁴⁴

Working with critical research stemming from cultural studies and sociology, some of this scholarship concerns media activist practices like "culture jamming."⁴⁵ In this line of study, popular television programs like *The Daily Show* have been examined for their potential to culture jam "the seamless transmission of the dominant brand messages."⁴⁶ Like studies of rhetorical devices and conventions, some of this research has moved further in the direction of audience reception, with one study finding that "nonsatirical readings" can work "in the same ideological or rhetorical direction as satirical readings."⁴⁷

In recent years, communication scholarship has increasingly underscored emphases upon the ethical and ideological functions of political comedy (or comedy that is already political). Ellen Degeneres's parodies of common understandings of femininity have served to denaturalize and show feminine displays as inherently performative.⁴⁸ Yet television comedies like *Psych* can reassure "audiences of their distance from racism," confirming "the 'secular orthodoxy' of interracial friendship, a depoliticizing ideology that views friendship as the antidote to structural and historical injustice."⁴⁹ Covering media reactions to the U.S.'s first Black president, Rossing found depictions of the Obamas in the 2008 election revealed "pervasive colorblind, antiracist discourses and scapegoating rituals that erect significant obstacles to racial justice."⁵⁰ Chidester has similarly looked at *South Parks's* features, which play with racial subject positions by *both* erasing and invoking difference.⁵¹

Other popular shows like *Family Guy* have undergone more content analytic treatment, with findings suggesting "derogatory messages were present in roughly 9% of Family Guy scenes and that correlations existed between the types of characters that were the senders and recipients of derogatory messages."⁵² In this regard, it is worth noting the ambivalence that appears to run through many of these studies. A recent project looked at Tina Fey's public persona, for example, finding it "ideologically significant" for constructing Fey "as both heterosexual sex symbol of

postfeminist achievement and as undisciplined (read: ugly) example of postfeminist consequence.”⁵³

Along these lines, the ideological and ethical functioning of comic intercultural communication will likely provide fertile ground for much future scholarship. Comedy has, for example, been a way for audiences in Arab regions to resist the hegemony of U.S. “soft power” strategies.⁵⁴ Alternatively, television shows like NBC’s short-lived *Outsourced* appear to have played into “old racial logics,” “by co-opting multiculturalism to provide moral authority for Western neoliberal capitalism,” and “by privatizing racism, thereby muting calls for antiracist structural reform.”⁵⁵

One of the more dominant trends in this area has involved applications of Bakhtinian concepts to expose the political dimensions of popular culture texts. Olbrys analyzed the ways that carnivalesque practices on *Saturday Night Live* can be disciplined in public culture.⁵⁶ A study of *The Big Lebowski* showed how “the carnivalesque encourages audiences to achieve a critical distance through laughter and realize the constructed nature of the social world.”⁵⁷ The print version of *The Onion* interrogated the post 9/11 mediascape through carnival, just as Bakhtinian concepts have showed how *The Colbert Report* positions and empowers audiences to more critically engage with the ideological dynamics of the mainstream media.⁵⁸

Finally, one of the nascent but distinct areas emerging as a result of more ideologically focused scholarship concerns the potentially immoral side of comedy itself. Contrary to popular accounts celebrating its virtues, empirical research examining organizational communication has found that humor can function to divide as much as bond individuals.⁵⁹ An examination of the book *Politically Correct Bedtime Stories* argued that the ethical boundaries of satire are amenable to critique, since “some forms of humor may facilitate audience acceptance of the very ideas the satirist intends to disparage.”⁶⁰ Looking exclusively at the problems of humor in public discourse, Waisanen explicated five ethical concerns citizens should track in political comedy.⁶¹ Last, and although it is from outside the communication field, Lockyer and Pickering’s *Beyond a Joke: The Limits of Humour* has, to this date, provided one of the broadest overviews of this newer area.⁶²

Public Culture and Models

Studies of political comedy’s features can be heuristically grouped in yet a third way. Rather than focusing primarily on textual devices or ideological dimensions, this theme can be characterized as mostly concerned with how comedy serves as a model for—and in some cases, a digression against—the public interest. In fact, what perhaps most distinguishes this work is in how it tends to *affirm* comic tools and models for public culture. As a representative example of this type of scholarship, Hariman concluded that “parody and related forms of political humor are essential resources for sustaining democratic public culture.”⁶³ Overall, these works intersect with literatures covering the public sphere and political deliberation. They also tend to argue that political comedy shows have reoriented the norms by which much corporate news media operates.

Jones's book-length, pioneering study of the emerging, hybrid formats developed in comedy programming like *The Daily Show* and *Politically Incorrect* focused intently on the contributions of political comedy to civic culture.⁶⁴ Contrary to prevailing assumptions in media ecology scholarship that television can only undermine public affairs, Jones demonstrated how these types of shows charted new territory by combining hilarity with poignant social critique, including spaces for more productive conversation than the media often offers. Another thread of debates about whether or not folks like Jon Stewart hurt or help democracy put such issues at the forefront of communication research.⁶⁵

A series of articles by Baym underscored the innovative approaches taken by political comedy programming compared to other types of shows.⁶⁶ *The Colbert Report* has reworked the lines of what constitutes "news," and can be seen as simply more critical and democratic than other journalistic formats.⁶⁷ Parallel efforts reinforced how comedians like Stewart serve to hold other journalists and pundits accountable for their work,⁶⁸ and continue to inform and entertain in ways that hold promise for public life.⁶⁹ Day's broad examination of comedy in public culture similarly concluded that "the political discourse taking place in the satiric register currently appears far more vibrant than any of the traditional outlets for serious political dialogue."⁷⁰

At the same time, scholars have covered less seemingly "political" programs as contributions to the public interest. Contrary to mainstream criticisms of the show, Olbrys argued that *Seinfeld* "provides a vision of hope for democratic interaction predicated on the commonality of vices rather than a collapse into fascism or the disciplining of rhetoric by presumably higher moral standards."⁷¹ With a continuing focus on the features of comic rhetoric modeling public values, new methodological approaches combining interviews and short filmings further push the boundaries of this area—as in Herbig and Hess's study of participant's voices at the comedic *Rally to Restore Sanity* in Washington D.C.⁷² Quantitative and qualitative content analysis has further supported the idea that shows like *Saturday Night Live* are increasingly being incorporated into and forming public values for mainstream news-making.⁷³

Some final, promising offshoots of this area may be found in how online publics are being inspired or formed through political comedy, and in comparative work like Baym and Jones's striking survey of international types of news parody, which examined "the global flow of parody formats, and the multiple ways in which news parody adapts to differing political, economic, and regulatory contexts."⁷⁴ Future work will undoubtedly need to follow these leads as a way of theorizing and evaluating comic contributions to public culture locally and globally.

Political Comedy's Effects

While considerable attention has been paid to understanding and evaluating comedic features, communication researchers—generally those with a more quantitative bent—have taken a keen interest in understanding the impact of popular political comedy programs. Over the better part of the past decade, political communication

scholars have considered the effects of exposure and attention to late-night comedy content on key indicators of democratic citizenship, specifically: (1) knowledge and learning, (2) attitudes and opinions, and (3) cynicism and engagement. In addition, researchers have spent considerable time examining the underlying mechanisms that shape how viewers process, interpret, and understand political comedy content and, more recently, what drives preexisting preferences or affinities for comedy and entertaining political media. Taken together, this research has helped situate political comedy content within the larger media environment, offering insights into how political comedy impacts behavior and more broadly, U.S. political and civic culture.

Knowledge and Learning

The study of the connections between exposure to political comedy and resulting gains in knowledge and learning has been heavily influenced by the debate between Baum and Prior over the value of soft news programming.⁷⁵ Baum offers evidence of a gateway effect, suggesting that young people in particular tune into traditional news content as a consequence of viewing a politically themed story on a soft news program.⁷⁶ In effect, he suggests that paying attention to soft news makes political topics more salient and helps to promote greater media engagement and knowledge among members of a normally inattentive public.⁷⁷ Prior questions the quality of this resulting knowledge, instead arguing that an increasing amount of media choice in the contemporary postbroadcast environment has fostered a less informed, less engaged, and more polarized public.⁷⁸

Irrespective of the normative orientation of the Baum vs. Prior debate, the empirical political comedy effects literature does offer concrete evidence supporting the notion that exposure to soft news and political comedy programming can lead to positive, albeit modest, outcomes with respect to political knowledge and learning. Initial work by Hollander for example, suggests that exposure to political comedy programming leads to higher levels of recognition—that requires only a marginal interest in politics—over the more thoughtful and involved process of recall.⁷⁹ Similarly, Kim & Vishak use findings from experimental research to show that the processing of politically oriented entertainment content is related to online rather than memory-based learning.⁸⁰ This less involved form of learning is based on a summary of evaluations or online tally, while memory based learning requires that individuals retrieve and access relevant information stored in their long-term memory.

Moreover, a recent meta-analysis of 35 political knowledge items featured in the National Annenberg Election Study found that exposure to late-night comedy results in knowledge gain, but primarily among inattentive citizens on easier question items.⁸¹ In a related vein, experimental research examining the relationship between exposure to political comedy and information seeking behavior found that exposure to political comedy stimulates attentiveness to news media content among less politically interested viewers and that such viewers are more likely to acquire information from traditional news sources given their initial exposure to comedy

content.⁸² Cao analyzed data collected by the Pew Research Center during the 2000 and 2004 election cycles, finding that exposure to political comedy had a greater impact on knowledge gain during the 2004 election cycle, particularly among younger and more educated viewers.⁸³ Research has also suggested that consuming political comedy content during the course of an election cycle increases knowledge about candidates and issues and encourages citizens to pay greater attention to political information presented by traditional news sources.⁸⁴

Candidate appearances on political comedy and soft news programs can also serve as an important information source for viewers, offering an opportunity for politicians looking to connect with audiences that differ from the traditional political news audience—essentially one that is younger, more female on average, and less engaged with the political process.⁸⁵ More specifically, Brewer and Cao suggest that exposure to a candidate appearance on a political comedy show during the course of a primary campaign positively impacts political knowledge.⁸⁶ Related work has suggested that viewing candidate appearances on soft news programs can positively impact political engagement and promote more consistent voting behavior.⁸⁷ In other words, viewers exposed to a candidate appearance on a soft news program may be more likely to vote for the candidate that best represents their political interests. More recently, work on the effects of exposure to the interview segments of political satire programs like *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report* found that those exposed to comedy interviews were better able to recall relevant political information than those exposed to an equivalent interview from a traditional cable news program.⁸⁸

Attitudes and Opinion

Early content analyses of the jokes presented on late-night comedy programs suggest a focus on personality and character flaws rather than on policy or issues.⁸⁹ Research has consistently shown that exposure to these types of jokes can impact related attitudes toward politicians by making particular traits more relevant, but that the impact of exposure is indirect, moderated by partisanship and prior levels of political knowledge.⁹⁰ For example, Young suggests that exposure to critical jokes on political comedy programs has a greater impact on those with lower levels of political knowledge and that strong partisans are more likely to negatively evaluate the candidate from the opposing party after viewing comedy content.⁹¹ At the same time, research by Xenos, Moy, and Becker has shown that political partisanship moderates the effects of exposure to critical content from *The Daily Show*.⁹² In this analysis, Republican viewers warmed toward Nancy Pelosi and the Congressional Democrats after watching segments from *The Daily Show*, while the attitudes of Democrats and Independents cooled toward the Speaker and her party after exposure to the same content. In fact, research has offered evidence of a priming effect for political comedy content. Exposure to political comedy encourages viewers to base their evaluations of political candidates on character traits made more salient by these popular programs.⁹³ Moreover, recent work on the differential impact of exposure to varied comedy types has suggested that exposure to the other-directed hostile humor that

dominates political satire programming results in cooler attitudes toward the politician being targeted by the humor, regardless of partisan identification.⁹⁴

While political comedy viewers primarily describe programs like *The Daily Show* as entertaining rather than informative, audience members still suggest that the programs are both persuasive and partisan in orientation.⁹⁵ A study by Becker, Xenos, and Waisanen offered evidence of a significant perceived third person effect for political comedy (as opposed to straight news) and research by Coe et al. suggests that both conservative and liberal viewers feel there is more bias inherent in *The Daily Show* than across a range of cable news options (e.g., *Fox News*, *MSNBC*, *CNN*, etc.).⁹⁶ Scholars have shown that both viewers and journalists alike find Stewart to be left-leaning,⁹⁷ and a content analysis by Morris suggests that *TDS* coverage of the 2004 election emphasized policy and character flaws when covering Republicans but was kinder toward Democrats, focusing instead on physical characteristics considered to be more trivial.⁹⁸

Research on the impact of exposure to *The Colbert Report* suggests that viewers are actually less critical of Republican politicians and policies after viewing the parody program.⁹⁹ In fact, recent scholarship has even suggested that viewers' political ideology encourages biased processing of Colbert's message; liberals tend to think that Colbert is being satirical with his conservatively themed political statements, while conservative viewers think Colbert actually agrees with the conservative policies and politics his character promotes.¹⁰⁰ At the same time, one study testing the impact of exposure to critical comedy content from the 2008 election that aired on *The Colbert Report* showed that both Republican and Democratic viewers evaluated the comic target—in this case John McCain—more negatively after exposure, with evidence of a larger negative effect for the attitudes of Democratic viewers.¹⁰¹

Cynicism and Engagement

Espousing a deeply held, normative belief in the inherent value of an involved and informed citizenry, scholars have been interested in understanding the net impact of political comedy programming on political engagement. As a result, political comedy effects research has spent considerable time exploring the relationships between comedy exposure and key behavioral outcome variables like trust, efficacy, and political participation. Underlying this body of research are significant concerns about whether the proliferation of political comedy programming can be seen as a boon or bust for democracy and whether the programs help or hurt younger viewers, who are the core of the political comedy audience.¹⁰²

On balance, research on political comedy and disaffection has suggested that while exposure to comedy promotes a more cynical outlook toward government institutions, politicians, and the mainstream media and less trust in these external entities, exposure to political comedy actually has an encouraging effect on individuals, bolstering their own personal evaluations of their ability to effectively contribute to the political process. For example, research by Baumgartner and Morris on the connections between comedy and political disaffection suggests that exposure to programs like *The Daily*

Show promotes more cynical attitudes and a lack of faith or trust in the institutions of government among younger viewers.¹⁰³ At the same time, their research suggests that viewing *The Daily Show* has a positive impact on judgments of internal political efficacy, or the belief in one's own ability to effectively participate in and understand politics. Subsequent research efforts have explored the relationship between comedy exposure and feelings of political disaffection, finding more fruitful connections between viewing political comedy and internal political efficacy than between comedy exposure and political trust.¹⁰⁴

Specifically, Holbert et al. suggest that internal political efficacy acts as a moderator variable in the processing of media content, with low-efficacy individuals reporting that they are less gratified by watching mainstream television news if they've been previously exposed to political comedy content.¹⁰⁵ Additionally, research on the impact of exposure to political comedy on civic and political participation has shown that political efficacy acts as a mediating variable, with more efficacious individuals exhibiting higher levels of engagement given prior exposure to political comedy content.¹⁰⁶ At the same time, research has demonstrated a connection between particular types of comedy (e.g., satire, parody, and online humor vs. traditional political comedy) and feelings of political efficacy, suggesting that the relationship between comedy exposure and cynicism may actually be nuanced.¹⁰⁷ In fact, Baumgartner and Morris offer evidence of a positive connection between exposure to the more straightforward satire presented on *The Daily Show* and feelings of internal political efficacy, but suggest that watching Stephen Colbert's more heavily constructed parody of cable news hosts like Bill O'Reilly negatively impacts feelings of internal political efficacy.¹⁰⁸

Concerned that watching political comedy programs promotes a cynical outlook, which in turn dampens civic and political engagement, research has also worked to pinpoint the precise impact of exposure to political comedy content on a range of traditional participatory behaviors. Moy et al. found that politically sophisticated viewers who tune in to late-night political comedy were more likely to vote and engage in political discussion.¹⁰⁹ Related work by Cao and Brewer suggests that viewing political comedy is positively related to low involvement political behaviors like joining an organization or attending a rally.¹¹⁰ Similarly, Hoffman & Young show that viewing political satire and parody, but not traditional late-night network comedy, is positively related to political participation.¹¹¹ Exposure to political comedy can also promote a greater interest in engaging in political talk.¹¹² Finally, Becker suggests that exposure to certain types of political comedy interview segments can positively impact lower level forms of political engagement like political expression.¹¹³

Processing, Understanding, and Affinity

While less abundant than the wealth of research dedicated to pinpointing the precise effects of exposure to political comedy on key behavioral outcome variables, communication researchers have also devoted attention to studying how viewers

process, interpret, and understand political comedy content. Applying dual-processing models like the elaboration likelihood model (ELM) to the study of political comedy, the present consensus is that comedy content is processed through a peripheral rather than central route.¹¹⁴ Instead of scrutinizing the arguments presented by comedians, viewers tend to simply agree with the content and work instead on simply getting the joke, lacking the ability or motivation to carefully inspect each relevant claim.¹¹⁵ While viewers pay careful attention to comedy content, the focus is often on quickly discounting the material being presented and determining whether they like the comedic source and find him or her credible.¹¹⁶ When looking at programs like *The Daily Show* or *The Colbert Report* more narrowly, viewers trying to fully comprehend the satire presented on these shows need a working knowledge of politics, in addition to a healthy dose of prior consumption of traditional news media content.¹¹⁷ Moreover, a preference for entertaining rather than serious news and an affinity for political humor are important predictors of political comedy consumption, and importantly, whether viewers are able to truly engage with the content, fostering a deeper understanding of the comedy and the political topics being presented.¹¹⁸ Research on comedy processing, understanding, and the affinity for political humor, continues to inform and shape political comedy effects research. Overall, additional scholarship is still needed in order to bridge the gaps between communication theory and results-driven effects research.

Directions for Future Political Comedy Effects Research

The eruption of politically oriented comedy texts has encouraged communication scholars from varying perspectives to consider the impact of entertaining material on public affairs. Present efforts aside, much of this research exists in separate silos with one camp of scholars focusing on the features of comedy content (e.g., the rhetorical devices and conventions, ideological and ethical functions, and contributions to public culture), while the other camp is centered upon measuring the effects of comedy exposure (e.g., knowledge and learning, attitudes and opinions, and cynicism and engagement) and understanding humor processing, understanding, and content affinity. Given a central focus on the political nature of much of this content, we see no better time than the present for these two trajectories to speak further to one another to advance a more robust and intradisciplinary approach toward studying political comedy. Drawing upon our discussion of comedy features and effects, we now offer five pathways for future communication research on political comedy.

First, we see a need to connect current research on comedy features with effects-driven studies—one clear benefit of such efforts could be to bring more conceptual clarity to political comedy's terms and definitions. Convinced that not all comedy is equal, recent effects research has focused on understanding the unique impacts of exposure to different comedy types (e.g., other-directed hostile humor or juvenalian satire vs. self-ridicule or horation satire) and varied comedy forms (e.g., satire, parody, etc.) on attitudes and behaviors.¹¹⁹ Understanding that there is in fact a diverse array of politically entertaining content, Holbert created a nine-part typology

that has helped to organize expanding media genres—yet current effects research has yet to focus on understanding the impact of much of this richly diverse entertainment content.¹²⁰ At the same time, work on comedy features has led to a formidable understanding of the unique rhetorical nature of many of these distinct comedy forms (e.g., satirical situation comedies, fictional political dramas, and entertainment television events), cataloging the implicit and explicit political material expressed within these creative endeavors. Overall, features research can provide a foundation for testing the effects of differing comedy types, while effects research can help sharpen justifications for and evaluations of political comedy content. Moving beyond programs like *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report* is also imperative. Effects researchers in particular must take a closer look at political parody programs like *Saturday Night Live*, online political humor sites, and print satire in order to understand the reach and impact of political comedy content on political and civic culture.

A second area for further convergence between features and effects research involves understanding more about the proliferation and diffusion of political comedy. Much has been written about how the web 2.0 environment allows anyone with a webcam to become an overnight *YouTube* sensation, including the increasingly viral reach of both user-generated and professionally produced online political comedy content (e.g., *Funny or Die*, *CollegeHumor*, *Jib Jab*). This dynamic is true both nationally and internationally, yet remains understudied. In addition to research looking closely into the workings of single comic artifacts, from a features perspective, the sheer quantity of comic texts available for study suggests a new challenge to consider the operations of even broader bodies of work—perhaps to construct new genres or to make wide claims about what is truly exceptional. From an effects perspective, similarly, broader conclusions might be drawn about whether the impacts that stem from exposure to user-generated vs. professionally produced content are differential, if only as a matter of degree. Perhaps a more “democratic” user-generated video may stimulate more immediate discussion, while a professionally produced video may ultimately engender higher levels of political engagement and involvement.

Third, for both features and effects researchers, the role of political comedy audiences presents a clear point of intersection for future work. As was noted, analyses of the interpretive dimensions of comic artifacts have already begun to examine the rhetorical conventions of texts with actual audience reactions to such works. While some in the effects arena have started to connect the study of political comedy with important media effects concepts like uses and gratifications theory,¹²¹ the field as a whole tends to privilege theories from the political communication and persuasion literatures, often ignoring valuable insights that might be gleaned from more traditional mass communication approaches toward studying media exposure and audience evaluations. Historically, audience reception studies have shed considerable light on the ways in which average viewers receive, process, and interpret a whole range of content—from popular television dramas like *Dallas* to ground-breaking comedies like *All in the Family*.¹²² While researchers have charted

the demographics of the political comedy audience, there is still much to be learned about how audiences engage with and feel about this proliferation of political comedy content. Understanding what political comedy content viewers choose to share should also be an integral part of future audience reception research. It will be important to understand not only which content viewers choose to share but also through which mechanism (e.g., social networking sites, personal communication), the political orientation of the content, and more.

Fourth, future research should work to better situate political comedy content within institutional structures and the larger postbroadcast environment. The people, networks, (dis)incentives, and dizzying array of media available influence content choices and audience preferences and expectations. Features and effects researchers might productively collaborate about what the boundaries of comic discourses offer or limit (i.e., what kinds of comedy can[not] be enacted). As Baum and Prior have both noted, the proliferation of soft news programs has altered the way viewers seek out and acquire political information.¹²³ For some segments of the population— young people in particular—the preference for entertaining, funny news is driving viewing patterns with younger citizens forsaking traditional news programming for political satire, soft news, and online humor. In effect, political comedy content has become an expected part of our political discourse. The implications of this dynamic and the consequences for public culture and political behavior have yet to be fully understood by communication researchers. In larger, structural terms, the question could be asked: is comedy some kind of totalitarian regime or a kaleidoscope of democratic offerings? As a point of inquiry, future work on political comedy should consider the influence of news content affinities, an affinity for political humor, and the diversity of the postbroadcast media environment as important contextual cues, understanding the symbiotic connections between institutions and individual and group choices.

Last, effects research needs to move beyond the confines of cross-sectional survey data and individual experiments to study the long-term effects of exposure to political comedy. In a similar vein, work on political comedy features needs to focus more broadly on the temporal dimensions of comic artifacts, including how the operations of political speeches or late-night monologues have changed over time. In both areas, we see room for time-series analyses to sharpen claims about the functions and impacts of developing comic forms. Taking a longer view should also encourage a better understanding of the ideological and ethical functions of political comedy and its contributions to contemporary discourses on gender, power, and citizenship. This final path could help scholars address normative questions about political comedy, allowing the field to edge closer toward answering questions like whether or not individuals such as Jon Stewart are saints or sinners in public culture.¹²⁴

To be clear, we are not necessarily advocating for multimethodological work to occur between features and effects research, but are rather arguing that, at a minimum, these literatures can inspire and recognize the reciprocal ways that each can move the other forward. With these avenues in mind, we urge communication scholars to lead the way on all things political comedy.

Notes

- [1] See Matthew M. Hurley, Daniel C. Dennett, and Reginald B. Adams, Jr, *Inside Jokes: Using Humor to Reverse-Engineer the Mind* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2011).
- [2] For starters, Holcomb's masterful overview of the importance of "jesting" as rhetoric in early modern England accounted for the complex sociopolitical purposes put into play by joking under changing (and changeable) circumstances—demonstrating in particular how issues of culture and identity raised in humorous forms are anything but trivial. Chris Holcomb, *Mirth Making: The Rhetorical Discourse on Jest in Early Modern England* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2001). The Classics have also played a vital role in (re)constructing comedy's political functions. Responding to charges that ancient comedy only functioned as entertainment, Konstan parsed differences between Greek forms like Old Comedy, where "bold actions; earthy humor; immediate social or political relevance . . . rich in fantasy and spunk" contrasted with the "naturalism" and "subtle and sympathetic examination[s] of social issues" in New Comedy—highlighting that both forms were "an intervention in the ideological life of the classical city-state." David Konstan, *Greek Comedy and Ideology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 4–5, 11. For a more comprehensive look at the historical, literary, and popular "significant reoccurring patterns" of comedy, see T.G.A. Nelson, *Comedy: The Theory of Comedy in Literature, Drama, and Cinema* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 17. As further motivation for our essay, we should last acknowledge the lead of Paul Lewis, who earlier set out "to introduce literary critics to the current social science humor research and to introduce social science humor researchers to literary works in which humor is crucial," to move beyond academic silos and encourage pluralistic projects in this area. Paul Lewis, *Comic Effects: Interdisciplinary Approaches to Humor in Literature* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989), ix–x.
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