

Political Satire:

Satirical News Affinity and its Relationship with Political  
Knowledge and Traditional News Media Consumption

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## ABSTRACT

In recent years there has been a growing debate about the role satirical news plays in society and whether satirical news use is responsible for increased political knowledge and participation among its audience. Survey data from both the 2010 and 2012 Pew Research Center for the People and the Press's Biennial Media Consumption Survey is used to test this relationship along with the role satirical news plays in the consumption of more traditional news sources. Going even deeper, this study attempts to determine the extent to which individual's use of satirical and traditional news media interact to influence political knowledge. Findings suggest that satirical news use significantly increases both overall news enjoyment and knowledge. Additionally, traditional news use seems to moderate the relationship between satirical news use and knowledge, with the relationship appearing highest, but flattest, among heavy users of traditional news and lowest, but more steeply positive, among lighter users of traditional news.

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## INTRODUCTION

Ten years ago, the host of Comedy Central's satirical news program *The Daily Show*, Jon Stewart, appeared on CNN's political debate show *Crossfire* in what is now a truly famous interview, where Stewart ridiculed *Crossfire* hosts for comparing their political news and debate show to his comedy show. When *Crossfire* hosts then attacked Stewart for not asking tough enough questions to then presidential candidate John Kerry, Stewart responded that his mission was not one of traditional journalism but instead of comedy. He went on to say that shows such as *Crossfire* have a certain journalistic responsibility and role in society and that they have failed Americans. Throughout the interview Stewart maintained that his show on Comedy Central was nothing more than a comedy show intended mainly to make people laugh, and, therefore, should not be examined with the same scrutiny as news discourse. During the interview, the hosts of *Crossfire* repeatedly tried to use comedy to "beat" Stewart at his own game while Stewart argued that such behavior was the fundamental problem. The traditional news media too often mistakes their work as entertainment instead of journalism (Colletta, 2009).

This debate has been referenced and cited numerous times over the years in both popular media as well as the academic community while attempting to define the role satirical news media plays in modern society (Young & Tisinger, 2006; Xenos & Becker, 2009; Carr, 2012; Colletta, 2009). While it is still uncertain what precise function satirical news media serve for society one thing is abundantly clear. News satire and parody have a significant effect on its viewers and has altered the contemporary political landscape and news media in many ways (Waisanen, 2009). News satire programs, in essence,

present comedic monologs about current events, comically point out hypocrisies as well as shortcomings found in the mainstream news media programs, and even report their own humorous take on the day's newsworthy events. These shows mimic the appearance and serious discourse of traditional newscasts, yet they also interweave the program with production techniques, content, tropes, and archetypes commonly found in entertainment programming. Most shows open similarly to that of hard news openings by emphasizing the date to give the show a sense of immediacy and graphics and voiceovers that imitate the authority and prestige of traditional broadcast news formats. Then they immediately transform into an entertainment show featuring quick camera moves, more upbeat music, and the presence of a live studio audience. While these techniques may seem to suggest that satirical news programs emphasize entertainment, the two discourses are portrayed as complementary to each other instead of in binary opposition (Baym, 2005).

Since the debut of such satirical news media, *The Daily Show* and its counterpart *The Colbert Report* combined have won more than 25 national Emmy awards while being nominated well over 100 times in various Emmy categories (Television Academy, 2014). *The Colbert Report* even boasts one Peabody Award in 2007 (National Association of Broadcasters, 2014). In addition, a 2007 Pew Research Center for the People and Press poll showed that comedian Jon Stewart was seen as the fourth most admired news figure in the United States (Today's Journalism Less Prominent, 2007), and *Time* magazine in 2009 listed Stewart as the most trusted newscaster in the United States (Jones & Baym, 2010). Extraordinarily, in 2006 even Merriam-Webster paid homage to Stephen Colbert when the famous dictionary claimed the Colbert-invented

word “truthiness” as the word of the year (Meddaugh, 2010). Many believe that these shows’ commercial appeal as well as their political significance can be attributed to their unique blending of entertainment and news discourses (Baym, 2005). It is this blending of traditional news discourse and use of satire that has generated both praise and ridicule for these programs. Interestingly, this apparent trust in satirical news broadcasters has arisen as Americans’ trust in traditional news sources has been on the decline. As recently as 2009, only 18 percent of Americans believed that the traditional press was unbiased and dealt with all sides of the issues fairly (Kohut, 2009). Meanwhile only 29 percent believed that journalists took the time needed to get their facts straight (Kohut, 2009). This lack of trust has had an effect on how the audience interprets the information gained via traditional news sources as well. It has been acknowledged that audience mistrust significantly diminishes the degree in which the media is able to influence audience members (Tsfati, 2004).

In an interview with *The Progressive*, co-creator of *The Daily Show*, Lizz Winstead, remarked that she saw *The Daily Show* and programs like it as extremely important to modern society, where she claimed the news media have regressed and no longer adequately accomplishes the task they were originally formed to perform. Winstead notes that the media, which has been considered the watchdog of society, now needed to be watched itself. To her, comedians fill this role by being the watchdogs for the watchdogs (Dinovella, 2012). In the United States, where the media in large part attempt to hold the government accountable for its actions, the best option to hold the press accountable, short of creating a national press council similar to that of India’s, is



for the press to in turn watch over itself. Jon Stewart and others like him, then, appear to hold a unique and important position in American society. Stewart's nightly program shows that there are effective ways for the media to critique and comment on itself and the government (Painter & Hodges, 2010). To Winstead, this might explain the apparent trust between American audiences and Jon Stewart. In addition, the above scenario described by Winstead would contend that shows such as *The Daily Show* first emerged because there was a serious abdication of duty by contemporary news media. To combat this degradation in purpose of traditional news media, which has arguably degenerated into a form of spectacle based on sound bites and spin, *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report* integrate tactics of both satire and journalism, two very different styles of discourse, to alter how viewers receive news (Baym, 2005). This would suggest that satirical news performs a needed journalistic function within American democracy (Faina, 2013). The comic strategies employed by such shows are then much more than just techniques for creating entertaining and engaging media content; they are also tools that comedians use to effectively engage in rhetorical criticism and sociopolitical applications (Waisanen, 2009). As such, as Waisanen puts it, to deny that these satirists make a positive contribution to American democracy would be to deny the importance of rhetorical study or the analytical examination of pervasive content (2009).

Yet, when analyzing satirical news programs, it is important not to focus only on the news and journalism aspect. Just as Jon Stewart has maintained, these programs are meant to be comedy and therefore are in their core different from news and should not necessarily be judged with the same journalistic scrutiny applied to traditional news

programs. While the programs might be outlined in such a way to remind viewers of newscasts that they might find in more traditional forms of media, satire, as an analytical device, does not broach political topics with the same lens and scrutiny as a traditional newsroom (Hmielowski, Holbert & Lee, 2011).

It is important to briefly note that this study focuses primarily on satire news and not entertainment news or parody news. While these topics are often lumped together and examined as a group, there are several fundamental differences in the core functions they serve in society. This study will not focus on various entertainment programs such as *The Tonight Show*, *The Ellen DeGeneres Show* or *Saturday Night Live*, which, while containing some news content, are framed as either entertainment news or parody news. Entertainment news as well as parody news are, as genres meant purely for the sake of entertainment. Parody seeks to mimic traditional news purely for the sake of humor and audience enjoyment, while satirical news uses humor to entertain the audience as well as educate society and incite social change. Satire news is a whole genre in itself that resists the traditional classification as either information or entertainment and exists to hold up “human vices and follies to ridicule and scorn” (Colletta, 2009, p 859). To many, it is unclear whether satirical news programs like *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report* are a reimagining of old satire and parody or a new form of journalism (Feldman, 2007).

While there are certainly other satirical news programs, such as HBO’s newer show *Last Week Tonight with John Oliver*, this study will primarily focus on the two Comedy Central news programs, *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report*, since most of the available data is centered on these two programs. Still, this study should not be

considered an analysis of *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report* but instead an analysis of satirical news as a genre.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

In a democracy there must be a healthy marketplace for ideas where individuals can receive information, deliberate, and then decide upon the best political course of action based on the information that they are provided. Within this context, the media have the responsibility to encourage civic virtue, expose corruption, and construct a space for political debate (Holbert, 2013). As far as political satire is concerned, there is substantial evidence that satire does have the potential to fill many of these roles and contribute to the virtues of republicanism within democratic society. However, as discussed in greater depth later, political satire may also play a role in the fostering of cynicism among many, particularly the young and unengaged, viewers. This potential has caused some to question whether satirical media play a positive or negative role in the encouragement of civic virtue and ideals. There is a substantial amount of evidence, though, that satirical news media do serve a valuable role helping to expose some of the corruption and underhanded dealings or intentions found in American media and politics (Holbert, 2013). As far as serving as a source of information in which to foster opportunity for political debate, satirical newscasts such as *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report* do provide a space for opposing perspectives that diverge from the consonant perspective often presented by other traditional forms of mass media (Meddaugh, 2010).

While as noted above, some argue that satirical programs are created in response to the decay of the news media, is that relative deterioration also why these programs are so popular? The uses-and-gratifications theory upholds that audiences are inherently

active in the communication process and not simply passive recipients to a media message (Rubin 2009). This implies that members of the audience will therefore purposefully seek media that satisfies their basic need for information or their basic need for entertainment. Some audiences then might actively seek out programs such as *The Colbert Report* and *The Daily Show* to both fill their basic need for entertainment as well as to attain information involving politics or current events. While the majority of young adults cite humor as their number one reason for viewing *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report*, a significant portion of respondents also list information as one of the key reasons for tuning in to such programming (Young, 2013). Also, there is a significant group of people who report that they find a great deal of enjoyment in the way that satirical newscasts “make fun of news.” This indicates that many viewers watch other news programs but then tune into satirical news to gain a second level of enjoyment to their previous news experiences (Young, 2013). There are even many, albeit again mostly younger, audience members, who use satirical media as their primary source of political information (Hollander, 2005; Heflin, 2006). Importantly, viewers tend to experience different types of media differently depending on their motivations to consume that media. This in turn can intrinsically change the way information received from that media is processed and interpreted in the brain (Roth et al., 2014). This means that an audience member’s motivation to view satirical media, whether it is to be informed or entertained, might have a drastic impact on how potential information is processed and if there will be a corresponding knowledge gain. The very classification of satirical media in the opinions of audience members influences an individual’s level of knowledge gain. Those who tend to view *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report* as legitimate news are more

motivated to process the information gained during the program and will have a correspondingly higher level of knowledge gained. It is theorized that viewing these programs as news, or even as both a mix of news and entertainment, activates greater mental resources resulting in a positive effect on learning (Feldman, 2013).

It is also important to have a basic understanding as to who watches these programs to gain a greater insight over how satirical news might influence society. As far as demographics go, it is typically an individual's age that is the most influential and consistent predictor of that individual's motivations to consume news programming (Hmielowski, Holbert & Lee, 2011). With that said, it is no great surprise that typically older audience members are more likely to be motivated to consume news for information-related purposes, while younger audiences view news media for more entertainment-based purposes (Lee, 2013). It is therefore popular belief that younger audiences in particular are not equally exposed to both satire and mainstream news programming. Rather, many believe that satirical, comedy-based news is the primary or even the only source of news among many younger audiences. It is true that in 2004, 21 percent of 18-34-year-olds reported that they regularly learned about the ongoing presidential campaign from satirical news programs. This is compared to the 23 percent of 18-34-year-olds from the same year reporting that they received political information from network news sources, significantly down from the 2000 election in which 39 percent of young adults reported receiving information from broadcast television news sources (Feldman, 2007). Even so, the assumption that young adults are receiving news content only from satirical or entertainment-based sources may not be accurate. Prior

research has shown that there tends to be a statistically significant positive correlation between satirical news consumption and traditional news exposure (e.g. Young & Tisinger, 2006). Regardless, there is still a large portion of the population, about 20 percent, who watches satirical news but claims to have no interest in following politics (Cao, 2010). This being the case, it is difficult to define whether satirical news viewing is the cause of increased traditional news consumption among young adults or an effect. Jon Stewart argues that young people can't possibly be getting news from his program because he doesn't do news. He does comedy based on the news, and if viewers did not know anything about the news prior to viewing, then they would simply not understand (C-SPAN Newhouse School Forum, 2004). This is consistent with past analyses of both *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report* suggesting that individuals low in political knowledge tend to avoid these programs and others like them because they do not understand the jokes (Young, 2013). There is data however, that shows that at least in some instances satirical news serves as a gateway to traditional news viewing where the entertainment aspects of the programs draw in typically more unengaged viewers and increase their likelihood of following up with traditional news exposure (Baum, 2005). While this cause-and-effect relationship is still debated, it is clear that viewing such comedic news programming likely increases with consumption of other forms of news media by typically unengaged viewers (Young & Tisinger, 2006). Those who regularly view traditional news expectantly do so to learn about contemporary issues. This would suggest that traditional news viewers will not be as affected by entertainment news as they are already attentive to the news media. It is then the unengaged news viewer, who would not normally be exposed to current events or political issues, who is most affected

by satirical news because news content is “piggybacking” off of comedic content (Baum 2005). In this case, comedy serves as the draw-in to assemble the audience as well as the vessel in which satirical news can engage in political discussion (Baym, 2005). Interestingly, these shows cover politics almost exclusively, making it difficult to argue that they pander to or attempt to attract completely unengaged viewers. Instead, whether intentionally or not, programs like *The Daily Show* lure in individuals who may not otherwise care for politics and direct their gaze to the important political issues of the day (Cao, 2010). Among already politically knowledgeable and engaged viewers, though, there is a tendency to watch political satire programming for background or commentary. These viewers clearly perceive that they are gaining something more than just entertainment from such programming. It is possible that these already very knowledgeable individuals watch satirical news to “fuel the kind of broad, integrative thinking that helps them make connections and gain insights (Young, 2013, p. 166).”

Beyond just age as a demographic signifier of who is more likely to watch satirical news, there is a strong correlation between the viewers of liberal opinionated news channels such as MSNBC and satirical news programming. Yet there is not a statistically significant relationship between the viewers of conservative opinionated news programming and satirical news. Despite this relationship, while political orientation does serve as a significant predictor of opinionated news viewing, such as an individual’s likelihood of viewing Fox News programming versus MSNBC, this relationship between political ideologies does not seem to exist when compared to satirical news (Hmielowski, Holbert & Lee, 2011). Satirical news does not seem to



reduce audience motivations to engage in selective exposure, though. In actuality, studies have concluded that exposure to satirical news media reinforces people's impulse to select media that align with their political ideologies and even influences viewers to become less tolerant of those who may not share their political opinions (Stroud & Muddiman, 2013). Also, motivations for viewing satirical news media differ based on gender and education level. For example, males are statistically much more likely than females to say that they watch satirical news media because it is funny, because they deem it more reliable and unbiased than traditional news, and because they use it to learn about current events (Young, 2013). Additionally, there is evidence that males, more so than females, tend to enjoy watching various forms of news content (Nash & Hoffman, 2009). Lastly, those with more education are more likely to be exposed to satirical media (Cao, 2008).

There have been reports of individuals who watch satirical news reporting similar interest in foreign affairs and political issues as hard news watchers, but interest does not necessarily translate into knowledge (Prior, 2003). So then the question really becomes, what effect if any do these types of programs have on political knowledge among viewers? Prior research indicates that while regular viewers of *The Daily Show* are typically more politically knowledgeable than both the average American and regular broadcast news viewers, it is not probable that they are receiving the majority of this political information from satirical news sources (Young & Tisinger, 2006). Some information is conveyed through these types of programs, though, since there is evidence that the viewing of satirical media does increase knowledge likened to that of a baseline.

One possibility is that satirical news media do not facilitate knowledge gain to the same level as other forms of news media (Kim & Vishak, 2008). Conversely, while satirical news programs have the main intention of entertaining viewers with laughter, they also tend to be a vehicle for substantive political and current-event information. Where traditional newscasts focus on hype, satirical newscasts focus on humor (Fox, Koloen, & Sahin, 2007). Despite this, these two very distinct and seemingly different types of programs surprisingly offer very similar amounts of substantive information (Fox, Koloen, & Sahin, 2007). These types of shows result in similar current-event knowledge gains over one week intervals as traditional news broadcasts on cable networks like CNN (Young & Hoffman, 2012). This is especially the case for those viewers who would normally be unengaged and uninterested in the political process and are accidentally informed about various political activities and current events through their search for entertainment or amusement (Brewer & Cao, 2006). On the other hand, there is some evidence to suggest that for already engaged and attentive political viewers, satirical news has very little to offer except for entertainment value (Young Min & Wojcieszak, 2009; Holbert, 2013). While containing similar amounts of substantive value, traditional news media and satirical news media are processed very differently in individuals' brains, resulting in satirical media usage showing to be more effective in influencing opinions about political figures and hard news media usage being more effective in conveying factual information about political issues. This is due to the type of mental processing being done when one watches these types of genres, where political entertainment news is processed via an online tally heuristic and traditional news is memory-based recall (Kim & Vishak, 2008). Regardless, audiences, even the typically

unengaged viewers, do not get all of the information needed to form political opinions from satirical newscasts. Instead, individuals use multiple sources, often including both satirical and non-satirical formats, to gain information that helps them gain a better understanding of politics (Hmielowski, Holbert & Lee, 2011). While taking into account multiple sources when forming their overall opinions, it is interesting to note that there is evidence that audiences tend to better remember certain basic recall facts such as names of interview subjects and even political affiliation and position of politicians presented on satirical newscasts than on more traditional cable news shows. This ease of recognition in the audience's mind may play some important role in the development of attitudes toward politicians and even politics (Becker, 2013). Satirical news does not pretend to always give the most accurate or unbiased facts, though it does provide certain insight that might be lacking in other types of news programs. Satirical media provides valuable insight into how American "social institutions work and teaches viewers to think, question and discover for themselves (Heflin, 2006)."

Beyond simple effects on political knowledge, what might be an even more important aspect of satirical news media is its agenda-setting role. In both *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report* and especially on HBO's satirical news comedy show *Last Week Tonight with John Oliver*, some new stories are highlighted that otherwise might go unnoticed by the conventional news media. For example, Stephen Colbert directed attention to campaign finance laws with humorous coverage of super PAC legislation where he famously announced that he himself was going to start a super PAC. And Colbert's *Better Know a District* segments focused on the positions and personalities of

congressional representatives who might otherwise have never been spotlighted on a national television network (Baym, 2007). Another prominent example of satirical news influencing the American news agenda would be *The Daily Show's* role in "breaking" the story linking then Vice President Dick Cheney to energy services corporation Halliburton, which was given many extremely profitable energy contracts in post-war Iraq (Feldman, 2007). This willingness to look at stories that other networks may dismiss as scandalous or uninteresting is strikingly important. As satire news has shown through the usage of these types of segments, it can provide issue exposure to otherwise latent subjects in American society. Also, since these subjects are often outside of the context one would typically see on a traditional television newscast, it offers further evidence that there is the potential for these types of programs to pass down political knowledge directly to the audience. Take, for example, Colbert's *Better Know a District* series. In this segment, Colbert humorously discusses the importance of congressional districts and juxtaposes this importance with the fact that many Americans know very little about these districts. He then goes on to discuss several in great depth and conduct humorous interviews with congressmen and women from some of the highlighted districts. This in turn both raises awareness of the importance of this undervalued part of American politics and serves as a valuable way for Americans to be introduced to the people representing them in Washington. Last, because these interviews are done in a humorous manner, audiences get a chance to see their representatives as both people and politicians in a very different way than if these interviews were conducted in another format (Baym, 2007). This may be the true strength of these types of programs. Satire has the unique

opportunity to highlight alternative perspectives, teach the public that it is healthy to engage in political debate, and playfully critique that system (Waisanen, 2009).

There have been times, albeit few and far between, where Stewart and Colbert forsake their traditional roles of political comedians and satirists. Instead of just serving as media personalities raising issue awareness, they have portrayed themselves as concerned citizens reaching out to the public in various forms of issue advocacy. One of the most notable occasions of this was in 2010, when Stewart used his nightly satirical news program as a platform to personally ask Congress to address the lingering healthcare needs of 9/11 rescue workers. In doing so, Stewart not only advocated for an issue, but also caused many members of his audience to do the same (Berkowitz & Gutsche, 2012). This rare moment of issue advocacy caused *The New York Times* to publish an article likening Stewart to news media legend Edward R. Murrow and his groundbreaking battle against McCarthyism in the 1950s. Indeed, the article also cites Stewart as one of the key contributors of the eventual success of the 9/11 rescue worker's healthcare bill (Carter & Stelter, 2010). While this sort of advocacy has happened in the past on very rare occasions, satirical news and its much more relaxed format does provide unique modern mediums in which popular and recognizable personalities can advocate directly for an issue. This act, though, has been viewed by some as a major overstepping of traditional journalistic boundaries within the larger issue of objectivity in journalism. Satire is a form of political discourse and as such many claim that it should be disconnected from action. Therefore, by taking a position and formulating a specific call

to action, some believe that Stewart nullified his role as a political satirist (Carlson & Peifer, 2013).

It has been demonstrated that increased exposure to satirical news programming leads to increased cynicism toward political candidates among audience members (Baumgartner & Morris 2006). This is especially the case among unengaged viewers (Balmas, 2012). There is a greater increase in cynicism among unengaged viewers because they are much less likely to view traditional news broadcasts that might serve a moderating effect. Therefore the extent of perceived realism in satirical news depends greatly on the amount of “hard news” one is exposed to. In this way, traditional news programming can serve as a mediating factor inhibiting the development of cynicism among audience members (Balmas 2012). Overall though, it is the constant negative comments and innuendoes about American politics and politicians that are so blatantly featured and framed in this type of satirical programming that lead audiences to have stronger negative emotions toward the political system (Lee & Kwak, 2014). This effect is amplified among younger viewers as well as in viewers who are previously less engaged or show less interest in politics (Guggenheim, Kwak & Campbell, 2011). Also of importance, political satire does not seem to wholly change the feelings and opinions of an audience about particular issues or candidates. There is evidence to suggest that an individual’s prior disposition is the key factor in determining how political satire impacts audience members’ feelings of cynicism toward particular subjects (Becker, 2014).

The phenomenon of increased cynicism is not confined to that of satirical news media, though. It has been well established through past media research that negatively

framed political prompts may result in greater distrust and cynicism among the public (Cappella & Jamieson, 1997). Additionally, since the early 1970s there has been a lot written about the relationship between non-news entertainment viewing and growing mistrust in politics (Guggenheim, Kwak & Campbell, 2011). With this being the case, it might be unfair to single out comedians such as Stewart and Colbert with a charge of cynicism that “implies that the manners and conventions of our political times are more generally high-minded and above reproach” (Bennett, 2007). No matter the source though, the resulting higher levels of individuals’ cynicism regarding both the media and politics is generally looked upon as a negative aspect of satirical news and even to some extent mainstream news as well. However, should cynicism always be viewed as a negative? Cynicism and negative emotions toward a political subject have been shown to lead to a greater level of political participation (Lee & Kwak, 2014). Consequently, while there appears to be an increase in political cynicism associated with satirical news, there is also an overall increase in individual political efficacy (Brewer, Young & Morreale 2013). Additionally, findings suggest that consistent exposure to sarcastic political humor such as that found on both *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report* nurture an individual’s political participation (Lee & Kwak, 2014); as well there is a positive relationship between the viewing of satirical comedy interviews on *The Daily Show* and anticipated political expression (Becker, 2013). This is the true goal of political satire; to encourage an audience to turn off their television sets and take action (Colletta, 2009).

These types of programs also appear to stimulate attentiveness to news content among less politically interested viewers, and these less interested viewers can more

easily acquire and retain political information from these programs than from traditional news media broadcasts. In this case, it is assumed that comedy is therefore a catalyst that can stimulate attentiveness among audiences (Xenos & Becker, 2009). Additionally, viewers of *The Daily Show* report an increased confidence in their individual ability to understand otherwise complicated politics (Baumgartner & Morris 2006). Interestingly, this is not the case for *The Colbert Report*. It has been shown that in an experimental setting, first exposure to Stephen Colbert's unique style of satire featuring many implicit and explicit messages seems to confuse some younger viewers. Yet this may not necessarily be the case for regular viewers of *The Colbert Report* as they are more accustomed to Colbert's unique style of satire (Baumgartner & Morris, 2008). Colbert's show centers on implicit irony and audience understanding of the program's connotative meanings over the explicit discourse. It is what is implied over and above the original content in *The Colbert Report* that tends to challenge the hegemonic aspects of modern American society (Meddaugh, 2010). It is important to note that *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report* each typically feature very different styles of satire, which can have a great effect on the persuasion process (LaMarre, Landreville, Young & Gilkerson, 2014). This difference in satire style might be important to the understanding of why new viewers to each program tend to have such different feelings related to their ability to understand each show, regardless of whether this contrast is mitigated by consistent viewing. Additionally, it is speculated that Colbert's style of presentation serves a polarizing effect leading to mental processing that will reinforce present beliefs. This effect is shared by both liberals and conservatives. Also interesting is that both liberals and conservatives recognize and appreciate the comedy associated with *The Colbert*



*Report* despite interpreting the messages in very different ways (LaMarre, Landreville & Beam, 2009). As discussed by LaMarre et. al., Horatian satire leaves agency in the hands of the audience while Juvenalian satire places most agency in the hands of the content producers (2014). Typically, *The Colbert Report* can be classified as mostly Juvenalian in satirical nature while *The Daily Show* features more of a mix of Horatian and Juvenalian types of satirical comedy. This might also be a potential explanation of why audiences tend to view content on *The Colbert Report* as having a greater comedic value than that of *The Daily Show*, yet viewing *The Daily Show* as the more serious program (Becker, 2013). Either way, both Stewart and Colbert can be considered rhetorical critics who critique the media and shed light on how well the media informs the public about key issues. Through the use of juxtapositions and alternative viewpoints, both Colbert and Stewart use different comedic devices to continually force issues into the public agenda, promote the consideration of different ideas from different perspectives not mentioned commonly in the traditional news media, and create “shocks of insight” (Waisanen 2009).

## HYPOTHESES

The previous literature can be interpreted in such a way where it becomes reasonably safe to make a few basic assumptions about satirical news and how the audience reacts to such programming. Some these basic assumptions will be tested in this study to gain a greater understanding of what role satirical news plays in the modern news culture. The first major point to be examined is the relationship between satirical news and the audience's overall sense of news enjoyment.

**H1:** *Those who use satirical news media more will tend to report that they enjoy keeping up with the news more.*

Support, or lack of support, for *H1* could indicate that satirical news fosters a sense of news enjoyment among audiences that might lead audiences to seek out other types of news content, both satirical and traditional. Conversely, a positive correlation between satirical news use and news enjoyment might simply show that individuals who enjoy news content seek out satirical news. Regardless of causality, a positive correlation between satirical news usage and news enjoyment would suggest that those who watch satirical news are more likely to consume other news media as well. To test this correlation, this study will attempt to replicate Young and Tisinger's (2006) work with more recent data and show that there is a statistically significant positive relationship between satirical news use and traditional news consumption.

**H2:** *Those who use satirical news media more will tend to also use other forms of news media – including a) nightly network news, b) cable*

*television news, c) NPR, d) C-SPAN, e) daily news papers, and f) online news – more often than those who do not regularly view satirical news media.*

Additionally, it can be assumed that those who find a greater enjoyment in news are not only more likely to consume more news, but also more likely to know more about current events.

**H3:** *Those who enjoy the news more will know more about current events.*

After identifying whether there is a correlation between satirical news and overall enjoyment, between enjoyment and knowledge, and between satirical news consumption and the consumption of other, non-satirical forms of news, it becomes imperative to determine whether there is a direct relationship between satirical news and knowledge.

**H4:** *Those who use satirical news media will tend to know more about current events.*

It will then be extremely interesting to determine whether this knowledge gain can be completely explained by the tendency to use other news media more often or whether there is knowledge gained over and above what would be expected from traditional news sources. Evidence for the latter pattern would contradict Stewart's opinion noted earlier that his program was not news and merely a comedy program about the news.

Additionally, this would contradict Young and Tisinger's (2006) conclusion that even though satirical news viewers seemed to be more knowledgeable than those who did not watch satirical news, it was not probable that they received the majority of their

information from satirical news sources. Instead, it might be that there is knowledge gained from satirical news that correlates directly with increased current events knowledge, yet this relationship is moderated by information gained during traditional news consumption. Therefore, hypothesis five was designed to test this relationship.

**H5:** *Traditional news consumption will serve as a moderator between satirical news use and current events knowledge.*

## METHOD

To test the above hypotheses and attempt to answer the proposed research questions, data will be drawn from the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press's biennial media consumption surveys from the years 2010 ( $n = 3,006$ ) and 2012 ( $n = 3,003$ ). After comparing the two data sets and confirming that there are no major differences in the way questions related to the concerned topics were worded, the two data sets were combined into a single very large data set ( $N = 6,009$ ) where the year of collection will be coded (2010 = 0, 2012 = 1) and statistically controlled for analysis. Both of these surveys consisted of random digit dialing of both landline as well as cellular phones (*landline*  $n = 3,806$ , *mobile*  $n = 2,203$ ) of adults living in the United States.

### **Variables**

Most of the following variables were assessed in very similar ways in both the 2010 and 2012 surveys. Unless otherwise noted there were not significant differences in question format or coding from one year to the next. All variables that did have slight differentiations in the wording or coding methods from the 2010 survey to the 2012 survey were still similar enough to be compared through the statistical standardization of the variables. The variables relevant to this study are as follows.

### Demographic Variables

Combined, the two data sets consist of 55 percent of participants being female and 45 percent being male. Gender was coded so that female equals a value of 0 while male equals 1. Additionally, the mean age of the combined data sets is 51.504 years old ( $SD = 18.418$ ). Of the participants in both surveys, 77 percent identified as white, 9 percent described themselves as Black or African-American, while 8 percent identified as Hispanic or Latino, with 6 percent of participants identifying as some other race.

Education level was determined slightly differently by the 2010 and 2012 surveys. In the 2010 survey, participants were asked to indicate their level of education on a 7-point scale where 1 represented an answer of “none or grades 1-8” and an answer of 7 represented “post-graduate training or professional schooling after college (e.g. towards a master’s degree or PhD; law or medical)” ( $M = 4.719$ ,  $SD = 1.599$ ). The 2012 data set, on the other hand, asked participants to indicate their education level on an 8-point scale where 1 was “less than high school (grades 1-8 or no formal schooling)” and 8 signified “post graduate or professional degree, including master’s, doctorate, medical or law degree (e.g. MA, MS, PhD, MD, JD)” ( $M = 4.707$ ,  $SD = 1.887$ ). Because of the differences in scales used between the two data sets, the education scores were standardized before they were combined into a single final data collection.

### Exogenous Variables

Political ideology was measured in both surveys (2010 and 2012) on a 7-point scale where 1 was “very liberal” and 7 was “very conservative,” with the mean scoring of all participants being 3.238 ( $SD = 0.977$ ).

The income variable was measured in both the 2010 and 2012 surveys on a 9-point scale where 1 corresponded to “less than \$10,000” and a value of 9 represented “\$150,000 or more” ( $M = 5.129$ ,  $SD = 2.424$ ). For the income variable, the overall median answer was a score of 6 corresponding with the value “\$50,000 to \$75,000”.

To determine an individual’s satirical news media use, an additive index was used to indicate how much participants reported watching *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report*. To measure an individual’s satirical news usage, both the 2010 and 2012 surveys asked participants whether they watched *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report* either “regularly,” “sometimes,” “hardly ever,” or “never.” These responses were recoded on a 0 to 3 scale so that “never” equaled 0 and “regularly” equaled 3. Then each individual’s scores for both *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report* were added, which resulted in each individual’s scoring somewhere between 0 and 6 on a new overall satirical news usage variable ( $M = 1.319$ ,  $SD = 1.754$ ).

Questions relating to the online news media usage variable were asked slightly differently in 2010 and 2012. In 2010 participants were simply asked “How frequently do you get news online?” The response options ranged from “every day,” which will be

recoded as a 5, “three to five days per week” (4), “one or two days per week” (3), “once every few weeks” (2), “less often” (1) and “never” (0). In 2012 the original question was asked slightly differently to account for the increased popularity and functionality of mobile Internet devices such as cellular phones. The exact wording of the question was as follows. “How frequently do you get news online or on a mobile device?” The 2012 survey had the same response options as the 2010 survey question. In this case, despite the apparent difference in question wording, these questions can be deemed similar enough to be compared since, whether or not the information was found on a mobile device or computer, the news content is still provided via online sources ( $M = 3.280$ ,  $SD = 1.765$ ).

To determine a combined variable for an individual’s legacy media use, it is necessary to look at several individual variables including how often one watches broadcast television news ( $M = 1.635$ ,  $SD = 1.185$ ), cable television news ( $M = 1.908$ ,  $SD = 1.119$ ), listens to NPR ( $M = 0.837$ ,  $SD = 1.106$ ), watches C-SPAN ( $M = 0.643$ ,  $SD = 0.881$ ) and reads a daily newspaper ( $M = 1.951$ ,  $SD = 1.170$ ). For each of the two survey years, these variables were measured the same way. Each survey asked the audience to identify how often they viewed, listened to, or read such content as either “regularly” (3), “sometimes” (2), “hardly ever” (1), or “never” (0). These individual variables were also used in the assessment of hypothesis 2.

An aggregate variable detailing an individual’s overall traditional news media use was also created. To create a variable that corresponded to an individual’s overall traditional news use it was necessary for each variable for traditional news consumption –



a) nightly network news, b) cable news, c) NPR, d) C-SPAN, e) newspapers, f) online news – to be standardized. Afterwards, the combined mean was taken from all of the standardized traditional news media use variables to create one overall traditional news use score ( $M = -0.011$ ,  $SD = 0.703$ ).

### **Endogenous Variables**

In both surveys the overall news enjoyment variable was calculated from participants' responses to a single question that simply asked how much each individual enjoyed keeping up with the news. Possible response options included “a lot”, which will be recoded as a 3, “some” (2), “not much” (1), and “not at all” (0;  $M = 2.293$ ,  $SD = 0.841$ ).

Participants' overall level of political knowledge was determined by the number of correct responses given to a series of questions administered by each survey. This series of questions in both the 2010 and 2012 surveys consisted of four questions concerning various political and current events facts relevant to the year in which the surveys took place. In 2010 the survey questions were as follows.

1. “Do you happen to know which political party has a majority in the U.S. House of Representatives?” (correct answer: Democrat)
2. “Can you tell me which company Steve Jobs is the head of?” (correct answer: Apple)

3. “Do you happen to know who Eric Holder is?” (correct answer: U.S. Attorney General)
4. “Can you name the country where a recent volcanic eruption disrupted international air travel?” (correct answer: Iceland)

The mean number of correct responses to the 2010 survey was 2.057 ( $SD = 1.275$ ).

Similar to the 2010 survey questions, the 2012 questions were as follows.

1. “Do you happen to know which political party has a majority in the U.S. House of Representatives?” (correct answer: Republican)
2. “Do you happen to know if the national unemployment rate as reported by the government is currently closer to 5 percent, 8 percent, 15 percent, or 21 percent?” (correct answer: 8 percent)
3. What nation is Angela Merkel the leader of? (correct answer: Germany)
4. “Which person – Mitt Romney or Barack Obama – is more supportive of increasing taxes on higher income people?” (correct answer: Barack Obama)

The mean number of correct responses to the 2012 survey was 2.137 ( $SD = 1.298$ ).

Because these the two data sets from 2010 and 2012 did not use the same questions it becomes necessary to standardize each individual’s knowledge variable by calculating a z-score ( $M = 0.000$ ,  $SD = 0.999$ ).

## PROCEDURE

Hypothesis one stated that there was a likely positive correlation between satirical news use and self-reported news enjoyment. A regression analysis was conducted to test this relationship. While news enjoyment could potentially be considered an independent variable with satirical news use as the dependent variable, since individuals who enjoy the news more might theoretically be more likely to search out a wider variety of news content, this study is going to assume that the reverse is happening. The more an individual watches satirical news the more he or she will find the news enjoyable. Therefore, in creating a regression analysis comparing satirical news usage and news enjoyment, satirical news use will be categorized as the independent variable with news enjoyment as the dependent variable. Regression allowed this study to examine what other independent factors might account for variance in overall news enjoyment as well. In the first model, basic demographic variables were compared alongside satirical news use to attempt to determine whether age, gender, race, education level, or income factored into the determining of the news enjoyment variable. There have been many implications that satirical news is primarily a young audience's genre (Feldman, 2007; Hmielowski, Holbert & Lee, 2011). Therefore, it is important to include an age variable within the hierarchal regression analysis. Additionally, previous studies have concluded that women do not typically find the news as enjoyable as men tend to (Nash & Hoffman, 2009). Therefore, to then get an accurate picture, it is imperative to include gender as a potential modifying demographic variable as well. Beyond age and gender, the variables for income, ideology, and education level have been consistently considered variables

worth analysis by many past studies (Cao, 2008) and therefore will be included to gain a better understanding as to how income and education might correspond to an individual's sense of news enjoyment. Additionally, exposure to other forms of news must be considered as well when determining satirical news use's effect on an audience member's level of news enjoyment. To do this, model 2 featured a regression analysis taking into account each individual's overall traditional news use.

Hypothesis two stated that there would be a positive relationship between the use of satirical news media and the use of other forms of traditional news media. To test the hypothesis, once again satirical news use will be the independent variable and traditional media use will be the dependent variable. This is done because the hypothesis is designed to determine whether those who show more interest in watching satirical news correspondingly search for other news content as well. Hierarchical regression equations will be used to determine whether there is a statistically significant relationship between satirical news use and traditional news use even after controlling for the year in which the data was recorded and basic demographic variables such as age, gender, income, and ideology. In this case, use measures of the individual traditional news media were not aggregated into one variable for comparison. Instead each variable for traditional news use was analyzed separately. This was done to determine whether satirical news viewers tended to mostly consume certain types of traditional news (e.g. online news or cable news) and neglect other forms of news media such as newspapers.

Hypothesis three, relating to the relationship between news enjoyment and current events knowledge, will also be tested using a regression analysis. While one can certainly

argue that prior knowledge is fundamental to enjoying the news, this analysis will assume that knowledge is most likely influenced by how much one enjoys the news as a subject. Those who are more interested in news might be more likely to pay attention to the programming and retain the information they receive. As a result, overall current events knowledge will be the dependent variable, and the tested independent variable will be news enjoyment. This analysis will feature other independent variables such as satirical news use, traditional news use, race, gender, age, ideology, education and income as well. This is done to determine whether news enjoyment accounts for an additional amount of variance in the model not accounted for by the aforementioned demographic independent variables.

Hypothesis four stated that those who use satirical media will tend to know more about current events than those who do not tend to watch satirical news. Satirical news media will again be the independent variable, and current events knowledge will be the dependent variable. Hierarchical regression equations will be used to determine this relationship as well, all the while controlling for variance in basic demographic variables as well as variables regarding other news use.

Hypothesis five dealt with traditional news use's moderating function between satirical news use and current events knowledge. To test this hypothesis, a multiple regression analysis was conducted. Before being able to do this analysis, though, it was necessary to create a term for the interaction between satirical news use and traditional news use. To create the term, the overall traditional news use score was multiplied by the satirical news use variable. Model 1 of the regression analysis featured all of the

independent variables from the final model of the regression table for hypothesis 4. This accounted for year of data collection, gender, age, education level, income, ideology, race, traditional news use and satirical news use. The interaction term was then added into the model, producing Model 2. If the addition of this term accounts for a significant portion of variance in the model, then it can be assumed that traditional news consumption moderates the relationship between satirical news use and knowledge. The nature of the moderation would then be explored graphically.

## RESULTS

### **Satirical News's Influence on Enjoyment**

First, the satirical news use and news enjoyment variables were compared. Recall that hypothesis one predicted that there would be a positive correlation in the amount of satirical news an individual watched and that individual's overall level of news enjoyment. Hypothesis one was supported. As indicated in Table 1, when controlling only for the basic independent variables such as age, gender, race and ethnicity, education level, income, and ideology the statistically significant positive relationship between satirical news use and news enjoyment was still evident ( $b = .090$ ,  $p < .001$ ). When controlling for all of the above demographic variables as well as for overall traditional news use, a positive correlation between how often one watched satirical news media and one's self-reported level of news enjoyment remained ( $b = 0.043$ ,  $p < .001$ ). This second model, taking into account other news usage habits, explained roughly 23 percent of the variance in news enjoyment.

Table 1  
*Hierarchical Regression Estimating News Enjoyment*

Model	News Enjoyment	
	1	2
Constant	1.056****	1.354****
Year	-0.033	-0.020
Gender	0.073**	0.047
Age	0.013****	0.010****
Education Level	0.077****	0.035*
Income	0.031****	0.015*
Ideology	0.087****	0.081****
African-American	0.281****	0.186****
Hispanic/Latino	0.091	0.089
Other Race	0.041	0.001
Traditional News	--	0.426****
Satirical News	0.090****	0.043****
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	0.134	0.233

Notes

All *b* unstandardized

\**p*<.05 \*\**p*<.01 \*\*\**p*<.005 \*\*\*\**p*<.001

### Satirical News's Influence on Traditional News Use

Table 2 indicates the relationships between satirical news viewing and the consumption of other non-satirical news sources. As indicated in the table below there proved to be a statistically significant positive correlation between the viewing of satirical news and the consumption of traditional news in all mediums thus supporting hypothesis two.

Table 2  
*Regression Table Estimating the Relationship Between Satirical News Use and Traditional News Consumption*

	Network News	Cable News	NPR	C-SPAN	Newspaper News	Online News
Constant	0.560****	0.536****	0.486****	-0.090	1.154****	3.217****
Year	0.011	-0.122	0.083**	-0.063*	-0.071*	-0.095
Gender	-0.142***	0.108*	0.109****	0.017	0.016	0.199****
Age	0.018****	0.009****	0.005****	0.007****	0.012****	-0.017****
Education	-0.040	-0.017	0.182****	0.024	0.085****	0.314****
Income	0.019	0.042****	0.033****	0.004	0.039****	0.101****
Ideology	-0.004	0.157****	-0.115****	0.042***	-0.005	0.047
African-American	0.510****	0.434****	0.026	0.496****	0.144*	-0.014
Hispanic/Latino	0.059	0.099	0.024	0.164***	-0.105	-0.157
Other Race	0.082	0.108	0.011	0.221****	-0.106	0.147
Satirical News	0.077****	0.113****	0.149****	0.116****	0.065****	0.112****
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	0.088	0.077	0.133	0.085	0.059	0.121

#### Notes

All b unstandardized

\*p<.05 \*\*p<.01 \*\*\*p<.005 \*\*\*\*p<.001



As one can see from the table above, the more one watches satirical news, the more likely that individual is to consume nightly network news ( $b = 0.077, p < .001$ ), cable television news ( $b = 0.113, p < .001$ ), NPR ( $b = 0.149, p < .001$ ), C-SPAN ( $b = 0.085, p < .001$ ), newspapers ( $b = 0.059, p < .001$ ), and online news materials ( $b = 0.121, p < .001$ ).

### **Relationship Between News Enjoyment and Knowledge**

Hypothesis three was supported. Those who enjoy consuming news content more tend to have a greater knowledge of current events. As indicated in Table 3, news enjoyment accounted for a significant portion of variance even when controlling for demographic variables as well as traditional and satirical news consumption habits ( $b = 0.218, p < .001$ ). This model accounted for roughly 33 percent of the variance.

Table 3  
*Regression Analysis of the Relationship Between News Enjoyment and Knowledge*

Variable	Unstandardized <i>b</i> Value
Constant	-1.317****
Year	0.028
Age	0.399****
Education	0.265****
Income	0.059****
Ideology	0.002
African American	-0.276****
Hispanic	-0.189****
Traditional News Use	0.110****
Satirical News Use	0.043****
News Enjoyment	0.218****
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	0.326

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Notes

All *b* unstandardized

\**p*< .05 \*\**p*<.01 \*\*\**p*<.005 \*\*\*\**p*<.001

### **Satirical News's Influence on Current Events Knowledge**

Hypothesis four stated that the more satirical news media an individual watched, the more knowledge that individual would have about current events. This relationship was supported. As one can see from Table 4, when controlling for basic demographic, economic and political variables, this relationship is still evident ( $b = 0.080$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Finally, when controlling for demographic variables as well as news consumption habits, the positive relationship between satirical news use and current events knowledge is still distinct ( $b = 0.057$ ,  $p < .001$ ). This second model, including other traditional news consumption, explains almost 29 percent of the variance. This data is indicated in Table 4.

Table 4  
*Hierarchical Regression Estimating the Relationship Between Satirical News Use and Knowledge*

Model	Knowledge	
	1	2
Constant	-1.186****	-1.054****
Year	0.013	0.023
Gender	0.380****	0.365****
Age	0.010****	0.009****
Education	0.270****	0.248****
Income	0.074****	0.067****
Ideology	0,024	0.023
African-American	-0.193****	-0.240****
Hispanic/Latino	-0.158***	-0.155***
Other Race	-0.127*	-0.142**
Traditional News Use	--	0.210****
Satirical News	0.080****	0.057****
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	0.274	0.289

Notes

All *b* values unstandardized

\**p*<.05 \*\**p*<.01 \*\*\**p*<.005 \*\*\*\**p*<.001

### **Traditional News as a Moderator in the Relationship Between Satirical News and Knowledge**

Hypothesis five was also supported. Traditional news use did have a moderating effect on the relationship between satirical news use and knowledge ( $b = -0.025$ ,  $p < .05$ ). To begin, a multiple regression analysis regarding satirical news use and traditional news consumption was conducted. In this model other variables including age, gender, and education level were also considered. These variables accounted for a significant amount of variance ( $R^2 = 0.289$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Next, an interaction term between satirical news use and overall traditional news consumption was added to the model, and it too accounted for a significant portion of the variance in current events knowledge ( $R^2 = 0.290$ ,  $p < .01$ ) representing a  $\Delta R^2 = 0.001$ . A complete summary of the regression analysis can be seen in Table 5.

Table 5  
*Hierarchical OLS Regression Analysis of Traditional News Use's Moderating Effect on the Relationship Between Satirical News Use and Current Events Knowledge*

Model	Knowledge	
	1	2
Constant	-1.054*****	-1.060*****
Year	0.023	0.024
Gender	0.365*****	0.364*****
Age	0.009*****	0.009*****
Education Level	0.248*****	0.247*****
Income	0.067*****	0.067*****
Ideology	0.023	0.023
African-American	-0.240*****	-0.237*****
Hispanic	-0.155***	-0.151***
Other Race	-0.142**	-0.140*
Traditional News Use	0.210*****	0.244*****
Satirical News Use	0.057*****	0.062*****
Interaction Term	--	-0.025*
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	0.289	0.290

Notes

All *b* values unstandardized

\**p* < .05 \*\**p* < .01 \*\*\**p* < .005 \*\*\*\*\**p* < .001

As noted from the Table 5, the original statistically significant linear relationships between both traditional news media ( $b = 0.244$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and satirical news media ( $b = 0.062$ ,  $p < .001$ ) remain even when accounting for the interaction between the two variables. This indicates that traditional news use and satirical news use do not only interact together to predict knowledge, but both separately and individually predict knowledge as well. Traditional news viewing's moderation effect on the relationship between satirical news and knowledge can be seen graphically in Figure 1.

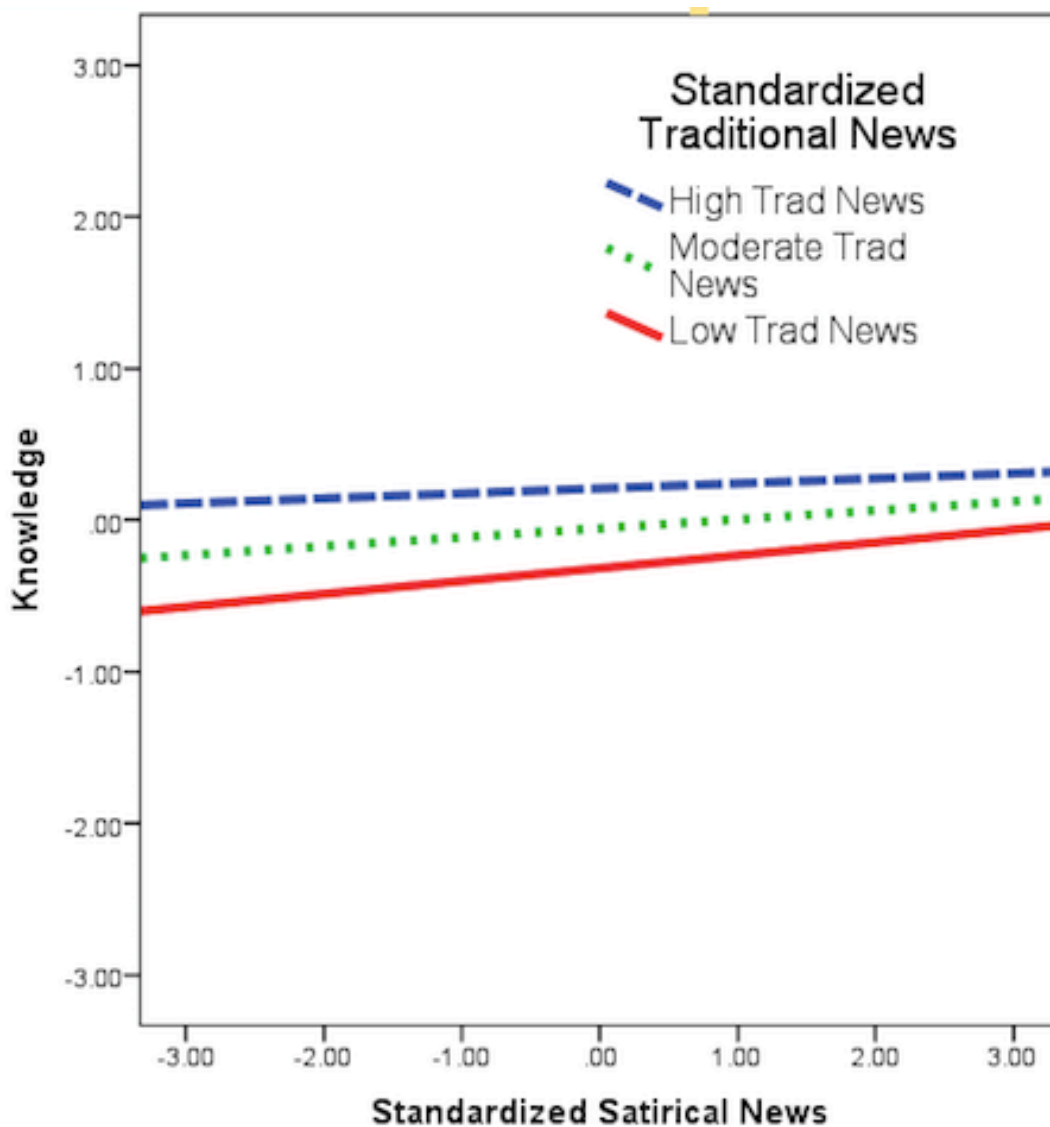


Figure 1  
*Moderation Effects of Traditional News Use on Satirical News Use and Current Events Knowledge*

In Figure 1, the units of measurement for both the overall current events knowledge and the standardized satirical news use represent the basic units of standard deviation above and below the mean. As one can see from Figure 1, those who watch a lot of traditional news and little satirical news score better on a current event's survey than those who do



not watch either satirical or traditional news. As the viewership of satirical news use rises among individuals in the high traditional news use group, there is a general gain in knowledge. However, this knowledge gain, while evident, is not drastic. It is shown to be evident by the very slight positive slope of the line. This indicates that the more one watches traditional news media, the less of an impact satirical news use will have on that individual's overall current events knowledge. That is not to say that watching additional satirical news media will not result in additional knowledge among the high traditional news group. Indeed, there is a positive impact on knowledge when one in the high traditional news use group watches additional satirical news content. This relationship is more evident, though, among those viewers who do not watch as much traditional news. The less traditional news an individual consumes, the more drastic of an increase in knowledge that individual will show as his or her satirical news use increases. This is evident by the higher positive slope of the low traditional news use group than the high traditional news group in Figure 1.

## DISCUSSION

The research so far reported in this study has used quantifiable data to indicate that satirical news serves an important and potentially undervalued role in society, not only by informing its audience, but also by fostering a greater overall enjoyment of the news, and possibly by influencing audiences' traditional news consumption habits. These results seem to contradict prominent satirical news host Jon Stewart's claim that his program is not news and instead merely an entertainment program framed around making fun of the traditional nightly news and how it handles certain political topics. Regardless, in this study several important characteristics were revealed about this genre.

While not quite a surprising finding, it was shown that the use of satirical news media does tend to foster an overall enjoyment of the news. This is hardly unexpected, since the primary goal of such satirical news media is to entertain audiences using humor while critiquing society through devices such as irony and satire. This, too, has not gone unnoticed in earlier research on the genre of satirical news and indeed the results of this study support earlier findings that satirical news media increases attentiveness in otherwise uninterested viewers (Xenos & Becker, 2009).

This increase in overall enjoyment of the news as a result of viewing satirical news content then corresponds directly to this study's findings that those individuals who find more enjoyment in consuming the news also tend to know more about current events. It only makes sense that those who enjoy watching the news will seek out more content related to the news. Those individuals will also pay closer attention to the information gained from such news sources and, therefore, gain more knowledge from consuming news. While the positive relationship between news enjoyment and

knowledge may not be the most surprising of findings, it is nevertheless significant. This simple result shows that audiences can be better informed by enjoying what they watch on the news. There is already a precarious balance between entertainment and information in the programming of news content. Thus, incorporating more entertainment value into the news could be potentially dangerous as this could lead to the degradation of journalism's vitally important role in society. Journalism's primary function in society is to educate and inform, not to entertain. Still, the relationship between enjoyment and knowledge persists. The revelations in this study might better be used to advocate for more informative entertainment programs rather than more entertaining news broadcasts. This is really where the satirical news genre fits into American media culture. It may not be journalism, but it does not claim to be either. It is first and foremost an entertainment genre dedicated to amusing audiences through humor. What is unique about the genre, though, is that it is an entertainment-based genre with an informative subtext.

The increased sense of news enjoyment among satirical news viewers might also explain why satirical news viewers tend to take in other forms of news media more often as well. This was not simply the case for particular types of news media. The positive correlation corresponded to every type of news media that was tested in this study. To explain this, it helps to understand that audiences tend to have basic needs. According to uses-and-gratifications theory, media audiences are inherently active in the communication process and not simply passive recipients to a media message (Katz, Blumler & Gurevitch, 1973). This implies that members of the audience will purposefully choose media that satisfy one of their basic needs. Some audiences, therefore, might actively search out programs such as *The Colbert Report* and *The Daily Show* to both fill

their basic needs for entertainment and to attain political and current events knowledge. In this case, satirical news is a method in which individuals can satisfy both basic demands at once; however, for most audiences these two programs do not fully satisfy either the need for entertainment or for information. This is when their other viewing habits must be considered as well as their motivation for watching satirical news. If the individual's motivation for watching a satirical news program such as *The Daily Show* is primarily entertainment-based, he or she is looking to satisfy a basic need for diversion yet in this process is exposed to news content that intrigues and piques an interest. Then, using foundational knowledge that he or she receives from satirical news programming, that individual might turn to other forms of news media for additional information. Still, there are those who already have a genuine interest in the news and enjoy consuming all types of news content. In this case these viewers might normally look to traditional forms of news media to satisfy their primary demand for information, but they also view satirical news content, as well, for a secondary source of information, and a source that breaks from the monotonous traditional news conventions. It then really becomes a question of causality, which can be broken down into two simple causal explanations that can be interpreted as an *appetizer* model and a *dessert* model. In the appetizer model, satirical news serves to whet the audience's appetite for additional news content. This is where the entertainment factor of the program entices viewers to watch, and the informative content found within the program motivates audience members to look to other sources of news for additional information. On the other hand, the dessert model refers to those who are generally more interested in news and are more likely to consume non-satirical news throughout the day. For these viewers, satirical news can be

seen as a pleasant change of pace that they view near the end of their day where they can still watch a program that is informative but also entertaining.

This study gives evidence that those who watch more satirical news media tend to know more about current events. This correlation between satirical news use and current events knowledge remains significant even after controlling for other traditional news use. This then implies that there is actual information being passed down from satirical news sources to the audience. This in many ways is in direct contradiction to statements Jon Stewart has made in the past regarding his program *The Daily Show*, that individuals cannot be learning from the program because to understand the humor they must have knowledge about the subject prior to viewing (C-SPAN Newhouse School Forum, 2004). These results, though, indicate that there is at least some degree of additional knowledge gain from these types of programs, above and beyond what viewers might be consuming through traditional news channels.

Additionally, the relationship between knowledge and satirical news use might be explained by the manner in which the content is delivered. It has already been discussed in detail how enjoyment facilitates retention of knowledge, and this may factor into why satirical news viewers tend to know more about current events. The information is delivered to them in such a way that they understand and enjoy learning the information. In this manner comedy acts as a catalyst that facilitates attentiveness and the retention of information (Xenos & Becker, 2009).

Satire news also tends to have the ability to put extremely complicated subject matter in a simple and easy-to-understand packages. This too might be one reason satirical news viewers score higher on current events tests than those who do not watch

satirical news. This would be in line with Baumgartner and Morris's (2006) findings that satirical news viewers report an increased confidence in their ability to understand otherwise complicated politics.

Also associated with knowledge, satirical news performs an exceedingly valuable agenda-setting role. The concept of agenda-setting is a relatively simple one. In its most succinct form, it can be said that the mass media do not tell the public what to think, but instead set the agenda for the popular discourse of the day, thereby theoretically telling the public what to think about (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). While the traditional news media have normally been considered the primary agenda-setting body in mainstream society, they are limited in a key way that satirical news is not. Because traditional news entities still have the need to make a profit, they must keep in mind that they need to maintain a viewership by providing interesting and controversial stories. While this is certainly valuable, there are indeed times where stories slip through the cracks or are not covered at all due to the subjects' boring nature. That does not mean that these subjects are not critically important and the public has the right to hear such information. This is where satirical news sources can play a vital role. Satirical news has the ability to look at topics, like Colbert's campaign to familiarize viewers with the House of Representatives, in a comedic fashion and thereby be able to cover such topics without worrying about losing the audience's interest.

The relationship between satirical news viewing and traditional news consumption cannot be ignored when discussing the relationship between satirical news use and knowledge. Young and Tisinger (2006) first noted that the increase in knowledge that was measured among satirical news viewers was most likely a result of those viewers

being much more likely to take in alternate forms of news as well. While this study has shown that satirical news use accounts for additional variance above and beyond that attributed to other news sources, the influence of other news programs is still present.

The influence of traditional news use on the relationship between satirical news use and current events knowledge was considered in greater depth. While there seems to be little question that there is a significant amount of information dissemination from satirical news programs to their audiences, the amount of traditional news that viewers watch also might influence their overall current events knowledge. It can be seen from this study's data that the more traditional news people watch the more they will know about current events despite their satirical news habits. However, the same can be said for satirical news viewing. The more satirical news people watch the more they will know about current events.

It is clear that those who do not watch as much traditional news will be influenced more by satirical news than those who watch traditional news regularly. Yet, that does not necessarily mean that those already consuming a greater portion of traditional news media do not gain additional knowledge from the use of satirical news programming as well. Notice that, in Figure 1, without the influence of satirical news use the groups for low, moderate, and high traditional news consumption are drastically different in terms of their knowledge scores. Yet, as the amount of satirical news consumed increases the closer these groups become in terms of their scores corresponding with knowledge. In this, it is clear that traditional news use plays a moderating role in the relationship between satirical news use and knowledge. While moderation is occurring, there is evidence that the linear relationships between traditional news, as well as satirical news,

and knowledge still remain. Thusly, satirical and traditional news relate to political knowledge both interactively and independently.

During the formulation and completion of this study an interesting question has been raised. Is satirical news journalism? Many, even some who create satirical newscasts, might argue that it is not journalism. Yet, the classic definition of journalism is the practice of disseminating valuable news and information about contemporary society to the public. While maintaining a comical stance, satirical news does perform this function. Yet, at the same time it arguably does not do this in the same capacity as other forms of news. Therefore, as one of the genre's primary advocates suggests, satirical news in the various forms that we have today, is not news but comedy about the news.

That is not to say that the satirical news genre does not serve an important function within American society. It has already been discussed that beyond its informative and agenda-setting roles, satirical news serves as a watchdog for the traditional watchdog. Satirical news is instrumental in pointing out the flaws and shortcomings of the American news media, and in that way, satirical news is a primary voice calling for better overall journalism from news professionals. Finally, it should not be overlooked that one of the most important functions satirical news serves is that of entertainment. It is a genre based on the entertaining of its audience and, therefore, its true purpose is to bring enjoyment to its viewers.

There have been several key limitations to this study. Despite comparing data from two separate years, there was not a significant change over time, and, therefore, the data was analyzed in a mostly cross-sectional manner. The last ten years has been a time



of monumental change in the American media environment with the general shift to online sources. It would have been advantageous to look at how the above relationships developed and changed over this time period. However, unfortunately the publicly available dataset that was used did not ask questions involving satirical news use in a similar enough way in the years before 2010 to accurately compare it to the datasets collected in 2010 and 2012.

It is important to note that all of the data collected for this study was self reported and gathered by phone. As with all self-reported data there is a chance that certain individuals were not completely honest with the interviewer and report false or exaggerated claims. Therefore, when considering subjects media use habits there is the possibility that some individuals claimed that they were more or less likely to watch certain medias than they truly were.

This study also was purely quantitative with only estimations concerning motivation to consume both satirical news and traditional news. While many assumptions were made in this study considering motivation to consume satirical news media, there was no qualitative research done to support these assumptions. This should be the subject of further study.

Finally, this study looked only at two specific satirical news programs. This was done out of necessity, as most of the data available dealt with *The Colbert Report* and *The Daily Show*. While both *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report* have been considerably important to the genre, they are not the genre in its entirety. It would have been beneficial to analyze other satirical news sources as well to get a more accurate picture of the genre and its viewers.

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