

Late Night Comedy and its Effect on the Public's Political Opinion

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the relationship between late night humor and the public's political opinion. This study looks closely at how humor affects audience learning, how late night humor affects the public's political awareness, whether or not late night humor is ethical, how late night humor is protected, how late night humor has evolved in regards to its political focus, and if late night humor has created political change.

Late night humor is increasingly focusing on politics. Many people turn to late night humor as a source of news, although late night humor is not considered a news source. This study aims to determine whether or not late night humor has the power to create a political impact by affecting the public's political opinion.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

Statement of the Problem

Late night humor's focus on political issues has created a sort of comedic journalism that the public is turning to as a source of news. Shows like Saturday Night Live, The Daily Show and The Colbert Report are beginning to focus more and more on political issues. Although effective in reaching a large audience, these late night humor shows are not journalistic news sources. Instead they are referred to as "fake news" (Baym, 2005). "Fake news" is protected under The First Amendment, but should not be confused with legitimate news sources.

These "fake news" sources can be beneficial to the public by acting as a gateway into actual news sources (Young, 2008) and informing about real political issues. However, there are also serious ethical issues to consider when spreading political messages to such a large audience. These shows are going beyond simply mocking politics and have started to become participants and activists within politics. Already, political change as significant as effecting the 2008 presidential elections has come about through these late night humor shows (Waldman, 2009).

Background of the Problem

Late night comedy began with late-night talk shows. Late-night talk shows are comedy-oriented, focus on daily news and air late at night. Johnny Carson, with The Tonight Show Starring Johnny Carson on NBC, popularized the late night talk show.

Nowadays, popular late night humor shows include Saturday Night Live, The Daily Show and The Colbert Report.

These late night comedy shows have begun to focus more and more political issues and have begun to have a real influence on the public's political knowledge and opinions. In 2004, Jon Stewart was the fastest-growing source of information about the 2004 presidential campaign for most Americans (Cutbirth, 2011). Also in 2004, The Peabody Awards recognized NBC's late night comedy series Saturday Night Live for its political satire, noting the show may have even swayed the election (Waldmann, 2009). Starting in 2011, The Colbert Super PAC Project had a substantial influence on the news media and public's understanding of campaign finance laws (Gilkerson, 2013).

Purpose of the Study

By looking closely at the effect that late night humor has on the public's political opinion, we can see potential risks and decided whether or not a change is necessary. Knowing the risk factors behind relying on late night humor shows as news sources will bring awareness to this issue. The public will be able to distinguish between real news and "fake news" and form their political opinions based on credible news sources. The public, journalists and members of late night humor shows should know the ethical concerns associated with late night humor shows.

Setting for the Study

This study will take place as data collection and research for a senior project at California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo.

Research Questions

This study is structured around research questions created based on literature and articles focused around late night humor and how it affects the public's political opinions, including how humor aids in learning, ethical issues, how late night humor is protected, the evolution of late night humor, and examples of late night humor creating political change.

1. How does humor affect audience learning?
2. How does late night humor affect the public's political awareness?
3. Is late night political humor ethical?
4. How is late night humor protected?
5. How has late night humor evolved in regards to its political focus?
6. Has late night humor created political change?

Definition of Terms

Fake News: News parody and political satire (Reilly, 2010)

Self-deprecatory: Disapproval of oneself (Merriam-Webster Dictionary, 2014).

Other-deprecatory: Disapproval of someone other than oneself (Merriam-Webster Dictionary, 2014).

Super PAC: A relatively modern breed of political-action committee that is allowed to raise and spend unlimited amounts of money from corporations, unions, individuals and associations (uspolitics.about.com, 2011)

Organization of the Study

This study will be organized into five chapters to help guide the reader through background information on late night comedy to the data collected and interpreted in this study. Chapter One states the problem of the study and gives a description on what it is about. Chapter Two is a literature review overviewing late night humor and its effect on the public's political opinions. Chapter Three includes the methodology used during the data collection. Chapter Four contains the research questions and the data that was collected for each research question. Chapter Five, the concluding chapter, summarizes the results of the study and gives recommendations for viewers and participants of late night comedy.

Chapter 2 *Literature Review*

The review of literature focuses on the existing literature on late night humor and how it affects the public's political opinions, including how humor aids in learning, ethical issues, how late night humor is protected, the evolution of late night humor, and examples of late night humor creating political change.

Humor and its Effects on Audience Learning

Research by Kent Truett (2011) found that students learned more effectively when teachers incorporated “related humor, self-disparaging humor, unrelated humor, and offensive humor” into their lesson plan.

Zemke (1991) states that humor helps people learn: “The contrary view, held most often by trainers and speakers who are successfully humorous (that is, people whose laugh lines usually get laughs), is that stories in general, and especially points made or reinforced humorously, are most likely to be learned best” (p. 2).

According to Wells (2002) people are likely to remember things that stand out to them as interesting or funny: “Longtime readers can often recite their favorites A-heds by topic: the one about competitive dwarf-throwing; the one about the British scientist who has spent his life trying to develop a no-flatulence bean; or the one about the strange appeal of UPS men dressed in brown” (p. 1).

Late Night Humor and Public Political Awareness

Research by Ian Reilly (2011) states that satire indeed attempts to initiate social change: “Satire openly endorses programs of social change, but it does not follow

through on its promises of reform. Thus, satire places resistance, dialogue, and change at the centre of its political project” (p. 36).

Patrick A Stewart (2011) conducted a web-based experiment carried out 2 weeks before the 2008 presidential elections in which participants were shown video excerpts of the 2008 presidential candidates making both self-deprecatory and other-deprecatory humorous comments. Stewart’s work was based on Smith, Larimer, Littvay, & Hibbing’s evolutionary theory applied to political leadership (2007). Findings of this experiment “suggest previously held opinions about the presidential candidates influence participant evaluation of humorous comments by the candidates. These comments, in turn, influence how participants evaluate the candidate making the humorous comment” (abstract).

Research by Kristy Harris (2014) states that satiric shows inform the public “through their use of hyperbole, understatement and imitation” (p. 98).

Research by Jones & Baym (2010) found The Daily Show and The Colbert Report to be necessary reactions to the declining democratically useful news programming. Jones cites the talk on these satirical shows as seemingly more genuine, honest and real than on traditional news programs.

Research by Feldman & Goldthwaite Young (2008) states that exposure to late night humor is associated with an increase in attention paid to the presidential campaign in national network and cable news. “Cross-sectional results demonstrate that viewers of late-night comedy programs-specifically viewers of The Tonight Show with Jay Leno and The Late Show with David Letterman, as well as Comedy Central's The Daily Show with Jon Stewart-pay more attention to the campaign in national network and cable news than nonviewers, controlling for a variety of factors” (summary).

Research by Paul Brewer and Emily Marquardt (2007) found, after examining the news stories and interviews in 52 episodes of The Daily Show from early 2005, that The Daily Show might have the potential to educate viewers about political issues and world events. This study found that of the 222 news stories in the examined episodes, more than half addressed political topics.

A study by Amy Becker (2012) compared the impacts of viewing a video clip of John McCain's self-satire on Saturday Night Live with the impacts of viewing a video clip of Stephen Colbert's more hostile humor that is directed at others. The results suggest that after watching Colbert makes jokes about McCain, the audience "cooled toward" McCain. Results also found that the effect of exposure to different types of political humor is relatively unaffected by political partisanship.

The Ethics Behind Late Night Political Humor

Research by Jason Peifer (2012) states that there are responsibilities and duties that should guide political humor. His research establishes that ethics is relevant to political humor and considers the importance of ethical political humor. He uses an example in which the Executive Producer of Saturday Night Live asked, after the terrorist attack on September 11, 2001, whether or not the show could be funny in light of the recent tragedy. Peifer poses the question, "What are we allowed to laugh about?"

According to Reilly (2001), satire is not held to the same moral codes as journalism: "Through its refusal to abide by the same journalistic standards of corporate media, and through its willingness to celebrate its own patently false construction of the news, satirical fake news is free to deconstruct media spectacles" (p. 116).

Research by Joe Hale Cutbirth (2011) states that late night humor does not have an ethical code to follow because it is considered “fake news.” “When Americans were asked a few years ago to name the journalist they most admired, Stewart (a stand-up comedian and Academy Award show host) tied three current or former network anchorman - Brian Williams, Tom Brokaw, Dan Rather – and cable host Anderson Cooper. Stewart uses the phrase ‘fake news’ to describe his work, and he claims that his work is designed to be nothing more than comedy” (p. 50).

According to research by Jones, Baym, & Day (2012), Jon Stewart has shown that satire can be not just a voice of political reason, but a voice of moral right as well. Stewart’s “unique place he now holds as a trusted fount of reason and sanity grants him additional license to occasionally step directly into the political fray, with serious intent and demeanor, and challenge public actors on moral and ethical grounds” (p. 45).

Research by Paul Sturges (2010) found that comedians monitor their material for potential offense. According to Sturges, comedians “assess the extent of offence and modify their performances in response.”

How Late Night Humor is Protected

According to Stephen Wermiel (1988), “The Supreme Court ruled that the First Amendment protects satire and parody, even when they cause emotional distress to public figures, just as libelous statements about such persons receive special treatment under the Constitution” (p. 1).

According to Gary Galles (2000), government based satire is the best celebration of the First Amendment. Galles states that humor is one of the most effective ways to protest against government abuse and that even politicians criticize the government.

Sturges (2010) looks at comedy as an area of expression that is frequently on the cutting edge of risk in order to decide what is and is not protected by the UN Universal Declaration on Human Rights. Sturges states that although comedy is sometimes treated as inconsequential and trivial, he believes that comedy is actually a “highly necessary commentary on life.”

The Evolution of Late Night Humor in Regards to its Political Focus

Research by Cutbirth (2011) states that satirists have been using the media of their time to challenge power sources for a long time, and that politics is nothing new to late night comedy. “It was there in the fifties and sixties with Jack Paar’s trip to Berlin and Dick Cavett’s confrontation with Lester Maddox. It grew in the seventies and eighties as Johnny Carson poked fun at Richard Nixon and Tom Snyder chatted with Gloria Steinem and Charles Manson. By the turn of the century, a second generation of Americans was growing comfortable with televised bedtime stories that reflected the political currents of the day – brought to them in Jay Leno’s monologues and David Letterman’s Top 10 lists” (p. 107).

Research by Marie Jackson (2010) states that there is a historical trend in the use of late night comedy as a political communication forum. Jackson states that candidates now use late night comedy to communicate their messages and sell likeable images.

Research by G Baym (2005) states that what has come to be known as “fake news” is actually more of an experiment in journalism. He argues that late night humor uses aspects of news, comedy and television talk to “revive a journalism of critical inquiry and advance a model of deliberate democracy.” He believes that *The Daily Show* is an example to look to for possibilities of political journalism.

Late Night Humor and Political Change

Research by Nathan David Gilkerson (2013) states that the Colbert Super PAC Project “substantially influenced the news media and broader public’s understanding of campaign finance laws — and has thus also impacted the real world political debate about the need for regulatory reforms. Going far beyond simply critiquing or making fun of certain aspects of the campaign finance system, Colbert’s project has become a real, operating part of the political system, in order to simultaneously skewer and demonstrate the absurdities of the law” (p. 237).

Cutbirth (2011) states, about the 2004 presidential elections, that Jon Stewart was “according to the shocking results of a respected national survey, the fastest-growing source of information about the presidential campaign for most Americans, especially young voters” (p. 57).

Allison J. Waldman (2009) writes on the 2008 presidential election, “The Peabody Awards is recognizing NBC's late night comedy series for its political satire, noting the show may have even swayed the election” (p. 1).

According to Reilly (2011) in noting the results of a survey done by Annenberg, Dannagal Goldthwaite Young identifies “Daily Show viewers [as having] higher

campaign knowledge than national news viewers and newspaper readers - even when education, party identification, following politics, watching cable news, receiving campaign information online, age, and gender are taken into consideration” (p. 1).

“Specifically, there is an awareness that internet-based humor (Baumgartner, 2007, 2008) and late-night talkshow humor (Compton, 2007; Moy, 2007; Niven, Lichter & Amundson, 2003), notably that of Comedy Central’s *The Daily Show* (Morris & Baumgartner, 2007; Young, 2007), *The Colbert Report* (Baym, 2007; Fowler, 2008; LaMarre, Landreville & Beam, 2009), and the long- running *Saturday Night Live* (Smith & Voth, 2002; Voth, 2007), affects the perceptions and actions of voters. Evidence from these studies shows a strong relationship between media portrayals of political candidates and how the public perceives them, and in turn public willingness to vote for or against candidates” (Stewart 2011, p. 202).

The 2010 Rally to Restore Sanity, Colbert’s testimony before Congress and his on-going efforts to run a Super PAC that raises and spends money to influence the political process are all of examples of instances in which Jon Stewart and Stephen Colbert created political change (Jones et al., 2012).

Chapter 3

Methodology

In this chapter, we will discuss the methodology used to collect data for this study with an experiment in which 40 participants in two university sororities watched video clips and completed surveys to look at the whether or not watching a presidential candidate make self-deprecatory and other-deprecatory humorous comments changes your opinion about that candidate.

Data Sources

The data collection for this study comes from surveys completed by 20 members of two university sororities, for a total of 40 participants. One sorority is called Sigma Alpha and the other sorority is called Gamma Theta Alpha. Both sororities are affiliated with California Coast State University. Each sorority was asked to watch video clips of presidential candidates Barack Obama and John McCain making self-deprecatory and other-deprecatory humorous comments and complete surveys evaluating the candidates.

Participants

Participants include members of the Sigma Alpha and Gamma Theta Alpha sororities. All of the participants are female college students between the ages of 17 and 23.

Experiment Design

This experiment is a replication of an experiment by Patrick A Stewart (2011) using the same methods but with different participants and experimenters. Participants were asked five questions about the 2008 electoral season presidential candidates John McCain and Barack Obama both before viewing video clips of the presidential candidates and after viewing videos of the presidential candidates. The questions used were modeled after questions used in Stewart's experiment (2011). Participants were asked to answer the questions with responses aligned along a 9-point scaled ranging from 'Not at all' (0) to 'Highly' (8).

Questions

1. How likeable is the candidate?
2. How intelligent is the candidate?
3. How honest is the candidate?
4. How compassionate is the candidate?
5. How electable is the candidate?

The videos used were chosen by Stewart (2011). The videos in this experiment are of Barack Obama and John McCain, at the 63rd Annual Alfred E Smith Memorial Foundation Dinner to benefit Catholic charities. This event was held on October 16th 2008, 19 days prior to the November 4 general election. Of the many humorous comments made by Obama and McCain at this event, two comments were chosen for each candidate, for a total of four comments. Each candidate is shown making one self-deprecatory statement and one other-deprecatory statement.

Data Collection

The data collection methodology for this study will be the responses to the questions given to the participants before and after watching the video clips. The video clips will be shown and the surveys given in person. Four surveys will be used, and each survey will consist of the same five questions with possible responses aligned along a 9-point scaled ranging from 'Not at all' (0) to 'Highly' (8).

Data Presentation

Communication with participants will take place in person. The video clips will be shown to all participants of each sorority at the same time. The surveys will be printed on paper and given to participants. This method of data collection and presentation ensures that it will be presented in the most complete and objective way possible.

Limitations

There are some boundaries in the study that are outside of my control. The first boundary is that this is a 10-week study. Due to this short time frame, only a couple of sororities could be reached to participate in the study. This research study is also taking place during a normal school period with a full-time schedule of classes, which also places time constraints on the amount of work that can be done.

Delimitations

Another boundary is that only two sororities were selected to participate in this experiment, because I felt that that was enough and because I did not have enough time to

reach out to a third sorority. There is not an all African American women's sorority at Cal Coast University, or I would have included them in the study to ensure that I was as inclusive as possible.

Chapter 4

Data Analysis

Chapter 4 will summarize respondents' answers to the surveys. Tables will be presented to represent the findings of the surveys. The survey answers will be analyzed and compared to the original research questions and the existing literature on how late night humor affects the public's political opinions as reviewed in Chapter 2.

Description of Participants

Sigma Alpha

Twenty members of Sigma Alpha (pseudonym) participated in this experiment. Sigma Alpha is sorority affiliated with California Coast State University (pseudonym).

Gamma Theta Alpha

Twenty members of Gamma Theta Alpha (pseudonym) participated in this experiment. Gamma Theta Alpha is sorority affiliated with California Coast State University.

Survey

To gain an idea of whether or not watching video clips of presidential candidates making humorous comments (either self-deprecatory or other-deprecatory) changes one's perception of that candidate, each respondent was asked to answer survey questions both before and after watching the video clips. There were a total of 40 respondents.

Table 1

Table 1 notes the participants' opinions about Barack Obama before watching the video clips.

Table 2

Table 2 notes the participants' opinions about Barack Obama after watching the video clips.

Table 3

Table 3 notes the participants' opinions about John McCain before watching the video clips.

Table 4

Table 4 notes the participants' opinions about John McCain after watching the video clips.

Table 1

Obama Opinions Before Watching Video Clips

Barack Obama	Likert Scale	Median Score
Likeable	0-9	4.9
Intelligent	0-9	5.7
Honest	0-9	4.8
Compassionate	0-9	5.4
Electable	0-9	4.8

Table 2

Obama Opinions After Watching Video Clips

Barack Obama	Likert Scale	Median Score
Likeable	0-9	6.4
Intelligent	0-9	6.3
Honest	0-9	5.6
Compassionate	0-9	5.6
Electable	0-9	5.9

Table 3

McCain Opinions Before Watching Video Clips

John McCain	Likert Scale	Median Score
Likeable	0-9	3.6
Intelligent	0-9	5
Honest	0-9	4
Compassionate	0-9	4.5
Electable	0-9	4.2

Table 4

McCain Opinions After Watching Video Clips

John McCain	Likert Scale	Median Score
Likeable	0-9	4.7
Intelligent	0-9	5
Honest	0-9	4.5
Compassionate	0-9	4.4
Electable	0-9	4.4

Late Night Humor and the Public's Political Opinions Research Questions

For this study, the following six research questions were created to determine how late night humor affects the public's political opinions, how humor aids in learning, which ethical issues should be considered, how late night humor is protected, the evolution of late night humor, and examples of late night humor creating political change.

Research question #1: How does humor affect audience learning?

This question was researched in order to determine if humor has an affect on audience learning. This question is important to understand why humor is used in an attempt to influence audience opinions.

As noted in Tables 1, 2, 3, and 4, respondents' perceptions of Barack Obama and John McCain changed after watching video clips of the candidates in every category except for the rating of McCain's intelligence, which stayed the same. This demonstrates that humor affects audience learning.

Research question #2: How does late night humor affect the public's political awareness?

This research question looks at whether viewers of late night humor are politically aware. This question also addresses the possibility that late night humor viewers are more politically aware than people who do not watch late night humor.

As noted in Tables 1, 2, 3 and 4, after watching the video clips, respondents rated both Obama and McCain more positively in every category except two. Respondents rated McCain's intelligence as the same after watching the video clips and his compassion as 0.1 point on the Likert Scale lower after watching the video clips. The respondents' changing ratings demonstrate that watching humorous videos does indeed affect one's political ideas.

Research question #3: Is late night political humor ethical?

This question was researched, because late night humor is not considered a legitimate news source. Instead it is referred to as “fake news.” For this reason, late night humor does not follow the same ethical guidelines as news organizations, although many viewers turn to late night humor as a news source. This question was asked to determine whether or not it is ethical to use late night humor to inform the public about political issues and possibly alter their opinions.

Ethicalness was looked at in the experiment in two ways. The first is that based on public perceptions, ethicalness is part of the criteria for the role of President of the United States. Watching presidential candidates on late night political humor shows allows the public to see the candidates as more human and makes the candidates seem more transparent. In this way, late night political humor can be argued as ethical. The other way that ethicalness was looked at in this experiment is whether it is ethical to attempt to change the public’s political opinions by showing them a humorous video. Referring again to Tables 1, 2, 3 and 4, respondents’ opinions on the political candidates changed after watching the video clips. The video clips were less than 30 seconds each in length, and each clip featured either Obama or McCain making a humorous comment. These video clips were not focused on political issues. It can be argued that it is unethical to show the respondents humorous videos of presidential candidates that sway their political opinions, because the videos did not provide any significant information about the candidates, they simply made the candidates more likeable and relatable.

Research question #4: How is late night humor protected?

This research question looks at the laws that protect late night humor in order to demonstrate that late night humor is legally permissible.

The editor of the video of the 63rd Annual Alfred E Smith Memorial Foundation Dinner to benefit Catholic charities, Patrick A Stewart, provided the video clips used in this experiment. Stewart sent the video clips to me via DropBox files in an email. He also gave me permission to use the video clips in an educational study. The copyright release of the video clips from the producer addressed any legal issues involved with transmission and viewing of the video clips.

Research question #5: How has late night humor evolved in regards to its political focus?

This question was researched to demonstrate how late night humor has increased its political focus over the years.

Looking back on the 1st Annual Alfred E Smith Memorial Foundation Dinner to benefit Catholic charities, presidential candidates did not use humor when addressing their audience. Satire has changed how people connect with candidates, which is demonstrated by the respondents changing opinions in their surveys.

Research question #6: Has late night humor created political change?

This research question was asked in order to gather examples of late night humor creating real political change. Examples make it easy to see that late night humor has had an affect on the public's political opinions.

As shown in Tables 1, 2, 3 and 4, respondents' opinions on the political candidates changed after watching the video clips. These tables illustrate how watching political comedy can alter people's political opinions, which in turn will affect how they vote and create political change.

Critical Analysis of Late Night Humor

The methodology design for this study included a review of the literature and an experiment in which 40 participants in two university sororities watched video clips and completed surveys to look at the whether or not watching a presidential candidate make self-deprecatory and other-deprecatory humorous comments changes your opinion about that candidate. The following data reflects the literature review in terms of the research questions.

Research question #1: How does humor affect audience learning?

Literature about humor and learning supports the idea that humor helps people learn. According to research by Kent Truett (2011), students learned more effectively when teachers incorporated "related humor, self-disparaging humor, unrelated humor, and offensive humor" into their lesson plan. Research by Wells (2002) found that people are likely to remember things that stand out to them as interesting or funny.

As noted in Tables 1, 2, 3, and 4, respondents' perceptions of Barack Obama and John McCain changed after watching video clips of the candidates in every category except for the rating of McCain's intelligence, which stayed the same. This demonstrates that humor affects audience learning.

Research question #2: How does late night humor affect the public’s political awareness?

According to Feldman & Goldthwaite Young (2008), exposure to late night humor is associated with an increase in attention paid to the presidential campaign in national network and cable news.

Tables 1, 2, 3, and 4 support this idea, because respondents’ changing ratings demonstrate that watching humorous videos does indeed affect one’s political ideas, which affects one’s political awareness.

Research question #3: Is late night political humor ethical?

Research by Joe Hale Cutbirth (2011) states that late night humor does not have an ethical code to follow because it is considered “fake news.” According to Reilly (2001), satire is not held to the same moral codes as journalism: “Through its refusal to abide by the same journalistic standards of corporate media, and through its willingness to celebrate its own patently false construction of the news, satirical fake news is free to deconstruct media spectacles” (p. 116).

Referring again to Tables 1, 2, 3 and 4, respondents’ opinions on the political candidates changed after watching the video clips. The video clips were less than 30 seconds each in length, and each clip featured either Obama or McCain making a humorous comment. These video clips were not focused on political issues. It can be argued that it is unethical to show the public humorous videos of presidential candidate that sway their political opinions, because the videos did not provide any significant

information about the candidates, they simply made the candidates more likeable and relatable

Research question #4: How is late night humor protected?

According to Stephen Wermiel (1988), “The Supreme Court ruled that the First Amendment protects satire and parody, even when they cause emotional distress to public figures, just as libelous statements about such persons receive special treatment under the Constitution” (p. 1).

The editor of the video of the 63rd Annual Alfred E Smith Memorial Foundation Dinner to benefit Catholic charities, Patrick A Stewart, provided the video clips used in this experiment. Stewart sent the video clips to me via DropBox files in an email. He also gave me permission to use the video clips in an educational study. The copyright release of the video clips from the producer addressed any legal issues involved with transmission and viewing of the video clips.

Research question #5: How has late night humor evolved in regards to its political focus?

Research by Marie Jackson (2010) states that there is a historical trend in the use of late night comedy as a political communication forum. Jackson states that candidates now use late night comedy to communicate their messages and sell likeable images.

Looking back on the 1st Annual Alfred E Smith Memorial Foundation Dinner to benefit Catholic charities, presidential candidates did not use humor when addressing their audience. Satire has changed how people connect with candidates, which is demonstrated by the respondents changing opinions in their surveys.

Research question #6: Has late night humor created political change?

The 2010 Rally to Restore Sanity, Colbert's testimony before Congress and his on-going efforts to run a Super PAC that raises and spends money to influence the political process are all of examples of instances in which Jon Stewart and Stephen Colbert created political change (Jones et al., 2012).

As shown in Tables 1, 2, 3 and 4, respondents' opinions on the political candidates changed after watching the video clips. These tables illustrate how watching political comedy can alter people's political opinions, which in turn will affect how they vote and create political change.

Chapter 5

Discussion and Recommendations

Summary

This study was performed in response to the increasing focus on politics in late night comedy. Late night comedy has a wide audience, many of whom rely on late night comedy as a source of news. This study was done in order to determine if late night comedy has the ability to change the public's political opinions.

To find information on the effects of watching late night comedy, or political humor, two groups of college aged women were participants in an experiment in which they watched presidential candidates make humorous statements and completed a survey about the candidates both before and after watching the video clips. The survey included the following questions:

1. How likeable is the candidate?
2. How intelligent is the candidate?
3. How honest is the candidate?
4. How compassionate is the candidate?
5. How electable is the candidate?

The survey questions are designed to determine if participants' opinions of the presidential candidates changed after watching video clips of the candidates making humorous statements. The survey elicited a variety of responses that were tied to the literature on late night humor and the public's political opinion.

Discussion

Through examining the data collected from Chapter 4, connections made between the survey's responses, and the existing literature found in Chapter 2, it is possible to make conclusions regarding the following original research questions.

Research question #1: How does humor affect audience learning?

The survey results found that all respondents' perceptions of Barack Obama and John McCain changed after watching video clips of the candidates in every category except for the rating of McCain's intelligence, which stayed the same. This change in opinion after watching the candidates make humorous statements demonstrates that humor affects audience learning.

The literature also supports the idea that humor helps people learn. According to research by Kent Truett (2011), students learned more effectively when teachers incorporated "related humor, self-disparaging humor, unrelated humor, and offensive humor" into their lesson plan. Research by Wells (2002) found that people are likely to remember things that stand out to them as interesting or funny.

Overall, there is a consensus between the survey results and the literature, that humor helps people to learn and remember. Humor is even considered an effective tool for teaching.

Research question #2: How does late night humor affect the public's political awareness?

The survey results demonstrate that humor can change one's political awareness, because respondents' changing ratings demonstrate that watching humorous videos does indeed affect one's political ideas, which affects one's political awareness.

The literature also supports the idea that late night humor affects the public's political awareness. According to Feldman & Goldthwaite Young (2008), exposure to late night humor is associated with an increase in attention paid to the presidential campaign in national network and cable news.

Overall, both the survey results and the literature support the idea that watching late night humor can affect one's political ideas, which affects one's political awareness.

Research question #3: Is late night political humor ethical?

The respondents' opinions on the political candidates changed after watching the video clips. The video clips were less than 30 seconds each in length, and each clip featured either Obama or McCain making a humorous comment. These video clips were not focused on political issues. It can be argued that it is unethical to show the public humorous videos of presidential candidate that sway their political opinions, because the videos did not provide any significant information about the candidates, they simply made the candidates more likeable and relatable.

The literature on this topic is undecided. Most agree that late night humor should be held to some ethical standard, but because late night humor is not considered a news source, it is unclear what that standard should be. Research by Joe Hale Cutbirth (2011) states that late night humor does not have an ethical code to follow because it is considered "fake news." According to Reilly (2001), satire is not held to the same moral codes as journalism: "Through its refusal to abide by the same journalistic standards of

corporate media, and through its willingness to celebrate its own patently false construction of the news, satirical fake news is free to deconstruct media spectacles” (p. 116).

Overall, the surveys results and the literature agree that late night humor does not legally have to hold itself to an ethical standard, because does not consider itself a journalistic source or even a news source. Because late night humor is considered “fake news,” it is free to cover any topic however it likes.

Research question #4: How is late night humor protected?

The experiment is protected by the consent of the original experimenter. The editor of the video of the 63rd Annual Alfred E Smith Memorial Foundation Dinner to benefit Catholic charities, Patrick A Stewart, provided the video clips used in this experiment. Stewart sent the video clips to me via DropBox files in an email. He also gave me permission to use the video clips in an educational study. The copyright release of the video clips from the producer addressed any legal issues involved with transmission and viewing of the video clips.

Literature states that late night humor is protected under the First Amendment. According to Stephen Wermiel (1988), “The Supreme Court ruled that the First Amendment protects satire and parody, even when they cause emotional distress to public figures, just as libelous statements about such persons receive special treatment under the Constitution” (p. 1).

Overall, both the survey results and the literature agree that the First Amendment legally protects late night humor. The First Amendment protects satire and parody even

when they cause emotional distress to public figures. This legally allows one presidential candidate to make fun of another on late night humor shows.

Research question #5: How has late night humor evolved in regards to its political focus?

The experiment used video clips from the 63rd Annual Alfred E Smith Memorial Foundation Dinner. Looking back on the 1st Annual Alfred E Smith Memorial Foundation Dinner to benefit Catholic charities, presidential candidates did not use humor when addressing their audience. Satire has changed how people connect with candidates, which is demonstrated by the respondents changing opinions in their surveys.

The literature supports the idea that late night comedy has begun focusing more and more on politics. Research by Marie Jackson (2010) states that there is a historical trend in the use of late night comedy as a political communication forum. Jackson states that candidates now use late night comedy to communicate their messages and sell likeable images.

Overall, both the survey and the literature support the idea that late night humor has evolved to focus more on politics.

Research question #6: Has late night humor created political change?

As shown in the survey results, respondents' opinions on the political candidates changed after watching the video clips. These results illustrate how watching political comedy can alter people's political opinions, which in turn will affect how they vote and create political change.

The literature supports the idea that late night humor has created political change

and gives examples of when it has done so. The 2010 Rally to Restore Sanity, Colbert's testimony before Congress and his on-going efforts to run a Super PAC that raises and spends money to influence the political process are all of examples of instances in which Jon Stewart and Stephen Colbert created political change (Jones et al., 2012).

Overall, the survey and the literature support the idea that late night humor has created political change. The literature gives many examples of times when late night humor has altered the public's political opinions, which has lead to political change.

Recommendations for Practice

After completing this study, considerable data has been collected and analyzed on the topic of late night humor and its effect the public's political opinion. Given the information, it is important to emphasize the most influential content and present if for anyone involved in the future of late night humor. Some recommendations for practice include be aware of the power that late night humor has, be transparent about how late night humor has affected political change, and follow an ethical standard, even though not legally required to do so.

Be aware of the power that late night humor holds.

Late night humor has huge potential to create political change. Sometimes it seems that this concept is lost on the producers of late night humor, because what viewers see is comedians joking around. But it is important for producers of late night humor to remember how much power they hold and how seriously people take what they say.

Research by Nathan David Gilkerson (2013) states that the Colbert Super PAC Project "substantially influenced the news media and broader public's understanding of

campaign finance laws — and has thus also impacted the real world political debate about the need for regulatory reforms. Going far beyond simply critiquing or making fun of certain aspects of the campaign finance system, Colbert’s project has become a real, operating part of the political system, in order to simultaneously skewer and demonstrate the absurdities of the law” (p. 237).

Be transparent.

If a late night humor comedian or host has an agenda, he or she should let the public know that. Late night humor comedians and hosts should share their political party and any political interest that they have with the public, so that the public can watch late night humor objectively and make political decisions on their own. Transparency is important in journalism, and it should be no less important in late night comedy, when politics are involved. Having transparency can make the public aware that late night humor may have an agenda, and realize that they should consider this while watching.

“Specifically, there is an awareness that internet-based humor and late-night talkshow humor, notably that of Comedy Central’s *The Daily Show*, *The Colbert Report*, and the long- running *Saturday Night Live*, affects the perceptions and actions of voters. Evidence from these studies shows a strong relationship between media portrayals of political candidates and how the public perceives them, and in turn public willingness to vote for or against candidates” (Stewart 2011, p. 202).

Follow an ethical standard.

Late night humor is not held to the same ethical standards as journalism, because it is not considered a news source. Instead it is considered “fake news” or satirical news. Even though it is not legally required to do so, late night humor should hold itself to a

certain ethical standard. Doing so would make that late night humor is nothing more than comedy and should not be viewed as a source of news.

Research by Joe Hale Cutbirth (2011) states that late night humor does not have an ethical code to follow because it is considered “fake news.” “When Americans were asked a few years ago to name the journalist they most admired, Stewart (a stand-up comedian and Academy Award show host) tied three current or former network anchorman - Brian Williams, Tom Brokaw, Dan Rather – and cable host Anderson Cooper. Stewart uses the phrase ‘fake news’ to describe his work, and he claims that his work is designed to be nothing more than comedy” (p. 50).

Study Conclusion

In conclusion, given the findings of the study, there should be qualitative research done regularly on late night humor’s effect on the public’s political opinion. Because late night humor has the ability to enact political change, routine data collection should be conducted. Overall, this study presented data that confirmed that watching political humor can change one’s political opinion. This study can be applied to all late night humor shows. This study serves as an education tool for professionals involved in late night humor as well as political figures and comedians. It also serves as a guide to consumers of late night humor, demonstrating that it is important to remember that late night humor can have a political agenda. Anyone interested in late night humor or politics could potentially benefit from using this study for further research in the subject area.

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