

Our Favorite News Source: Late Night Comedy

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"I will not exploit for political purposes my opponent's youth and inexperience." That one-liner was spoken, as some of you may recall, during the Reagan-Mondale debates in October, 1984. It was disarming, good-hearted and spoken by a winsome Ronald Reagan. Even Walter Mondale was laughing as the line was delivered. Reagan frequently used humor to defuse the argument that he was too old to serve as President and rose to this challenge numerous times confronting the issue directly. One of my favorites was Reagan's repeating the advice of Thomas Jefferson who stated "one should never judge a person by his age, only his work." Reagan ended with the quip: "Ever since he told me that, I've stopped worrying. "

Commenting on the political scene is not new, evidenced by Will Rogers in the 1920's and '30's. While his comments were those of an entertainer, there were nuggets of truth in them. His was not late-night comedy, but he found humor, lots of it, in politics and on both sides of the political spectrum, witnessed by several of his comments:

"I am not a member of any organized political Party. I am a Democrat.'"

Also:

"The only difference between death and taxes is that death doesn't get worse every time Congress meets."

Finally:

"Everything is changing. People are taking their comedians seriously and the politicians as a joke. "

All of which brings me to the present topic as humor and politics seem to go hand in hand. This paper attempts to explore the place of humor in late night comedy as a source of news, testing the (1) accuracy of reporting as well as (2) the ability to persuade and motivate its audience to action.

Early Beginnings

The present late night comedy shows of Jimmy Kimmel, Stephen Colbert, Jimmy Fallon and others had their beginnings with the likes of Steve Allen, Jack Paar and Johnny Carson, among others. These shows featured monologues, guests from the entertainment world, musical acts and sketches. During the late 1970s and most of the 1980s, Carson was largely supreme in late night programming. He did not wholly avoid political comment, but his jokes were not risky or far from the mood of the public.

Changes started to occur with Arsenio Hall and then candidate Bill Clinton playing "Heartbreak Hotel" on the saxophone. Then came Late Night With David Letterman on CBS. Letterman did not shy from political jokes or comment, repeating that "the road to the White House runs through me." After Carson retired in the early 1990s, he was replaced on the Tonight Show by Jay Leno, a stand-up comic whose forte' was well-delivered one-liners. Both Letterman and Leno selected policy issues, Presidents and other politicians for their humor. A sample from Leno follows:

Today is the anniversary of the Watergate break-in. That's the day Republicans tried to steal the Democrats' plans. That's also the last time the Democrats had any plans worth stealing. It's also the last time a Republican President had a plan and actually carried it out.

According to a book entitled Politics is a Joke, How TV Comedians are remaking Political Life, Jay Leno was the first late-night comedian using politics as his primary target. He was also more political than his television network competition, documented by a study by The Center for Media and Public Affairs in Washington, DC who monitored the content of late night talk shows for 10 years following 1992 and found Leno told almost 50 percent more political jokes than Letterman during that time period.

Beyond the talk shows are Saturday Night Live and the cable network Comedy Central with not just political humor, but also political satire. Classics from Saturday Night Live include

a portrayal of Bill Clinton gorging on fast food, Al Gore slowly enunciating "lock box," and Tina Fey's uncanny depictions of Sarah Palin during the 2008 campaign.

Beginning in 2000, appearances on late night comedy programs have become important for politicians and their advisory teams, especially for those running for the White House. These appearances have a two-fold benefit: (1) reaching a portion of the population missed through the mainstream media and, (2) controlling the message. This controlling of the message is highly important in light of comments by Democrat strategist Mandy Grunwald who stated: "If Leno, or Imus or Dennis Miller are making jokes about you, you have a serious problem. Whatever take they have on you is likely to stick much more solidly than what is in the political ads in papers like the Washington Post." Because it has been increasingly hard for candidates to get free air time, personal appearance by a candidate on a late-night show can be quite beneficial. Simply stated, politicians as well as scholars appreciate the benefits bestowed by such appearances in providing some information to many who might otherwise have ignored the campaign.

Influence of Mass Media.

Much of the present day understanding of politics is from mass media: newspapers, radio and the nightly news on television. However, since the 1990s, many consumers of news have rejected these traditional outlets as news sources. The Pew Research Center reported in 2000 that 47% of Americans between the ages of 18 and 29 get some, (if not most) of their political information from late-night television shows. Looking at the entire population, more than 25% of those surveyed get some political information from this same source. While an unconventional method of political communication, late-night shows are becoming a major player in the dissemination of political information to the general public. The Pew Research Center reported in 2008 that only 29% of those surveyed claimed to watch nightly news on a regular basis, compared with a figure of 60% in 1993. As to the reading of newspapers on a regular basis in 2008, the figure was 46%, compared to 71% in 1992. Not only are fewer Americans relying on traditional news sources for political knowledge, but to some extent they

look to late- night talk and comedy shows. Moreover, these sources have been documented to have an effect on how politics is understood, although the degree of this effect is still open to continuing analysis and debate, and is something I'll address later in this paper.

Replacement for these traditional news sources is what has been termed "infotainment" or "soft news," which includes daytime talk shows such as *The View*, news magazines like *Sixty Minutes* and late-night comedy shows. Late-night comedy is featured as a portion of this replacement, but that's not the whole story. While the Pew data point to a trend in which young people as a demographic are tuning into late-night comedy rather than traditional news, it has been argued that this Pew data does not establish that the same individuals who are not watching news are watching late-night comedy. Moreover, those young people who report the highest rates of exposure and learning from late-night comedy programs are the same individuals who report the highest rates of exposure to more traditional forms of news. Therefore, the narrative of young people tuning into late-night comedy instead of news may be more myth than reality! So, does news watching engender late-night comedy viewing, or does late-night comedy viewing spur news watching? Certainly, late-night comedy is more engaging if the viewer brings some awareness of current events, however elemental, to the program. It has been argued that late night comedy is a gateway to traditional news on the basis that some public affairs knowledge is necessary to appreciate late-night humor. In other words, the desire to understand political humor, that is, "to be in on the joke" may compel a seeking for information from traditional news sources.

There is some research to the effect that the viewing of non-traditional news programming (which includes late-night television comedy) can be associated with greater political knowledge. However, it has also been argued that there is little factual knowledge gained from these programs. Danielle Sarver in her 2007 doctoral dissertation found a correlation between those claiming to get information from late-night sources and lower political knowledge.

Effect of Late-Night Comedy

While there may be some incidental learning of political information among less sophisticated viewers of late-night comedy, the features of these programs make it difficult for any but the highly sophisticated to use such information in voting decisions. One reason is that politics is not the central feature of late-night comedy, and occupies only a portion of the skits and opening monologues. As a rule, most viewers turn to late-night programs for entertainment rather than what little political information may be imparted. Therefore, it has been argued that viewers are unlikely to act upon what little information they may gather in making political decisions. Moreover, the sophisticated person who does glean information about political issues should have enough pre-existing knowledge to resist any influence the jokes might otherwise have. So, even if a viewer learns about political issues from soft news or infotainment programs, he will not use this knowledge of these issues when voting.

But the matter of repetition of particular themes can have an effect. During the election of 2000 there were repeated characterizations of Al Gore as being boring and inclined to exaggerations and George Bush as being less than bright. During the Gore-Bush debates in 2000, David Letterman opined that:

Al Gore is very excited for round number two of the debates. He says....he's prepared five new made-up stories.

Jay Leno also took his turn:

Al Gore took this week off. I'm trying to imagine Al Gore on a holiday. How boring would those vacation slides be? "Here I am next to a tree. I'm the one on the left."

Leno didn't stop with Gore either, when shortly before the election it surfaced that Bush was arrested in 1976 for DUI:

Let's see what's new with George Anheuser-Busch, ladies and gentlemen. Yeah, The guy who put the party back in the Republican Party.

Neither did Letterman stop, and he said:

This is the last day of the presidential race. Or, as George Bush says, "last call." Interestingly, as the number of jokes increased with respect to both the candidates, their unfavorable ratings increased. Overall, the joke percentages and unfavorable ratings for Bush and Gore followed similar trends in the weeks preceding the 2000 election.

Commenting on the effect of late-night comedy on voting, Jon Stewart, then host of Comedy Central's *The Daily Show*, stated that it was unlikely that people were influenced by the content of comedy shows because they had to have some prior knowledge to be able to appreciate the humor. Jay Leno agreed, saying: "We [writers and comedians] reinforce what people already believe." Nonetheless, the characterizations of Gore as inclined to exaggeration and being boring persist, as does that of Bush's low intelligence despite his Ivy League education.

Content of Late-Night Comedy Jokes

While late-night shows concentrate on what is funny to the viewing audience, the influence of their content cannot be discounted. "Accessibility bias" is an argument which asserts that power of television to influence viewers stems from its ability to make information easily retrievable or accessible. This theory contends that the most easily retrievable information will tend to dominate opinions and judgements and being repetitive makes it more easily accessible. Repeated comments will carry more persuasive weight whether the subject is Bush's intelligence or Gore's tedium. Since most viewers have no first-hand knowledge about political leaders, Letterman's or Leno's criticism of these leaders may be perceived as valid.

John Michael Kittross, in *Controversies in Media Ethics*, has argued that infotainment or soft news confuses the audience because it provides entertainment rather than information. Since these snippets may be brief, a complex subject receives simplistic treatment because of time constraints. From my personal observations, I have experienced garbled presentations of legal issues on media, print or otherwise, either because the writer did not understand the issues or was too rushed by time or deadlines to explain thoroughly the precedent involved. On the other hand, perhaps the writer had an agenda and an even-handed explanation did not fit his

preconceived narrative. The take-away from this, in my opinion, is to exercise caution in relying on infotainment for accurate news. It is important to understand that many times viewers are hooked by "hot" topics presented in an entertaining manner to the exclusion of topics of actual or real importance.

No definitive study has emerged to my knowledge that has traced the effects of late-night talk shows. Perhaps these shows help a viewer in his perception of a candidate or issue. However, studies by the Pew Research Center have shown conclusively that those who claim they are regularly informed about elections through late-night talk shows are the least informed group of individuals. Only 20% knew much about the candidates in the 2000 election and 45% did not know who was seeking election. These statistics lead one to believe that those who get their information from late-night television are more likely to be less informed than regular viewers of other information sources.

A study conducted by professors at University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire and reported in their paper Everything I Learned about Politics I learned From Jay Leno describes their taping and coding of monologues from Jay Leno, David Letterman and Conan O'Brien in 2000 from October 2 to November 24. Categories of jokes included: Policy jokes (referring to a specific issue); Institutional jokes (targeting institutions of government); and, Personal jokes (related to individual characteristics), which comprised over 90% of all jokes. Moreover, these personal jokes were largely (95%) negative, with precious few jokes (4%) related to policy.

Consequently, for the viewer depending upon late-night comedy for news about the candidates, the message was all about character, negatively presented, with virtually no discussion about relevant issues of the campaign. Clearly, late-night comedy is not delivering all of the news and what it delivers, at least according to this study, is mostly devoid of policy issues and decidedly negative.

An intriguing twist to this debate, is that despite the contention that late-night comedy imparts little actual political information, studies reflect that the younger viewers more than

other ages RECOGNIZE campaign information although they may not recall what was imparted. In other words, late-night viewing increases what younger people think they know about a political campaign, but provides only a moderate improvement in their actual knowledge about the events associated with the campaign. This moderate improvement, however, can be considered to be good news in that young people are capable of receiving at least some information, even though their potential for participating in a meaningful manner remains open to further study and review.

Politics of Late-Night Comedy

Few studies have been conducted relative to the relationship between cynicism and late night television viewing. According to the Danielle Sarver dissertation previously mentioned, there was an experiment with individuals of college age who watched The Daily Show which determined that these viewers expressed more cynicism toward the electoral system and the news media generally than non-viewers. Perhaps The Daily Show has the negative effect of lowering support for political institutions and politicians among those less inclined to participate in the political process. So, although the program arguably may make the world of politics more understandable, it contributes to a lack of interest in actual participation. The study and its findings were specific to The Daily Show and there is not a corresponding relationship to late night talk shows.

According to a study conducted by M.A. Baum in 2002, it was determined that among those who watch late-night comedy programs, those most likely to vote were female, older and more affluent. As previously noted, however, these individuals are not the "core" viewers of late-night, although the younger white respondents were likely to vote. On the other hand, it is the young voters that are notoriously difficult to get to the polls, which constitutes the bulk of late-night comedy watchers. Not unsurprising is the finding that the viewers of late-night comedy are more likely to be Democrats and Independents than Republicans, while the Republicans who do watch are more politically aware and more likely to vote than the other groups. The sneering

presentations of the left-leaning class on late-night television may have been a motivating factor to those who voted for Donald Trump in the past election. At least this factor was the thought of Caitlin Flanagan in her May, 2017 article in *The Atlantic Monthly* attributing Trump's rise to the Presidency to late-night comedy which alienated Conservatives and made Liberals smug. On the other hand, it can be argued with some assurance that Trump voters did not spend much time watching late-night comedy.

A recent article dated August, 2017 confirms a lack of Conservative interest in late-night comedy. Miranda Dawson writes in *The Black Sphere* that comedy writers are frustrated because they cannot convince Americans to hate President Trump. A writer for *Full Frontal with Samantha Bee* whined there just may not be a way to reach the other side, acknowledging an obvious left wing bias. According to *Variety*, the general theme of writers was they are so exhausted trying to win over Trump supporters with their writing and don't want the job anymore. According to the article, what these writers blatantly miss is the concept that people tune into late-night comedy to escape the stress of the day and expect to be entertained, not sneered at or lectured. My personal observation is that because practically every late-night show monologue bashes Trump, after a while the jokes and gibes become old, boring and less effective.

Current Late-Night Entertainers

As previously observed, current Late-Night entertainers have built upon the work of their late-night predecessors. Letterman and Leno have moved on and new personnel have arrived with fresh faces. ABC has *Jimmy Kimmel Live*, while NBC has *The Tonight Show* with Jimmy Fallon, followed by *Late Night with Seth Myers*. CBS has Stephen Colbert with *The Late Show*, and *The Late Show* with James Corden. Formats are essentially the same with an opening monologue followed by guests, usually three, who converse with the host on various topics. In my observations, precious little actual news is presented in either the monologue or guest interviews.

Late-night comedy on cable is a slightly different animal, in that broadcast standards are quite relaxed compared to the networks. The Daily Show on the Comedy Central network follows a format differing from network shows, is more combative and includes freely offered slants and opinions by Trevor Noah, a likeable replacement for Jon Stewart. While many of the vulgarities and coarse language are bleeped, it's obvious what was censored. TBS includes Conan O'Brien and Full Frontal with Samantha Bee, while HBO features Last Week Tonight With John Oliver and Real Time with Bill Maher. Each of these presenters has a different style, although the left-leaning bias is unmistakable.

My comments are based upon random sampling of the programs and late-night entertainers and I have not made an exhaustive search of each and every program. That being said, I did find a commonality among both network and cable late-night comedy. There was, little actual news imparted on either source and what news was delivered dwelt heavily on personalities with scant attention to either institutions or policy. The coverage was decidedly negative and mean-spirited with a heavy dose of left-leaning bias and opinion. The kinder humor of Jay Leno calling out both sides did not seem to be present, with the occasional exception of Jimmy Fallon who recently targeted both Hillary Clinton's promotion of her new book as well as Donald Trump. Without question, the target of choice on all of these late nights is President Trump and his foibles (which appear to be many), with no counter-balance by anything positive.

Consider this from a recent Seth Meyers monologue:

President Trump held a press conference today with the emir of Kuwait. And Journalists were all provided with translators so they could understand what Trump was saying.

Jimmy Kimmel in commenting on President Trump's recent speech at the UN said:

It was an historic event in that I think I'm pretty sure this was the first time anyone said something like this: "They're working together in the Middle East to crush the loser terrorists and stop their re-emergence."

Loser is a word you use to describe your sister's fiancé. Not terrorists. Loser is how Biff insulted Marty McFly. Our President uses it to describe ISIS.

Another inquiry is whether there is any mea culpa or retraction when past jokes are found to be based on premises that turned out to be false was not something I explored. However, I did see a U Tube repeat of a John Oliver rant on the comments by President Trump that Trump Tower and some of his conversations, both pre and post election, were subject to wire tap. Oliver was scathing and in coarse street language (permissible on HBO) expressed his indignation that a sitting President and his administration would be a party to such extremes. Other late-nights as well joined in this derision and denunciation of the Trump comments. Now, according to a report on CNN several weeks ago, the FBI obtained a warrant to eavesdrop on Paul Manafort in 2014 which was later renewed and resulted in the monitoring of Manafort's conversations with Trump in the Summer and Fall of 2016. To date, I've seen or heard nothing from the late-night comedians about these new developments. I won't hold my breath waiting for updates based upon this new information.

Conclusions

Many Americans do not invest considerable time into carefully following political news, whether presented in the traditional media or otherwise. For some, late-night comedy is a way to "check in" on the news without expending much effort. Others seek out late-night comedy solely for its entertainment value. For younger viewers, late-night comedy may serve a dual purpose, one of informing while also entertaining. A number of studies reveal, however, that late-night comedy viewing imparts only a modicum of information and may serve to create a false sense of having political knowledge when in fact the information gained is superficial and devoid of real understanding. This is especially true if earlier comments and jokes are found to be false or misleading.

As a result of my research for this paper, I have concluded the following:

1. Traditional news sources seem to be giving way to cable news, social media and late night comedy.

2. Millennials as a demographic appear to be the viewers most attracted to late-night comedy as a news source despite a lack of actual news content.
3. Late-night comedy can create lasting perceptions about candidates, accurate or not, through repetition.
4. Whether late-night comedy is a significant force in affecting the vote for a particular candidate is unclear.
5. If you wish to be entertained, and can bring a bit of political understanding to your viewing of late-night comedy (and don't mind a largely one-sided view), you may have an enjoyable time, whether or not you're updated on the news.

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