



When Parody and Reality Collide: Examining the Effects of Colbert’s Super PAC Satire on Issue Knowledge and Policy Engagement Across Media Formats

HEATHER LAMARRE
University of Minnesota

See the companion work to this article

“Shifting the Conversation: Colbert’s Super PAC and the Measurement of Satirical Efficacy”
by Amber Day in this Special Section

Following the 2010 U.S. Supreme Court landmark decision on campaign finance (i.e., *Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission*), political comedian Stephen Colbert took to the airways with a new kind of entertainment-based political commentary; satirical political activism. Colbert’s creation of a super PAC garnered the attention of national media, providing him the opportunity to move his satire beyond the confines of his late-night comedy show (*The Colbert Report*). Transcending traditional boundaries of late-night political comedy, Colbert appeared in character on a variety of political talk shows. Meta-coverage of this collision between parody and reality begs the question: Do audiences who consume Colbert’s super PAC parody in different media contexts demonstrate significantly different effects? Using data from a Web-based experiment ($N = 112$), effects of consuming Colbert’s super PAC satire in different media contexts (political comedy show, political talk show) were compared. Results indicate that consuming Colbert’s super PAC parody in the context of his comedy show resulted in significantly higher levels of issue knowledge and support for campaign finance reform when compared with those who consumed Colbert’s super PAC parody in the context of a political talk show (*Morning Joe*). The present study addresses the theoretical and practical implications for political and policy communication.

Following the U.S. Supreme Court landmark decision on campaign finance—*Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission* (2010)—political comedian Stephen Colbert broached the controversial decision that allowed corporations and unions to contribute untold amounts to political action committees

Heather LaMarre: hlamarre@umn.edu

Date submitted: 2012-12-03

Copyright © 2013 (Heather LaMarre). Licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution Non-commercial No Derivatives (by-nc-nd). Available at <http://ijoc.org>.

(PACs) with his unique brand of political parody: satirical political activism. Engaging in what Day (2011) termed "ironic authenticity," Colbert crossed the boundaries of traditional satire and became part of the national campaign finance debate (Jones, Baym, & Day, 2012). Moving from the role of comedic observer to sardonic activist, Stephen Colbert successfully started his own super PAC, *Americans for a Better Tomorrow, Tomorrow* (FEC, 2010). Jones et al. (2012) referred to this hybrid between political parody and real world activism as "performing the debate," an act through which the comedian provides the electorate with "an extended civics lesson" (p. 50). Legal researchers similarly argue that Colbert's satire offers an entertaining way to learn about campaign finance (Garrett, 2012), while political journalists and pundits alike tout the benefits of Colbert's educational comedy (Hoppe, 2012; Kleinsmith, 2011). Still, such conjecture has yet to be empirically tested, leaving open the question as to whether Colbert's super PAC parody significantly influences audiences' issue knowledge or opinions.

Colbert's super PAC parody has garnered national media attention, providing the comedian ample opportunity to extend his political parody beyond the confines of his show and appearing in character across multiple formats (e.g., *Letterman*, *This Week*, *Morning Joe*, etc.). This type of metacoverage, wherein political media treat political entertainment as an object of legitimate inquiry, has been growing in recent years (Baym, 2010; Young, 2011). Young (2011) notes that the rise of hybrid news formats and the focus on what Baym (2010) calls "aesthetic-values"-driven political news have created a new political media environment in which parody becomes an important aspect of intertextuality and the construction of political narratives.

In their recent article, Jones and colleagues (2012) outline the various ways that political satirists are moving beyond their traditional roles, directly engaging political journalists and elites. The scholars generally agree that Colbert's direct engagement contributes to society's information needs. Yet little is known regarding specific audience reactions to Colbert's satire when it is encountered outside the boundaries of his late-night program. This collision between political parody and reality, coupled with Colbert's metacoverage, raises the question of whether the political comedian's parody elicits similar or different audience effects when consumed in different media contexts.

With public trust in traditional news continuing to erode (Morales, 2012), money in electoral politics hitting an all-time high (Carnia, 2012), and audiences turning to late-night comedy for entertainment-based political news and information (Bibel, 2012), scholars and industry professionals are necessarily interested in the role these types of alternative news and information formats play in shaping political knowledge, influencing the electorate, and bolstering public engagement with policy issues. This present study draws upon recent qualitative and critical assessments of Colbert's political satire, empirically examining conjectures made in previous research and mainstream news media regarding the influence of Colbert's super PAC parody. Specifically, an online survey ($N = 112$) with an embedded experimental manipulation (*TCR*; *Morning Joe*; *Control*) was conducted to test the effects of consuming Colbert's super PAC satire in different media contexts (political comedy show, political talk show). The literature informing the study, as well as the results and discussion follow.

Political Parody in a Post Broadcast Society
Post-Broadcast Media and Political Satire

A dynamic set of factors, including the infusion of entertainment and news, shifting economic news models, an explosion of digital technologies, and actively engaged audiences, have resulted in what Baym (2010) calls aesthetic-expressive values of news production. An example of this shift from normative to aesthetic-expressive values of political journalism is embodied in the rise of political metanews coverage (i.e., media coverage about political media). Young (2011) further explored the changing nature of political media, demonstrating that the hyper-reality and intertextuality surrounding Tina Fey's impersonation of vice presidential candidate Sarah Palin led to a nonlinear news narrative promulgated through media metacoverage. Young (2011) concluded that "when distinctions between genres have disappeared, we should not be surprised when the actors and the settings of these campaign narratives are drawn from the world of fiction and entertainment" (p. 262). Young's perspective pairs nicely with Jones' (2010) explication of "border crossing," demonstrating that when comedians such as Stephen Colbert step outside the traditional confines of satire to "perform the debate," they become objects of the news and, in doing so, provide alternative political narratives.

Extending this to Stephen Colbert's Super PAC, it becomes clear that metacoverage of Colbert played an important role in setting the narrative and potentially influencing public opinion regarding campaign finance. If normative values were still governing news selection and construction, the media would likely not have treated Colbert's comedy as a legitimate object of inquiry. In today's aesthetic-values approach, however, news-entertainment hybrids have actively covered Colbert's super PAC, altering the interplay between fiction and reality in ways that most certainly shape the public narrative for campaign finance reform (Baym, 2010; Young, 2011; see also Jones et al., 2012). In turn, questions arise as to whether Colbert's border-crossing satire and the media's metacoverage of his parody significantly influence how individuals process the satire and form opinions regarding the policy issue.

News-Entertainment Hybrids

Hoping to engage audiences in political news and public affairs issues amidst the rapidly changing media environment, media producers are packaging political content in a variety of entertaining formats thought to engage audiences and increase message receptivity (Baym, 2007; Feldman & Young, 2008; Holbert et al., 2003; LaMarre & Landreville, 2009). Still, nearly one in four adults over 30 and half of young adults ages 18–29 turn to political satire and parody such as *The Daily Show (TDS)* and *The Colbert Report (TCR)* as key sources of political news and information (PEW research center, 2008).

Although the primary goal of late-night comedy is to entertain, some forms are developed with secondary goals aimed at influencing political attitudes and opinions (Holbert, 2005). In a 2011 *Fox Sunday Morning* interview with Chris Wallace, political comedian Jon Stewart articulated this point saying, "Here is the difference between you and I—I'm a comedian first. My comedy is informed by an ideological background . . . [But] when did I say to you I'm *only* a comedian? I said I'm a comedian first. That's not *only*" (Ryan, 2011; emphasis added).

Famous for publically appearing as his television persona (both on and off camera), Colbert is much more enigmatic. Using a deadpan and often sardonic style to parody conservative cable news pundits, he offers a unique brand of political satire that has been shown to influence audiences across the political spectrum (Day, this Special Section; Baumgartner & Morris, 2008; LaMarre, Landreville, & Beam, 2009). Even still, Colbert is known for pushing the boundaries of political satire, such as headlining the 2006 White House Correspondents' Dinner in full character and making a humorous bid for President in the 2008 South Carolina primary (Day, 2011; Jones, 2010).

Parody and Public Policy Education

Scholars maintain that political humorists such as Stewart and Colbert aim to inform the electorate (Day, this Special Section; Jones et al., 2012). In a rare moment, Colbert recently provided some insight, suggesting this may actually be the case. Letting his guard down during an interview with fellow late-night comedian, Dave Letterman (Burnett, Gaines, Pope, & Brennan, 2012), Colbert regaled the audience with how his political finance parody began as a joke following the *Citizens United* decision. Surprised to find such little oversight and restriction on how super PAC money may be spent, the comedian noted that his own super PAC parody highlights such absurdities, but he also hinted that a secondary aim of his political parody includes promoting such democratic ideals as informing the electorate.

Regardless of intent, it is here—at the intersection of political parody and satirical activism—that Stephen Colbert's unique brand of political humor is thought to influence politically diverse audiences (Baym, 2010; Garrett, 2012; Jones, 2010). As such, Colbert's extended super PAC parody, which highlights the absurdities of campaign finance law and mocks the controversial *Citizens United* decision, offers an excellent context to empirically examine the role that his activist satire plays in informing the electorate and promoting issue engagement.

Campaign Finance as a Context of Study

The 2012 presidential race was predicted to reach historic levels of campaign spending, even amidst the age of low-cost social media. Experts estimate that campaign advertising expenditures would top \$5.8 Billion, with political action committees (PACs) accounting for large portions of the spending (Barker, 2012; Carnia, 2012; "2012 Election," 2012). Although public interest in campaign finance is not new, concern has risen regarding the influx of money from "super PACs and other outside groups that don't have to reveal their donors, which has multiplied in the wake of a Supreme Court ruling" (Carnia, 2012). While traditional news has focused on following FEC spending reports and covering the "money race" between Democrats and Republicans ("2012 Money," 2012; Carnia, 2012), late-night political comedy show host, Stephen Colbert opted for a comedic response. In what can be described as "extended political parody", Colbert's approach developed an alternative news narrative, resulting in a wide platform for ongoing satirical commentary about money in politics. Engaging in what Jones et al. (2012) call "border crossing political satire" (p. 35), Colbert's parody has collided head-on with political journalism, punditry, and election politics.

Metacoverage and Potential Form Effects

Metacoverage of Colbert's highbrow antics has moved his political parody beyond the confines of his late-night show. His recent appearances range from other late-night venues (e.g., *Letterman*) to Sunday morning political shows (e.g., *This Week*) in which he consistently performs in character. Jones (2010) noted that Colbert presents one of the most complex and compelling political comedy characters in today's media. While Jones (2010) and Day (2011) surmise that Colbert's commitment to character is part of the allure that draws audiences into his parody, potential nuances between the media appearances have not been empirically considered. Unlike Stewart, who engages in thoughtful and often introspective discussions on political news programs (e.g., *Fox Sunday Morning*, *The O'Reilly Factor*), Colbert's media interviews and appearances are an extension of his television persona (Baym, 2010; Day, 2011; Jones, 2010). Unsuspecting or inattentive audiences might find it difficult to properly interpret Colbert's in-character appearance, especially when it occurs in the context of a political news show (e.g., *This Week*, *Morning Joe*).

Little is known about audience reactions to Colbert's appearances on other news and entertainment programs, but it is quite likely that the meta-coverage will result in form effects wherein different formats lead to differential perceptions of the satire and underlying messages (LaMarre & Walther, 2012; Young, 2011). Fiore and McLuhan first claimed that the "medium is the message" in 1967, arguing that context and form affect message reception as much or more than does content itself. Recent studies have similarly demonstrated that form and context do affect how audiences derive meaning and subsequently respond to political content across different media channels and forms (Delli Carpini & Williams, 2001; LaMarre et al., 2009; Young, 2011). DeVreese and Boomgaarden (2006) found that different media formats produced significant differences in political knowledge, while LaMarre and Walther (2012) reported differential effects of media format on perceptions of satire and public opinion. Because satire is complex and often difficult to interpret within a single context (Young, 2008), it is likely that moving the satire outside the boundaries of the comedy show into a new form (e.g., a cable news show) will alter how audiences derive meaning and form opinions about the underlying political message (Day, this Special Section; Delli Carpini & Williams, 2001; DeVreese & Boomgaarden, 2006; Young, 2011; see also Jones et al., 2011). Prior work has demonstrated how complex satire leads to misperceptions of satire and potential confusion regarding the underlying messages, suggesting that Colbert's border crossing coupled with his commitment to character could easily be misinterpreted outside the confines of his own show (Baumgartner & Morris, 2008; LaMarre et al., 2009). The question then becomes to what degree does Colbert's humor translate across media format, and at what point do audiences begin to derive different meanings as a function of form and context?

The Colbert Report Meets Morning Joe

Although there are many forms of political news and entertainment (Holbert, 2005) this study limits itself to comparing two political programs that provide a mix of news and entertainment. *TCR* airs on Comedy Central and offers traditional political satire in a late-night format, and *Morning Joe*, on MSNBC, provides a hybrid of political news and entertainment in a morning show format. While these two shows differ in several ways, Colbert has presented super PAC satire on both. Even still, his recent

appearance on *Morning Joe* covered many of the same topics and themes presented in his late-night comedy show, thus providing a good means of comparing of audience effects.

TCR offers a sophisticated form of political humor (satire) that differs from other forms of political comedy (Baym, 2005; Jones, 2010; LaMarre et al., 2009). In contrast, *Morning Joe* provides a more explicit, non-satirical hybrid of political news and entertainment, which relies on interviews, debate, and commentary. Still, both programs maintain a primary political focus. While both forms of media offer news and information pertaining to politics, Hmielowski, Holbert, and Lee (2011) note that "satire does not approach the topic of politics with the same lens as used in newsrooms" (p. 109). So what happens when satire is brought into the news format? Because it is likely that audiences approach *TCR* and *Morning Joe* with different expectations, it is quite possible that consuming the parody in two different contexts results in significantly different audience responses. Drawing on prior late-night and political entertainment literature, two specific outcomes of interest include issue knowledge and policy attitudes.

Issue Knowledge and Opinion Effects

Political satire and late-night political comedy have been linked to a variety of democratic outcomes including viewer perceptions (Cao & Brewer, 2008), evaluations of political candidates and leaders (Baumgartner & Morris, 2008; Moy, Xenos, & Hess, 2005; Young 2004), political trust and efficacy (Becker, 2011), and political attitudes (LaMarre et al., 2009; LaMarre & Walther, 2012). One area of great consternation is whether entertainment-based formats can properly engage or inform the electorate (Baum, 2002, 2003; Prior, 2003).

Issue knowledge. Baum and Jamieson (2006) identified the "Oprah effect" wherein inattentive citizens who regularly consumed the soft news format were more likely to consistently vote. Baum (2002) posited the "gateway hypothesis", which suggested that soft news consumption increased political interest and issue knowledge among the inattentive and non-political publics. However, Prior (2003) argued that soft news did not increase, and potentially decreased, political knowledge among viewers. While Baum (2003) agreed that general political knowledge was not significantly increased through soft news consumption, he found evidence that consuming entertainment-based news (soft news) positively influenced issue specific knowledge and attention. Likewise, qualitative and critical approaches have detailed the intersections of political comedy and learning, noting the format is conducive for breaking complex topics down into easily understood concepts (Baym, 2007).

Still, the question of context remains unanswered. Vraga et al. (2012) examined differences in political show host styles, noting clear differences between the late-night host and the cable talk show host. Other studies have shown that format influences cognitive engagement (Green & Brock, 2002), as well as emotional response (LaMarre & Landreville, 2009). In a recent study, LaMarre and Walther (2012) found that audiences learned more about the bank bailout issue from viewing *The Daily Show* than they did from watching CNN's *Anderson Cooper 360*. In contrast, Becker, Xenos, and Waisanen (2010) suggest that audience perceptions must be examined before learning outcomes are assessed. Taken as a whole, it appears that political satire has some positive effects on issue knowledge and that political media formats do elicit different audience reactions. However, no empirical studies have directly tested differential effects

of the same satire being delivered across multiple formats. Thus, the following hypothesis and research question are offered:

H1: Simple media exposure to Colbert's super PAC satire will have a significant positive relationship with issue knowledge.

RQ1: Will TCR viewers, Morning Joe viewers, and the control groups significantly differ in their levels of issue knowledge?

Opinion formation. Several studies have examined the influence of political satire on attitudes and public opinion. Holbert et al. (2011) revealed that satirical tone led to differing levels of perceived issue importance among viewers crossing the ideological spectrum. LaMarre et al. (2009) found that political ideology predicted opposing interpretations of Stephen Colbert's political joke telling on *TCR*. Similarly, Baumgartner and Morris (2008) found that young voters were influenced by Colbert's satire in unexpected ways. In each case, the authors identified consequential implications for public opinion such as shifting attitudes among key voting constituencies. Young (2008) examined how audiences process satire, finding that complex satire, such as Colbert's political parody, often results in heuristic processing and attitude change. Nabi, Moyer-Gu e, and Byrne (2007) concluded that audience attitudes were shaped through a heuristic process. On the whole, empirical evidence suggests that political satire significantly influences audience attitudes and opinions. As with issue knowledge, however, little is known about the differing effects of delivering the same political parody across different media formats. Thus, the following hypothesis and research question will be examined:

H2: Simple media exposure to Colbert's super PAC satire will have a significant positive relationship with support for campaign finance reform.

RQ2: Will TCR viewers, Morning Joe viewers, and the control groups significantly differ in their support for campaign finance reform?

Interpreting the Satire

Prior research finds that satire is difficult to interpret (Nabi et al., 2007; Young, 2008), raising concerns that audiences will struggle to understand the underlying political message. LaMarre et al. (2009) found that Colbert's deadpan style creates ambiguity and provides few contextual cues for audiences to interpret. Baumgartner and Morris (2008) found that exposure to Colbert's "hyper-partisan humor" in which he parodied right wing pundits actually resulted in more favorable attitudes toward President George W. Bush and Republicans in Congress (p. 634). The authors concluded that while Colbert's message was persuasive, his unique brand of humor did not work the way one might expect satire to perform. Instead, it appears that young viewers might not have properly interpreted Colbert's underlying messages or were confused by the humorist's style.

Considering the complex nature of political satire, coupled with Colbert's sardonic style (Day, 2011), it is pertinent to examine how audiences perceive Colbert's super PAC satire and if those

perceptions differ between media viewing audiences. Put differently, do people interpret Colbert's satire (e.g., the intended joke targets and underlying political message) differently when watching his late-night political comedy show as compared to when watching him appear in character on another political talk show? Thus, a final research question is offered:

RQ3: Do TCR viewers perceive Colbert's super PAC satire (e.g., properly interpreting intended joke targets and underlying political message) significantly different than do Morning Joe viewers?

Method

Using Amazon's Mechanical Turk (MTurk), an online survey with an embedded experimental media exposure manipulation (*TCR; Morning Joe; Control*) was conducted.

Random Assignment

To ensure random assignment, a comparison of the treatment groups was conducted. No significant differences between *Morning Joe* and *TCR* viewing groups were found for gender, $t(112) = .295, p = .570$; race, $t(112) = .186, p = .776$; income, $t(112) = -.386, p = .70$; education, $t(112) = -.046, p = .872$; or age $t(112) = -.371, p = .506$. As such, it appears that the random assignment was sufficient.

Manipulation

Media format was manipulated by exposing the treatment groups to different video clips embedded within the online survey. Both media clips featured Stephen Colbert, focused on his super PAC, and were of similar length (see stimuli for additional information).

Sample

The data were collected using MTurk, an online recruitment site that invites adults to participate in studies for a small cash payment. The sample ($N = 112$) included adult, registered voters living in the upper Midwest. Slightly more than half of the participants were female (54.7%). The average age was 23 years. Some 70% of participants were Caucasian, 9.4% were African-American, 11.1% were Hispanic, 5.1% were Asian, and the remaining 4.3% reported themselves as "Other" or chose not to answer the question. The average household income was \$25,001–\$50,000. The mean level of education for this sample was "High School Diploma or GED".

Validity of MTurk sample. Gosling, Vazire, Srivastava, and John (2004) concluded that pay-for-participation, Web-based recruitment tools, such as Amazon's Mechanical Turk (MTurk), are generally diverse, are more representative of an adult population than college and convenience samples, not adversely affected by repeat responders, and produce findings that are consistent with other sampling methods. However, there are rising concerns that savvy users can develop survey-taking programs (known as survey bots) that provide invalid data. Thus, it is recommended that human tasks and

screening questions be used to eliminate this growing threat (Berinsky, Huber, & Lenz, 2012; Gosling et al., 2004).

A recent study specifically examining the validity of MTurk concluded that MTurk samples are more representative of the U.S. adult population than convenience and college student samples (Berinsky et al., 2012). Still, probability based samples remain superior to nonprobability sampling, including MTurk. Regarding the demographic differences between MTurk and ANES data, MTurk participants appear to be slightly more liberal, higher educated, and skewed female (Berinsky et al., 2012).

Although researchers must be aware of the potential challenges and limitations in Web-based sampling, recent examinations of MTurk conclude that such limitations can be addressed with rigorous designs. The present study addressed these concerns, requiring human tasks that would identify "survey bots" and eliminating data when participants failed to properly answer content specific questions (see following for details on the procedure).

Procedure

All research was conducted online. Participants were invited to take the survey through the MTurk recruitment site. After screening potential participants for age (over 18), residency (U.S.), and voter eligibility (registered voters), 118 participants completed the survey. However, after the manipulation check was conducted, 6 participants were dropped from the analysis, resulting in a slightly lower sample size of $N = 112$ (see manipulation check that follows). After consenting to the study and agreeing to the nominal cash payment (administered through PayPal), participants were randomly assigned a URL that linked them to one of three conditions in the computer program created to reflect the 3 x 1 experimental design. The two media viewing groups began with a short video clip that featured Stephen Colbert discussing his super PAC in either the context of his show (*TCR* viewing group) or in the context of a cable political talk show (*Morning Joe* viewing group). The control group did not view any media (see following for stimuli details).

Following the video, two multiple-choice questions were asked of the media viewing groups to ensure that the media format manipulation was effective (see following for manipulation check results). Immediately afterward, all participants were asked to answer a series of questions regarding campaign finance issue knowledge, political interest, source perception, attitudes toward campaign finance reform, and demographics. The entire process, from start to finish, averaged roughly 20 minutes.

Stimuli

***TCR* super PAC parody clip.** The media clip for *TCR* used in this study is a 2 min: 45 s clip edited from a segment titled "Colbert Super PAC—Coordination Resolution with Jon Stewart" that originally aired during the January 12, 2012 episode of *TCR*. The clip includes the segment in which Stephen Colbert transfers his super PAC to Jon Stewart and the two ask Trevor Potter (Colbert's super PAC attorney) pointed questions about the "rules." The tone is satirical, but Potter's answers to the comedians' questions are serious, accurate, and informative about super PAC laws and regulations. The questions and answers

specifically relate to rules governing employees, candidate-super PAC noncoordination, and how the money could be spent.¹

Morning Joe super PAC interview clip. The *Morning Joe* video is a 2 m: 55 s clip edited from a segment titled "Stephen Colbert on MSNBC's *Morning Joe*" that originally aired during the January 20, 2012 episode of *Morning Joe* on MSNBC. The *Morning Joe* clip includes the segment in which Colbert is interviewed by the show hosts about his super PAC. The commentary offered by Colbert is satirical, maintaining the same position, tone, and tenor as the commentary he offers in his show. The topics in the edited *Morning Joe* clip mirror those in the *TCR* clip, focusing on super PAC rules and regulations governing employees, noncoordination, and expenditures. Colbert remains in his television show persona during the entire segment. Thus, Colbert offers highly similar political satire messages about super PACs in both the late-night political parody and the cable political talk show.²

Manipulation check. After viewing the embedded videos, participants were asked two multiple-choice questions to ensure that the message format manipulation was effective. The first question simply asked participants to identify the name of the show they watched (answer choices included: *The Colbert Report*, *Fox and Friends*, *The Daily Show*, *Morning Joe*, not sure, refused to answer). The second question asked participants to name the topic of discussion in the clip (answer choices included: super PACs, illegal immigration, unemployment, not sure, and refused to answer). Approximately 92% of the participants answered both questions correctly. The ability manipulation was deemed highly effective. The six participants who failed to properly answer either of the two questions were eliminated, and only the remaining 112 participants who responded correctly to both questions were included in the analysis.

Measures

Issue knowledge. A main dependent variable under study was issue knowledge, which was measured by asking participants four questions taken from information available in both videos (Cronbach's $\alpha = .73$). The questions, with response choices and the correct answer noted, included:

- (1) "Under FEC regulations, super PACs can run ads in support of political candidates as long as they do not (coordinate their strategy with candidates or campaigns [correct answer], hire anyone from the super PAC staff to work for the campaign, invest in businesses with the candidate, not sure, no answer)";

¹ Due to copyright, the edited clip cannot be made publically available. A copy of the edited clip referenced here is available upon request. The full-length (nonedited) segment is publically available at <http://www.colbertnation.com/the-colbert-report-videos/405889/january-12-2012/indecision-2012---colbert-super-pac---coordination-resolution-with-jon-stewart>

² Due to copyright, the edited clip cannot be made publically available. A copy of the edited clip referenced here is available upon request. The full-length (nonedited) segment is publically available at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4tQcrmK5y8o&feature=relmfu>

(2) "Super PACs are free to do whatever they want with the money they receive, provided that it is legal" (true [correct answer], false, not sure, no answer);

(3) "Under FEC regulations, a super PAC cannot hire any employees who have worked with or for the political candidates" (true, false [correct answer], not sure, no answer); and

(4) "What Supreme Court decision allows corporations and unions to contribute unlimited amounts to PACs?" [*Citizens United*]. Individual-level "issue knowledge scores" were created by totaling the number of correct answers for each participant, with possible scores ranging from 0 to 4 ($M = 2.08$, $SD = 1.25$).

Attitudes. Individual-level attitudes toward campaign finance reform were measured for this study. The attitude measure used a 3-item index created from unique items measured along 6-point semantic differential scales. Participants were asked to select the number on the scale that most represented their opinion from the statements: "Campaign finance reform is . . . needed (1)-not needed (6)," "wise (1)-unwise (6)," and "not at all important (1)-very important (6)." The answers to "needed-not needed" and "wise-unwise" were reverse coded. The index was reliable with Cronbach's $\alpha = .91$ ($M = 4.39$, $SD = .95$).

Perceptions of satire. Using the same 5-point scale as source credibility, two questions were asked to assess how audiences perceived Colbert's satire. Perceptions of satire were measured by asking participants how much they agree with the statements: "Stephen Colbert does not personally support campaign finance reform [reverse coded] ($M = 3.35$, $SD = 1.23$)" and "Stephen Colbert actually thinks super PAC rules and regulations are absurd ($M = 3.46$, $SD = 1.36$)."

Covariate. Political interest was used as the covariate. Extant political entertainment literature has demonstrated the influence of political interest, indicating that individual-level interest in politics would influence one's elaboration, perceptions, and attitudes about the message, sources, and message target (Holbert et al., 2003; Young & Tisinger, 2006). Political interest was measured by on a 7-point Likert-type scale from 1 (*not at all interested*) to 7 (*very interested*) ($M = 3.44$, $SD = .96$).

Analysis

OLS regression and Analysis of Covariance (ANCOVA) were run to assess the relevant hypotheses and research questions. For the ANCOVAs, each test retained the same independent variable—media format (i.e., *TCR*; *Morning Joe*; *Control*)—as well as the same covariate—political interest. The outcome variables included: issue knowledge, support for campaign finance reform, and satire perceptions. The regression equations each used simple media exposure to Colbert's super PAC satire as the independent variable and controlled for age, race, gender, income, education, political interest, political ideology, and prior viewing of Colbert. Dependent variables included issue knowledge (H1) and support for campaign finance reform (H2).

Results

Issue Knowledge

As predicted by H1, OLS regression found that viewing Colbert's super PAC parody significantly predicted increased issue knowledge, $\hat{a} = .632 (.254)$, $p < .05$.

In response to RQ1, the ANCOVA revealed a significant main effect for issue knowledge $F(2, 109) = 12.51$, $p < .001$ (Table 1). Using Bonferroni's post hoc comparisons, analysis of the adjusted means revealed that audiences who watched *TCR* (adjusted $M = 2.74$, $SE = 1.11$) had significantly higher issue knowledge scores than those who watched Colbert's appearance on *Morning Joe* (adjusted $M = 2.05$, $SE = 1.24$) or the control group (adjusted $M = 1.43$, $SE = 1.06$), $p < .001$. It appears there was a significant form effect wherein issue learning was highest for *TCR* viewers.

Table 1. Adjusted Means and Standard Errors for Issue Knowledge, Support for Campaign Finance Reform, and Perceptions of Colbert's Satire.

Groups	Issue Knowledge	Support for Campaign Finance Reform (CFR)
<i>The Colbert Report</i>	2.74 (1.11)	4.73 (.89)
<i>Morning Joe</i>	2.05 (1.24)	4.30 (.93)
Control	1.43 (1.06)	4.10 (.94)
	Perceptions of Colbert Support for CFR	Perceptions of Colbert Intended Joke Targets
<i>The Colbert Report</i>	4.00 (.88)	4.49 (.68)
<i>Morning Joe</i>	3.86 (.89)	3.88 (.91)

Attitudes

Using OLS regression, viewing Colbert's super PAC parody did not significantly predict increased support for campaign finance reform (H2), but the equation approached significance, $\hat{a} = .404 (.213)$, $p < .06$.

However, the ANCOVA conducted in response to RQ2, found a significant main effect for support for campaign finance reform $F(2, 109) = 4.32$, $p < .05$, (Table 1). Analysis of the adjusted means revealed that viewers who watched *TCR* (adjusted $M = 4.73$, $SE = .89$) demonstrated significantly more support for campaign finance reform than did the control group (adjusted $M = 4.10$, $SE = .94$), $p < .05$, but they did not significantly differ from those who watched Colbert's appearance on *Morning Joe* (adjusted $M = 4.30$, $SE = .93$), $p = .168$. Thus, it seems that while the OLS regression did not reach significance, the ANCOVA detected some movement in campaign finance reform attitudes among groups. Replication using more power to detect effects would likely clarify these mixed results.

Satire Perceptions

In response to RQ 3, ANCOVA analysis revealed a significant main effect for perceptions of Colbert's support for campaign finance reform, $F(2, 109) = 48.31, p < .001$ (Table 1). Additionally, it appears that *TCR* viewers (adjusted $M = 4.00, SE = .88$) and *Morning Joe* viewers (adjusted $M = 3.86, SE = .89$) equally perceived Colbert as actually supporting campaign finance reform, $p = 1.0$, suggesting that exposure to his satire in both formats produced similar perceptions of his underlying attitude toward the issue. There was also a significant main effect for perceptions that Colbert's super PAC satire was mocking the absurdities of campaign finance law and super PACs, $F(2, 109) = 86.82, p < .001$. Interestingly, significant differences between the two media viewing groups did emerge where *TCR* viewers (adjusted $M = 4.49, SE = .68$) perceived Colbert's satire as mocking the absurdities of super PACs significantly more than did those who watched Colbert's appearance on *Morning Joe* (adjusted $M = 3.88, SE = .91$), $p < .01$. Hence, it seems that while both groups perceived Colbert as wanting campaign finance reform, *TCR* viewers may have more clearly understood the nature of his humor.

Post Hoc Analysis

The perception of satire results provided interesting insights regarding audiences' understandings of Colbert's super PAC parody. LaMarre et al. (2009) and Baumgartner and Morris (2008) concluded that Colbert's style of humor and commitment to character potentially create ambiguity, which can impede one's ability to properly interpret the underlying political message. In the present set of results, exposure to Colbert's satire (either through his show or through his appearance on a political talk show) increased perceptions that the comedian has a policy agenda (i.e., supporting campaign finance reform) when compared with the control group. Yet the late-night viewers and political talk show viewers significantly differed in their perceptions of Colbert's intended joke targets, for example, who or what his parody was mocking. To further probe this discrepancy, a post hoc analysis was performed. Both political ideology (Baumgartner & Morris, 2008; LaMarre et al., 2009) and knowledge (LaMarre & Walther, 2012; Young, 2004) have been identified as important factors in humor processing studies. As such, these two variables were tested as predictors of audience satire perceptions.

Using OLS regression, this study tested political ideology and issue knowledge as predictors of audience perceptions of satire. In the first regression, controlling for age, race, gender, political interest, and prior viewing of Colbert, political ideology was not found to significantly predict audiences' perceptions of Colbert's intended joke targets ($\hat{\beta} = .041, p = .685$) or his underlying policy message about campaign finance reform ($\hat{\beta} = .042, p = .647$). However, controlling for age, race, gender, political interest, political ideology, and prior viewing of Colbert, it was found that issue knowledge was significantly related (Table 2) to perceptions that Colbert's satire was mocking super PACs ($\hat{\beta} = .428, p = .001$), as well as to perceptions of his support for campaign finance reform ($\hat{\beta} = .396, p = .001$) (Table 2). Thus, it appears that one's issue knowledge was a better predictor of one's "getting the joke." This points to the importance of intertextuality, which is discussed subsequently in more detail.

Table 2. OLS Regression Results Predicting Perceptions of Colbert's Satire.

Predictors	Perceptions of Colbert's intended joke targets		Perceptions of Colbert's intended political message	
	<i>B</i>	<i>s.e.</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>s.e.</i>
(Constant)	2.619	.903	1.818	.819
Age	-.003	.037	.048	.033
Gender	-.282	.264	-.137	.234
Political interest	-.099	.138	-.153	.127
Race/ethnicity	.034	.143	-.127	.127
Political ideology	.138	.097	.133	.086
Prior Colbert viewing	.257	.115	.251	.111
<i>Issue knowledge</i>	.428*	.102	.396*	.090

(*) $p < .001$. Coefficients are unstandardized

Discussion

The purpose of this study is to empirically examine whether Colbert's super PAC parody resulted in higher issue knowledge and support for campaign finance reform among audiences. Additionally, these effects were compared between two different media environments: (a) within the confines of Colbert's show and (b) his appearance on the political talk show *Morning Joe*. Drawing upon the literature, the study also asked whether differences in perceptions of Colbert's satire emerged between the two media formats.

The results indicate that simple exposure to Colbert's super PAC satire has a positive effect on issue knowledge. Still, there is a significant form effect wherein issue learning is highest for *TCR* viewers. The results regarding attitudes toward campaign finance reform are not as clear. While the regression predicting increased support for campaign finance reform (CFR) from media viewing only approaches significance, the between-groups analysis reveals that both viewing groups demonstrate more CFR

support than did the control group. This seeming contradiction might be a result of low power. Because the overall effect was approaching significance, it is quite possible that the sample was not large enough to fully detect effects in the regression equation. Thus, replication using more power is suggested to clarify these mixed results. Still, as prior research has shown, these findings suggest that political parody has the potential to significantly influence attitudes toward public policy issues. Taken together, the results support recent work that situates Colbert's super PAC satire as a laboratory for learning about policy issues (Day, this Special Section; Jones, 2010; Jones et al., 2012), as well as highlighting the importance of metacoverage and intertextuality in constructing alternative political narratives through satire (Baym, 2010; Young, 2011).

As one probes deeper into the effects of Colbert's super PAC parody on learning, it becomes clear that form matters. Specifically, the late-night comedy resulted in higher issue learning than did the political talk show hybrid. Thus, it seems that exposure to Colbert's political satire within the boundaries of his own show elicits more learning than does exposure to Colbert's political parody in a different media setting. This is quite interesting, suggesting that when political comedians move beyond the confines of their comedic space they might lose control over message receptivity. While this difference might be attributed to any number of factors, including message discounting (Nabi et al., 2007), lack of contextual cues (LaMarre et al., 2009), lower prior knowledge (Baumgartner & Morris, 2008; LaMarre & Walther, 2012), increased processing load required to make sense of the satire (Young, 2008), and so on, it is quite remarkable that audiences learned more from the late-night comedy format than they did from the news-entertainment hybrid. It also raises questions regarding potential differences in intertextuality, boundaries of political satire, and the influence of metacoverage (Baym, 2010; Day, this issue; Young, 2011). Future studies should begin to explore whether audiences derive different meanings as a function of increased (or decreased) metacoverage exposure, and when one's prior understanding of the issue interacts with this process. Additionally, it would be beneficial to begin sorting through the role of intertextuality, both as an antecedent and as an effect of viewing political humor metacoverage.

When looking at audience perceptions of Colbert's satire, an interesting paradox occurred. *TCR* parody viewers appear to have better understood Colbert's intentional mocking of super PAC rules and regulations than did the *Morning Joe* viewers, yet no differences emerged between the groups in terms of their perceptions of Colbert's support for campaign finance reform. Hence, it appears that while both groups perceived Colbert as wanting campaign finance reform, satire performed within the boundaries of a comedy show might offer a better forum for understanding the nature of the humor and the underlying political messages. It was thought that perhaps attitude effects observed among *Morning Joe* viewers were due, in part, to alternative factors such as source or political ideology. The post hoc analysis provided some additional insight in this regard, demonstrating which latent variables were (and were not) at play. Namely, political ideology does not appear to significantly influence audience understandings of Colbert's humor, but issue knowledge emerges as a key predictor of properly interpreting Colbert's satire across the media forms. Perhaps, as Young (2008) posited, the increased cognitive loads required to make sense of Colbert's "out-of-the-box" satire on *Morning Joe* made it difficult for viewers to properly interpret what his goals and intentions were. Again we see the role of intertextuality emerging. If viewers come to the media with relatively low understanding of the political issue, making sense of the satire is more

difficult. It appears this burden grows even stronger when the satire is being performed across different entertainment-news hybrids and outside the boundaries of the comedian's show.

Taken together, it appears that the civics learning lab created by Colbert's super PAC parody has some boundaries that require further exploration. The present findings offer some empirical evidence, supporting claims that Colbert's "performance satire" encourages issue learning and bolsters support for public policy initiatives (Baym, 2010; Day, 2011; Jones, 2010). Still, important differences emerge as the comedian moves his satire into other forms of political media. Although the political talk show *Morning Joe* relies heavily on entertainment, Colbert's brand of satire did not translate well in this news-entertainment hybrid.

As more and more comedians opt for bridging real world politics and political parody, it will be important to explore the boundaries of satire's effects. Thus, future studies should focus on testing these boundaries, finding the conditions under which political satire influences audiences across the growing spectrum of media formats. Additionally, this study only examined simple exposure. It is likely that frequent exposure to Colbert's satirical antics can reduce the ambiguity and increase the extent to which audiences understand and properly interpret the satire. Indeed, it may well be the case that more is better. As Colbert and fellow political comedians continue to push the boundaries of political parody, culturally and politically diverse audiences will become more familiar with this new hybrid between political comedy and reality. As such, longitudinal studies offer an especially interesting way to empirically examine how effective Colbert's strategy will be over time.

As with any study, this research was limited in several ways. The small sample size and single exposure inhibited the ability to draw strong conclusions or generalize the results. Additionally, only one form of political media was compared to the late-night format. Indeed, there are many forms of political media that warrant consideration, including several different types of political talk shows. That said, finding effects with such a small sample and a single media exposure suggests that these findings are likely conservative estimates of real-world effects.

Moreover, this study found important differences in the effects of consuming Colbert's satire across multiple formats. These results support claims that Colbert's unique brand of political parody helps inform the electorate and bolster support for public policy issues. Remarkably, the late-night format showed more promise than did the political talk show interview in terms of increasing issue knowledge and influencing policy opinion. Additionally, late-night viewers appear to have better understood that Colbert's super PAC parody was mocking *Citizens United*, campaign finance, and money in politics. Still, both the *Morning Joe* and *TCR* viewers understood Colbert's underlying political message regarding campaign finance reform. Because Colbert's primary aim is to entertain, it may be enough that *Morning Joe* viewers enjoyed the comedy and "got the message." On the other hand, as media producers, policy communicators, and campaign strategists become aware of the potential to inform, engage, and influence the electorate through political parody, there will be a growing demand for research that clarifies the complexities and develops models for the strategic use of political humor. As researchers, we should continue exploring, testing, and defining the boundaries and effects of political satire in the age of participatory media, with an emphasis on understanding the benefits and consequences of intertextuality.

References

- Barker, K. (2012, August 13). Two dark money groups outspending all super PACs combined. *ProPublica*. Retrieved from <http://www.propublica.org/article/two-dark-money-groups-outspending-all-super-pacs-combined>
- Baum, M. A. (2002). Sex, lies and war: How soft news brings foreign policy to the inattentive public. *American Political Science Review*, 96, 91–109.
- Baum, M. A. (2003). Soft news and political knowledge: Evidence of absence or absence of evidence? *Political Communication*, 20, 173–190.
- Baum, M. A., & Jamieson, A. (2006). The Oprah effect: How soft news helps inattentive citizens vote consistently. *Journal of Politics*, 68, 4.
- Baumgartner, J. C. (2007). Humor on the next frontier: Youth, online political humor, and the JibJab effect. *Social Science Computer Review*, 25, 319–338.
- Baumgartner, J. C., & Morris, J. S. (2008). One nation, under Stephen? The effects of *The Colbert Report* on American youth. *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media*, 52(4), 622–643. doi:10.1080/08838150802437487
- Baym, G. (2005). *The Daily Show*: Discursive integration and the reinvention of political journalism. *Political Communication*, 22(3), 259–276. doi:10.1080/10584600591006492
- Baym, G. (2007). Crafting new communicative models in the televisual sphere: Political interviews on *The Colbert Report*. *The Communication Review*, 10(2), 93–115. doi:10.1080/10714420701350379
- Baym, G. (2010). *From Cronkite to Colbert: The evolution of broadcast news*. Boulder, CO: Paradigm Publishers.
- Becker, A. B. (2011). Political humor as democratic relief? The effects of exposure to comedy and straight news on trust and efficacy. *Atlantic Journal of Communication*, 19(5), 235–250. doi:10.1080/15456870.2011.622191
- Becker, A. B., Xenos, M. A., & Waisanen, D. J. (2010). Sizing up *The Daily Show*: Audience perceptions of political comedy programming. *Atlantic Journal of Communication*, 18(3), 144–157. doi:10.1080/15456871003742112
- Berinsky, A. J., Huber, G. A., & Lenz, G. (2012). Evaluating online labor markets for experimental research: Amazon.com's Mechanical Turk. *Political Analysis*, 20(3), 351–368. doi:10.1093/pan/mpr057
- Bibel, S. (2012, October 4). Late-night TV ratings for September 24–28, 2012. *TV by the Numbers*. Retrieved from <http://tvbythenumbers.zap2it.com/2012/10/04/late-night-tv-ratings-for-september-24-28-2012/151491>

- Burnett, R., Gaines, B., Pope, M., & Brennan, J. (Executive Producers). (2012, August 30). *Late Show with David Letterman*. [Television broadcast, season 19, episode 3667]. New York, NY: Worldwide Pants Incorporated.
- Cao, X., & Brewer, P. (2008). Political comedy shows and public participation in politics. *International Journal of Public Opinion Research*, 20(1), 90–99. doi:10.1093/ijpor/edm030
- Carnia, C. (2012, August 2). 2012 election costs could reach record \$5.8 billion. *USA Today*. Retrieved from <http://content.usatoday.com/communities/onpolitics/post/2012/08/2012-election-total-spending-costliest-obama-romney-/1#.UHCeU3FOMGg>
- Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission, 558 U.S. (2010). Retrieved from <http://www.aclu.org/free-speech/citizens-united-v-federal-election-commission>
- Day, A. (2011). *Satire and dissent: Interventions in contemporary political debate*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Delli Carpini, M. X., & Williams, B. (2001). Let us entertain you: Politics in the new media environment. In L. Bennett & R. Entman (Eds.), *Mediated politics: Communication in the future of democracy* (pp. 160–191). New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.
- DeVreese, C., & Boomgaarden, H. (2006). News, political knowledge and participation: The differential effects of news media exposure on political knowledge and participation. *Acta Politica*, 41(4), 317–341.
- 2012 Election will be costliest yet, with outside spending a wild card. (2012, August 1). *OpenSecrets*. Retrieved from <http://www.opensecrets.org/news/2012/08/2012-election-will-be-costliest-yet.html>
- Feldman, L., & Young, D. (2008). Late-night comedy as a gateway to traditional news: An analysis of time trends in news attention among late-night comedy viewers during the 2004 presidential primaries. *Political Communication*, 25(4), 401–422.
- Garrett, R. (2012). Seriously funny: Understanding campaign finance policy through the Colbert super PAC. *St. Louis University Law Journal*, 56, 711–719.
- Gosling, S. D., Vazire, S., Srivastava, S., & John, O. P. (2004). Should we trust Web-based studies? A comparative analysis of six preconceptions about Internet questionnaires. *American Psychologist*, 59, 93–104.
- Green, M. C., & Brock, T. C. (2000). The role of transportation in persuasiveness of public narratives. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 79(5), 701–721.
- Holbert, R. L. (2005). A typology for the study of entertainment television and politics. *American Behavioral Scientist*, 49, 436–453.

- Holbert, R. L., Pillion, O., Tschida, D. A., Armfield, G. G., Kinder, K., Cherry, K., et al. (2003). *The West Wing* as endorsement of the American presidency: Expanding the domain of priming in political communication. *Journal of Communication*, 53, 427–443.
- Hoppe, C. (2012, January 21). Stephen Colbert turns super PAC rally into civics lesson. *Dallas Morning News*. Retrieved from <http://www.dallasnews.com/news/politics/perry-watch/headlines/20120120-campaign-journal-stephen-colbert-turns-super-pac-rally-into-civics-lesson.ece>
- Hmielowski, J., Holbert, L., & Lee, J. (2011). Predicting the consumption of political TV satire: Affinity for political humor—*The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report*. *Communication Monographs*, 78(1), 96–114.
- Jones, J. P. (2010). *Entertaining politics: Satiric television and political engagement* (2nd ed.). Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Jones, J. P., Baym, G., & Day, A. (2012). Mr. Stewart and Mr. Colbert go to Washington: Television satirists outside the box. *Social Research*, 79(1), 33–60.
- Kleinsmith, S. (2011, July 5). Opinion: Colbert's super PAC—Good for government and good for us. Retrieved from <http://www.wnyc.org>
- LaMarre, H. L., & Landreville, K. D. (2009). When is fiction as good as fact? Comparing the influence of documentary and historical reenactment films on engagement, affect, issue interest, and learning. *Mass Communication & Society*, 12(4), 537–555.
- LaMarre, H., Landreville, K. D., & Beam, M. A. (2009). The irony of satire: Political ideology and the motivation to see what you want to see in *The Colbert Report*. *The International Journal of Press/Politics*, 14(2), 212–231. doi:10.1177/1940161208330904
- LaMarre, H. L., & Walther, W. (2012, May 24). *Ability matters: A look at ability manipulation for cable TV news and late-night TV satire elaboration*. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the International Communication Association, Phoenix, AZ.
- 2012 Money race: Compare the candidates. (2012, September 10). *The New York Times*. Retrieved from <http://elections.nytimes.com/2012/campaign-finance>
- Morales, L. (2012, July 10). *Americans' confidence in television news drops to new low*. Retrieved from <http://www.gallup.com/poll/155585/americans-confidence-television-news-drops-new-low.aspx>
- Moy, P., Xenos, M., & Hess, J. (2005). Communication and citizenship: Mapping the political effects of infotainment. *Mass Communication and Society*, 8, 111–131.
- Nabi, R., Moyer-Gu e, E., & Byrne, S. (2007). All joking aside: A serious investigation into the persuasive effect of funny social messages. *Communication Monographs*, 74, 29.
- The Pew Research Center for the People & the Press. (2008, January 11). *Internet's broader role in*

- Campaign 2008: Social networking and online videos take off*. Retrieved from <http://people-press.org/reports/pdf/384.pdf>
- Prior, M. (2003). Any good news in soft news? The impact of soft news preference on political knowledge. *Political Communication, 20*, 49–171. doi:10.1080/10584600390211172
- Ryan, M. (Executive Producer). (2011, June 20). *Fox News Sunday with Chris Wallace*. [Television broadcast]. Retrieved from <http://video.foxnews.com/v/1006873447001/exclusive-jon-Colbert-on-fox-news-sunday>
- Vraga, E. K., Edgerly, S., Bode, L., Carr, D. J., Bard, M., Johnson, N., et al. (2012). The correspondent, the comic, and the combatant: The consequences of host style in political talk shows. *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly, 89*(1), 5–22. doi:10.1177/1077699011428575
- Young, D. G. (2004). Late-night comedy in election 2000: Its influence on candidate trait ratings and the moderating effects of political knowledge and partisanship. *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media, 48*, 1–22.
- Young, D. G. (2008). The privileged role of the late-night joke: Exploring humor's role in disrupting argument scrutiny. *Media Psychology, 11*, 119–142.
- Young, D. G. (2011). Political entertainment and the press' construction of Sarah Feylin. *Popular Communication, 9*, 1–15.
- Young, D. G., & Tisinger, R. (2006). Dispelling late-night myths: News consumption among late-night comedy viewers and the predictors to various late-night shows. *Harvard International Journal of Press/Politics, 11*, 113–134.