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Understanding *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*: Effects in a New Media Environment

Jacob Andrew Long

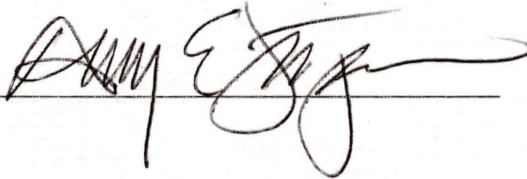
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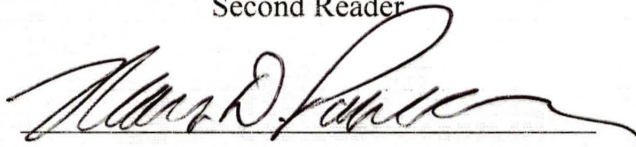
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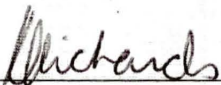
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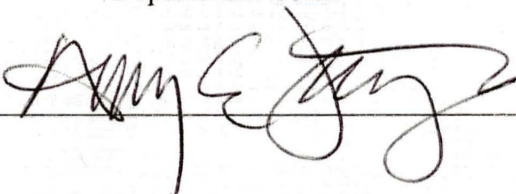
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ABSTRACT

Understanding *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*: Effects in a New Media Environment

by Jacob Andrew Long

As *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* has earned widespread attention for its perceived impacts on politics, the nature and extent of those effects have been disputed. While there is a growing body of research on this topic across several academic disciplines, it has generally been received as inconclusive. *The Daily Show* has been a particularly befuddling example of the indistinct boundary that divides news and entertainment, thereby exposing the pitfalls of conducting research based on the presumption that such a line exists. I propose a new theoretical framework from which to interpret existing and future research, which focuses on changes in the political and media environments that have rendered older normative assumptions and methods ineffectual.

Standards applied to broadcast news research do not map well onto political satire, which is part of the reason why *TDS* research has produced results that seem contradictory according to older frameworks. Likewise, disciplinary divisions have effectively prevented complementary research works from entering into dialogue with one another. By approaching these questions about *TDS* from a perspective befitting political satire in a 21st century media environment, I connect existing research in a more coherent manner than what currently exists. With this framework as a guide, I demonstrate that *TDS* benefits democracy by increasing attentiveness to politics among what would otherwise be inattentive viewers, promoting a discerning orientation towards politics, and empowering viewers to understand and engage with the political world.

Introduction

The Daily Show with Jon Stewart has attracted critical attention from scholars, political commentators, and laypeople for both its style and its apparent growing influence on serious political discourse. As the relevance of more conventional gatekeepers, like broadcast news and newspapers, has receded in an environment of growing media choice, Jon Stewart has become a symbol of the many new sources citizens look toward for political information and commentary. While these changes are undeniable, what are far less clear are what the consequences of this new political environment will be for American democracy. On one hand, *The Daily Show* could seem to be part of a troubling trend towards trivialization and superficiality in politics that promotes disengagement, cynicism, and apathy via its entertaining style. On the other, it may provide a necessary check on corporate and political power while engaging otherwise disenchanted citizens with politics. By interpreting *TDS* and the existing scholarly research on it within a new theoretical framework, I argue that there is more truth to the latter hypothesis. *TDS* aids democracy by acting as a gateway for non-participating citizens to begin attending to and participating in politics while also attracting an informed audience that uses the show for its checks on power, both political and cultural. The end result is an audience that will trend toward both increased attentiveness toward politics, a critical and discerning orientation toward political and media institutions, and confidence in its ability to understand and participate in those institutions.

Throughout this project, I will outline *The Daily Show's* effects on democracy by considering its effects on its viewers. This is not necessarily the only way the show could

affect democratic society; for instance, it is fathomable that *TDS* can benefit society by altering traditional news outlets that are fearful of being skewered by Stewart. While I will touch on these possibilities, they are generally difficult to measure and do not necessarily answer the most compelling critiques of both the program itself and the media environment on the whole. Instead, I will narrow my focus on the program's ability to affect citizens. I will draw upon the existing research on these effects, but contextualize them in a new theoretical framework to add some clarity to the body of work that has been described as inconclusive (Holbert 2013). To meet my standard for benefiting democracy, *TDS* must help make its viewers better citizens. As for the precise measures for what makes better citizens, these will be developed in more detail. Generally speaking, *TDS* aids democracy by acting as a gateway for non-participating citizens to begin engaging with politics while also attracting an informed audience that uses the show for its ability to hold political and media institutions accountable. It should act as an equalizing force among the information "haves" and "have-nots," a schism that scholars like Markus Prior (2007) argue is growing due to the proliferation of entertainment media and could arguably be embodied by a *TDS* audience that at any given moment includes both highly informed and underinformed viewers. The desired end results of viewing *TDS* are increased attentiveness toward politics, a critical and discerning orientation toward establishment politics and media, and more confidence in one's ability to understand and participate in those institutions.

While entertainment-oriented media like *TDS* have attracted a great deal of attention and even a growing line of research across several disciplines, little has been done to interpret the overall body of work or even concretely delineate desired outcomes

of this research on the whole. Williams and Delli Carpini (2011) made strides in this regard by blurring the perceived distinctions between news and entertainment, particularly as the economic and technological circumstances of the media environment change. Others had recognized the perhaps unrealistic standards applied to news (e.g., Zaller 2003) and saw promise in “soft” formats for engaging citizens in complex political issues (e.g., Baum 2003). Lance Holbert calls for an “anchor from which to judge what political satire can or should look like as a democratic ideal,” further clarifying a hope “to bring normative theory more firmly into the fold of the empirical study of political entertainment media” (2013, 306, 317). To evaluate research on the show’s effects, one must start by “shifting the focus from ‘what is’ to ‘what should be’” (Holbert 2013, 307). That is, when researchers describe “what is,” it must be contextualized alongside a well-argued notion of “what should be.” Otherwise, potentially significant research outcomes could go unrecognized or mischaracterized. Holbert goes on to say that political communication research “needs more consistent and explicit presentation of the normative assumptions under which researchers function, as well as acknowledgement that these assumptions exist within a specific type of democratic theory” (2013, 317). This project seeks to do just that: I will outline a theoretical framework from which to interpret existing research, use that to assess the existing research, and then sketch a plan for future research, both empirical and otherwise. From there it will be possible to make a reasonable judgment as to whether *TDS* ultimately benefits American society.

Mediated Citizenship Revisited

Media scholar Michael Schudson has often employed a citizen-centric style in his work, including with *The Good Citizen* (1998), in which he argues that changes in the

media landscape and popular conceptions of the ideal citizen have changed concurrently throughout American history. To briefly summarize, the revolutionary years were characterized by a deference to political elites as the fledgling government needed a formal structure and information was quite decentralized. After those initial years, throughout much of the 1800s, the ideal citizen was active in his party, which was also the chief purveyor of public affairs information via newspapers, pamphlets, and local meetings. The Progressive movement in the later 1800s and early 1900s brought with it a distaste for party politics and a shift in the press towards what is now known as the “objective standard.” This reflected a dominant model of citizenship that emphasized the division of labor and capitalistic efficiency. In that era, journalists expectedly gained a collective consciousness as part of their increasingly specialized place in the American labor force and worked to raise their prestige in part by embracing objectivity. Citizens, often taking on their own specialized professions, were happy for politicians to run politics and journalists to run the press as that was an efficient model of citizenship and governance. Journalists were trusted to distill the facts of public affairs for easy consumption without bias and with a strong moral conviction as a means for citizens to hold the political world accountable without excessive involvement in the fact-gathering process. The independent journalist seemed preferable for this role to parties, which had become wearisome for citizens that just wanted to know the truth. The ideal citizen of that era was an informed one, taking the objectively reported information from the press and drawing his or her own, rational conclusions from it.

This notion of both the citizen and the press endures today and has become quite cumbersome for both groups. Experience, even in the era of a more centralized press

corps, shows that journalists cannot and will not report all of the relevant facts and do so without bias; it is simply impossible to do so, even when there are honest attempts to avoid these pitfalls. Likewise, citizens cannot be counted on to learn all of these facts, even with great motivation to do so. Bernard Berelson, Paul Lazarsfeld, and William McPhee noted in the golden years of the objective era that "it seems remarkable that democracies have survived through the centuries . . . That is the paradox. Individual voters today seem unable to satisfy the requirements for a democratic system of government outlined by political theorists" (1954). While they were sounding the alarms in the heyday of objective journalism, not much has changed since, as levels of public knowledge about politics have remained relatively unchanged throughout the intervening years (Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996; Delli Carpini 2005). Though the attractive part of the former era's style is its perceived efficiency, it is not efficient enough. Citizens cannot be asked to both learn a great deal of political information and apply it to all of the critical issues for democracy. Schudson advocates instead for "some distribution across people and across issues of the cognitive demands of self-government" (1998, 310). In other words, political media must be trusted to actually offer interpretations of the issues of the day, even if that requires some reorganization of those industries. Citizens may take initiative on subjects of particular interest, but they simply cannot invest the time necessary to both gather the reported facts and come to coherent conclusions on all public affairs topics.

A helpful development in this regard is the technological innovation since Schudson's 1998 book. This has theoretically reduced barriers to entry for journalists of various stripes, be it the person with a large Twitter following or those like Andrew

Sullivan, who have enough social capital to blog independently and still be heard. Likewise, the costs for receiving political and other information have been reduced. Headlines can be pushed to a smartphone's notifications alongside text messages and emails. A given person's Facebook or Twitter timeline is likely to be filled with articles shared by friends, which is why roughly half of the users of those platforms claim to get news from them (Mitchell 2013). Learning about politics and current events no longer is restricted to particular times, places, or media. This does not necessarily increase the expectation for how much a citizen ought to know about politics, but it certainly means they will learn from a greater variety of sources and the notion of something like the true story may prove even more elusive than it inherently already is.

A more democratized media environment epitomizes a trend that Schudson recognized much earlier, which he argues was marked decisively by the Nixon-Kennedy debates of 1960. These brought the presidential debate to the widely-owned television set for the very first time, giving Americans a shared political experience that was unprecedented. It symbolized a changing of the guard, he says, because it was in some ways the last gasp of a public sphere that was once only accessible to elites. Of course, all kinds of elites hated the Nixon-Kennedy debates for being on television. Dead air was not allowed, time constraints and artifice played too great a role, and it seemed too antithetical to reason. Schudson remarks, "even if James Madison ran a network and hired Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr. to head the news division, television could not produce 'reasonable discussion' and sophisticated citizens" to the satisfaction of contemporary critics (1998, 238). Noting the absurdity in targeting television for this critique, Schudson adds, "as if radio, newspapers, and the rough-and-tumble of legislative

floor debate had long favored the ruminating mind” (1998, 238). The side effect of “the expectation that *everybody* owns public life,” however, “is competition and confusion that gives rise to a lingering sense of disaffection and unease in both good times and bad” (1998, 239). In other words, the promise of a media environment that brings presidential debates to the living room (and later, the cell phone and beyond) brings with it a burden. To be democratic is to empower all, which can be simultaneously disempowering as no one person will get all he or she wants.

Just as the line between news and entertainment has blurred in the postmodern era of media convergence and genre mixing, so have other aspects of life. In a 1961 lament on the decreasing importance of politics in the life of the average citizen, political scientist Robert Dahl noted a distinction between “primary activities involving food, sex, love, family, work, play, shelter, comfort, friendship, social esteem, and the like” and politics, which instead lies at “the outer periphery of attention” (quoted in Schudson 1998, 240). However, as Schudson retorts, all of these “primary” issues were already becoming and have since become very much politicized. Regulation of food, laws regarding sexual health and sexual partners, working hours, mental health, federal assistance to provide shelter to the poor, and a myriad of other “private” issues are thoroughly entangled with political life. First embodied by the civil rights movement, Americans began to embrace an alternative to the ideal citizen that reads the newspaper voraciously, votes, and perhaps is involved in civic or community groups.

Emerging was the rights-conscious citizen, who is at once more and less active in political life. The rights-conscious citizen may not be so consistently attentive or knowledgeable as the older model, but is sensitive to the politicization of issues affecting

their personal liberty. Personal liberty may not only refer to direct encroachments upon one's own freedoms, but also others'. In other words, the rights-conscious citizen takes to heart the words of Martin Luther King, Jr.: "injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere" (1963). In a world where more and more landmark public policy decisions are made in the Supreme Court (e.g., *Roe v. Wade*, *United States v. Windsor*, *National Federation of Independent Business v. Sebelius*) or administration (e.g., dissolution of "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" policy, NSA intelligence gathering) rather than U.S. Congress, the rights-conscious citizen lives their private life with an occasional disengagement from politics, but always at the ready to activate in case of a threat. They contribute to democratic society by an emphasis on making their voice felt nationally via the thunder of public opinion rather than the ballot box, though certainly most of these citizens vote. In this project, the notion of good citizen will be inclusive of these multiple models, both the newer rights-conscious citizen as well as the older, information-driven ideal. This model leaves partisan wiggle-room, too, as it accommodates both the left-liberal social justice paradigm and the libertarian approach to freedom, which will focus on negative liberty and property rights.

Building on Schudson's work, Jeffrey Jones (2006) argues that the normative approach to mediated citizenship is plagued by three major, flawed assumptions. First, news is always taken to be "the primary and proper sphere of political communication" (Jones 2006, 366). The second is that it is assumed that the primary function of media is to transmit information to citizens. Jones explicitly links the second assumption to Schudson's description of the "Informed Citizen" ideal. Finally, the third flawed premise is that "political engagement is primarily a physical activity" (2006, 369). Such a notion

precludes online discussions, research, or any of the variety of “significant cognitive activities—say, the development of schemas or mental maps about political reality” that may result from interactions with media (2006, 369). All three presume an instrumental approach in which the various media function as a means to an end, effectively excluding the citizen’s subjectivity in the process. Instead, Jones advocates for an understanding of political communication in which political communication is neither for self-gratification (it is fun to learn about politics for citizens, it is profitable to report on it for media) nor civic duty. Instead, political communication can be understood as cultural in nature, a means to experience community.

Jones proposes four new premises to replace the old: “*media are plural; mediums affect meanings; mediation occurs beyond information acquisition; and we live in a culture of political engagement*” (2006, 371; emphasis in original). The first is important to this project, in that it disavows the notion of a monolithic media that acts together, for similar aims, using similar means, and with similar effects on its viewers. Instead, different programs, corporate entities, and programmatic styles will vary in the aforementioned aspects without any knee-jerk loss of legitimacy based on anachronistic standards. The second proposition relates to changes that are at hand, which is that a different medium will communicate differently due to its inherent qualities. For instance, a newspaper will never have the audiovisual impact of television while television cannot communicate verbally in as complex ways as a newspaper. That “mediation occurs beyond information acquisition” refers to the idea that the indirect nature of mediated citizenship is significant for more than just the effectiveness of the vessel (the medium) in transmitting information. Rather than evaluating how media are a means to an end for

politics, researchers must examine how media are a means to an end *for citizens*. Both consumption and creation of media can be a way for citizens to construct their own identity, feel community with fellow citizens, become empowered by newfound confidence or emotion, and a variety of other ritualistic purposes.

The last and perhaps most important proposition is that Americans and the West more generally live in a “culture of political engagement.” Jones elaborates that:

“daily citizen engagement with politics is more frequently *textual* than organizational or ‘participatory’ in any traditional sense. That is, the most common and frequent form of political activity, for most people, through their choosing, attending to, processing, and engaging myriad media texts about the formal political process of government and political institutions as they conduct their daily lives. (Jones 2006, 378)

Media, both manifestly political and otherwise, are the main way in which citizens understand and feel a part of politics. This sometimes will be because the citizen or the media creator intended for that to be the case, but just as often it will be a by-product. This project will use Schudson and Jones’s reasoning on what today’s citizens are and ought to be when considering the import of *TDS*’s impact on them. The key insight here is that many common sense and even academically popular notions of “good citizenship” are outmoded or, at least, not inclusive of all it means to be a citizen in the 21st century. The absence of certain physical engagements with politics is not sufficient evidence to conclude whether a citizen is indeed engaged, which is perhaps the most important aspect of the good citizen. Thinking, talking, learning, and paying attention to politics are all integral aspects of citizenship that could be enhanced by exposure to media texts, not to mention the less measurable socially integrative potential of those texts.

Recent Changes in Media Consumption

Neil Postman, in his seminal *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, evokes Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* to illustrate the danger of an increasingly trivial, entertainment-oriented media. Postman says that, as opposed to the dystopian vision of George Orwell in which fear was used as a weapon, he fears that society could be "controlled by inflicting pleasure" (1986, xx). While the threat is not imminent in Postman's view, he sees great danger lying in the American fascination with television; this medium, he proposes, is wholly unfit for communicating complex messages yet has become the primary medium for doing so. More recently, Peter Berkowitz implicated a new media environment as cause of increased partisanship and disenchantment with the country in a piece in the *National Journal*. Arguing against the notion that the Bush administration and Iraq conflict were primary drivers of these trends, Berkowitz argues that it is *TDS* and "the determined labors of members of the left-liberal intellectual and political elite . . . to demonize the Bush administration," misleadingly characterizing "the president and his team as mendacious . . . and as radicals" (2014). While his overall argument outlines other factors as well, this criticism of *TDS* and its inclusion by American conservatives in what they see as the left-liberal spin machine is emblematic of the negative discourse that sometimes surrounds the program. This means that there are several related potential problems endemic to today's media environment that must be addressed for *TDS* to be evaluated as a positive influence on democratic society: it might trivialize serious issues, it may be too partisan, and could undermine civic pride and trust.

If the fear is that we are headed to a Huxleyan dystopia of citizens that are compliant in their own oppression, mere voting is not sufficient evidence to disprove the

supposed harmful effects of television use. While there are not many contemporary thinkers as inherently distrusting of the entire medium as Postman, the fear of an entertainment-addicted populace is not so novel. For some, the not-so-distant dystopian future involves a media environment “that offers us dazzling entertainment and seeks to fulfill our every consumer desire” (Chester 2007, xvi). There is a legitimate fear that the media market will soon become so efficient in its ability to offer apolitical yet compelling entertainment that citizens will not go through whatever obstacles stand between them and engagement with public affairs. For Postman, this is an issue with the moving image, a concern which may be alleviated as Americans are growing more apt to get news from printed internet sources and engage in double-screened viewing, watching TV with a tablet device in hand (Pew Research Center for the People and the Press 2013). For Chester and others (e.g., McChesney 1999), the problems are structural, in which a state-supported media oligopoly has little incentive to act for the betterment of democracy while fearing no legitimate competition in the broadcast sphere. With all this in mind, the nightly broadcast news still remains collectively understood as the most basic means by which citizens can and should follow public affairs.

The primary concern regards media choice: the rise of cable television in the 1980s, which gave consumers more channels to choose from, and the late 20th and early 21st century rise of the Internet followed by mobile devices and social media, making television just one of several equally useful media. Adding television channel choices beyond the three networks decreases inadvertent exposure to nightly news programs, which had been integral to broad knowledge of public affairs (Robinson 1976). Beyond the mere lack of choices, the pre-1980s television viewer had to be near the TV to change

the channel and, typically, manipulate the antennae in just the right way for each particular station. In other words, there were actual cost:benefit calculations to be made. This, of course, hearkens back to Anthony Downs's notion of "free political information," which is gained when citizens are seeking entertainment or engaged in other rationally chosen activities that result in political learning as a by-product (cited in Prior 2007, 4). Markus Prior aptly notes that the example used by Downs, viewing newsreels before a movie, is only rational choosing insofar that the actual preference of the chooser is not available; in this case, a movie screening without the newsreel (2007, 5).

Prior carries on with a market-based explanation, which boils down to efficiency. By-product learning is an inefficiency of the media market and that market has become remarkably more efficient in the recent past via the proliferation of choices. What follows, then, is that by-product learning has decreased along with the inefficiencies of old¹. Rather than spreading information to more people, increased access has simply led citizens to exercise their newfound ability to disengage. The media environment that is much more capable of serving more citizens in more ways has instead led to a greater inequality of knowledge, according to Prior's hypothesis; the interested citizens can

¹ Though this is not Prior's argument, it makes a compelling case for those that have argued for increased involvement of public media as a means to better inform citizens and increase the quality and quantity of public affairs programming. This would, theoretically, help account for the tendency for market efficiency to take precedence over what might be seen as democratic needs. See Robert McChesney and Mark Crispin Miller's *Rich Media, Poor Democracy* as an example of these arguments.

easily immerse themselves in political information while the uninterested can drown out the political world with other genres of media. This is related to Cass Sunstein's (2001; 2007) "Daily Me" concept, which refers to the increasing ability for citizens to curate their exposure to the outside world. Not only does this enable the inattentive public to self-select apolitical media, it allows partisans to place themselves within "echo chambers," thus potentially increasing polarization alongside inattentiveness (Bennett and Iyengar 2008; Prior 2007). This poses a significant concern for democracy, taking for granted that polarization itself is problematic. However, polarization of the electorate is easy to conflate with polarization of politics, which is likely much more related to geographic sorting, the adoption of the primary election process, campaign finance reform, gerrymandering, and a general change of culture in Congress (Theriault 2008). Unfortunately, the tremendous methodological flaw when interpreting his results in the context of *TDS* is the question of where the show falls between information and entertainment, not to mention whether there are many other shows that might be haphazardly categorized as entertainment but in fact affect their citizens positively.

In any case, many would likely be dismayed that while in 1985 47% of Americans recognized a photo of the top-rated network news anchor, Dan Rather, the same was true of only 27% of Americans when asked to identify the top-rated network anchor in 2013, NBC's Brian Williams (Suls 2014). The difference over time is most pronounced among the youngest Americans. While 41% of 18-29 year olds recognized Rather in 1985, just 15% recognized Williams in 2013. This is just one way to reflect a simpler fact, which is that Americans are fleeing traditional sources of news en masse. While news audiences are declining a great deal across all demographics, the split

between 18-29 year olds and older citizens is becoming increasingly stark. The country on aggregate reported having seen any network or cable TV news “yesterday” at 57% in 2006 and 55% 2012, which is hardly a significant change. 54% reported watching local TV news “regularly” in 2006, with that figure dropping to 48% in 2012, which is troubling but not necessarily indicative of impending doom or any other kind of radical shift (Pew Research Center for the People and the Press 2012). However, a disproportionate amount of these aggregate losses in viewership were focused in young people, as there was a 15% drop from 2006 to 2012 among 18-29 year olds that reported having seen any TV news on a network or cable yesterday and a 14% drop in those reporting to do so regularly. While most of the eye-popping statistics regarding news viewership compare the Cronkite-era viewer with today, these changes have occurred in just 6 years. A paradigm shift is in progress, whether or not society recognizes it.

In the same span of time, the internet has boomed in its relevance as a medium for news. In 2012, 50% of Americans reported having gotten news from a digital source “yesterday,” making it the second most common medium for news after television, which was used by 55% of respondents, down from 72% in 1994 (Pew Research Center for the People and the Press 2013). Mobile devices are rapidly overtaking computers in this trend towards digital news consumption, as well. As an example, the print circulation of *The Wall Street Journal* was 2.3 million in 2013 while their digital content reached 60 million unique users. Further, 32% of their web hits came from mobile devices, up from 20% just one year before (Marshall 2013). In January 2014, mobile internet usage, which includes phones and tablets, accounted for 55% of all web traffic, overtaking desktop- and laptop-based usage for the first time (O’Toole 2014). The rise of digital sources for news and

entertainment shows no immediate signs of stopping and adds a new wrinkle to the way scholars must think about television, which faces fierce competition as a medium. If a given television program is to succeed, it must not only get viewers to change the channel, but also turn away from their computer, cell phone, or tablet. Alternatively, programming can be versatile enough to appear on all of these platforms.

Emblematic of these changes is the popularity of *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*. On a typical weeknight, *TDS* draws 1.5 million viewers, which makes it more popular than much of its cable news competition like *Hannity*, which draws 1.3 million viewers an hour earlier (Kondolojy 2014c; Kondolojy 2014a). More notably, the Comedy Central program draws around 800,000 in the 18-49 age range on an average January 2014 weeknight, which is roughly a third of the size of nightly news broadcasts in that age range and likely over double that of any evening cable news program² (Kondolojy 2014b). Furthermore, *TDS* has a very well-developed web presence, offering recent full episodes on its own website along with every segment the show has ever aired, dating all the way back to Stewart's first episode in 1999. On the popular streaming content website Hulu, which is available only to Americans and is said by Nielsen ("'Binging' Is the New Viewing for over-the-Top Streamers" 2013) to be used by 18% of Americans, *TDS* is consistently ranked in its top five most popular shows. Since the show publishes its segments on its website immediately after the show airs, it has also made its content easily shared on social networks. All of this is to say that its reach on a day-to-day basis

² Cable news ratings are reported with the younger age subset at 25-54 rather than 18-49, which is more commonly used for entertainment programming. Given that ratings trend upwards with age for cable news, it is likely that their 25-54 ratings are higher than their 18-49. Either way, the highest such rating for any cable news program on January 9, 2014 was 432,000 viewers (compared to 853,000 for ages 35-64) for FOX's *The Five*, making it seem exceedingly unlikely that there is a significant swath of 18-24 year old viewers that would sway the ranking. Either way, this is informed speculation on my part.

likely exceeds the daily television viewers it attracts by a considerable margin. In 2007, 16% of Americans reported regularly getting news from *TDS* or its then-new sister show, *The Colbert Report* (Pew Research Center for the People and the Press 2007a). While it may be tempting to interpret this as a calamitous change in media consumption, more analysis and a sense of scholarly context is necessary.

There are dissenting opinions to this dire picture of the future of media. The theorized potential benefit of the broad category of “soft news” also follows this logic of rationally choosing citizens selecting entertainment over political content. In this case, citizens are unintentionally exposed to political content on programs like *Oprah* or *Entertainment Tonight*, which leads to more knowledge and attentiveness despite a lack of initial interest on the part of the soft news viewer (Baum 2002; Baum 2003; Baum 2005; Baum and Jamison 2006; Baum 2007). Baum’s promising research demonstrates a “gateway effect” in which citizens exposed to byproduct political information on entertainment programs show a greater interest in those issues later. They become more attentive, and presumably better, citizens as a result of watching entertainment-oriented programming. While some fear an increasingly fragmented audience, which is on one hand more highly partisan and on the other extremely low on attention, others find the problem to be overstated. For instance, aggregate levels of political knowledge show little measurable change from the time that the vast majority of American adults watched network news and had a newspaper at their door each morning to the present, when network news is essentially an example of niche media (Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996; Delli Carpini 2005). Inequality still exists in political knowledge as it has since the first times it was measured, but it is now less likely to reproduce other social inequalities the

way it did when higher education and income were almost prerequisites to news consumption rather than today, when those factors simply reduce barriers (Prior 2007, 271). Likewise, the concern seems to generally be that citizens are watching less news and there is little disputing that fact. Trends in the overall consumption of public affairs information are less clearly troubling as the proliferation of smart devices and the Internet have made the costs of consumption lower, though this was less true in 2008 (and earlier) when much of the aforementioned pessimistic material was published.

Technological and economic changes are not the only explanatory factors for the past and present tumult in the media environment. In Darrell West's *The Rise and Fall of the Media Establishment* (2001), he proposes that there have been five distinct eras in the history of American news media: the partisan media, the commercial media, the objective media, the interpretive media, and most recently the fragmented media, which arguably still describes today's news media and maps onto Prior's conception of the present-day media environment. Of interest here, though, is the interpretive media, an era which West says began in the 1980s and lasted into the early 1990s. The unprecedented aspect of this era was that professional journalists no longer would take or appear to take "political statements at face value" and instead "undertook analysis pieces to put particular events in a broader context" as a means to make their experience and specialized knowledge valuable to their audience (West 2001, 69). While this sounds great conceptually, West argues this explains a rather seismic drop in Americans' trust in the news media as allegations of bias began to undermine any attempts at contextualization. West is not alone in this conclusion, either (e.g., Sabato 1991). This interpretive turn remains influential, however, as it led to some content-related changes, like the surge in punditry;

former politicians and public policy experts were perceived to have the ethos for analysis that journalists lacked. Perhaps more importantly, this led to an entrepreneurial spirit challenging the establishment news media, which long consisted of NBC, ABC, CBS, and to a lesser extent PBS.

Rupert Murdoch is perhaps the clearest example of a media owner making inroads in the American market thanks to the new embrace of interpretation. FOX became a legitimate fourth network in time and FOX News is the most-watched cable news network (Pew Research Center for the People and the Press 2013). Ted Turner is another example of a figure that became prominent in the fragmented media, or the era that succeeded the interpretive media. Technological change made possible greater fragmentation in media in general, but not necessarily in news. Market forces always threatened to change news content, but once again did not necessarily predict forces like Murdoch's FOX or Turner's CNN. An acceptance of interpretation, even if a conflicted one, was the necessary component. Americans both wanted a more interpretative news and did not want it; to withhold necessary context or obvious conclusions out of duty to objectivity was never desirable, but doing so leaves open the door for bias or other bad faith reporting, examples of which of course exist (Sabato 1991).

This interpretive turn is rooted in academia, according to West (2001). The early 20th century was permeated by a positivist optimism, in which rapid scientific advances gave academics and the general public hope that a complete understanding of the modern world was possible if only enough fact gathering could be done. The era following World War II, however, would later be characterized as "postmodern." In the middle of the century, concepts like the truth "were seen as relative to context, personal position,

cultural values, and societal norms” (West 2001, 70). With this understanding of the world, an aim towards objectivity as the media once had seemed naïve. No facts are unassailable and can instead be bestowed multiple, contradictory meanings depending on the context in which they are presented. While this might seem to unshackle the journalist from an unrealistic standard of objectivity, the effect was to delegitimize their position as gatekeepers and elevate pundits and other nonprofessionals to their level. An example here would be Jon Stewart, whose appeal and credibility is at least in part based on his incredulity; being just another New Yorker is part of his shtick, since both the professional journalist and politician draw too much ire and skepticism for their motives.

Another factor to consider in the increasing ineffectuality of traditional news in earning public attention and respect is that politicians and other political actors are much more able to use digital media to directly message their targets, instead of using the news as middle-man. Nonetheless, journalists are still serving as amplifiers to public relations firms and campaign talking points instead of using the increased efficiency of those entities to do more independent reporting (Pew Research Center for the People and the Press 2013). All of this serves to illustrate the point that focusing on news media, while still important, is indubitably excluding emerging and relevant sources of political information and opinion. Likewise, there is an unstated assumption that defecting from traditional news sources means disengaging from politics; there are so many alternative sources and media available today that it is a dubious proposition to say that citizens are necessarily politically uninterested simply because they no longer watch broadcast news or read a physical newspaper. Given the relative stability in political knowledge throughout the 20th century and shortly thereafter, the changes in news consumption do

not appear to have harmed (or helped) engagement to any appreciable degree (Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996; Delli Carpini 2005; Jacobs, Cook, and Delli Carpini 2009). This begs the question: “which has more impact on our society: an inside-the-Beltway column about Congressional bargaining over a gay-rights measure, or the coming-out episode of Ellen?” (Williams and Delli Carpini 2002, B14) Today, the latter may very well be more significant, if cultural statements like the *Ellen* episode or the Tina Fey skits on *SNL* ever were less important than everyday political jostling.

Trends in Academic Research on Media

Research on media is changing, though it has hardly been a settled discipline at any point in time. A constant limiting factor, as is noted in various self-reflections on the state of research, is the fact that the same subjects are being examined by researchers in different disciplines and often using different theoretical and methodological approaches (Anderson and Baym 2004; Bennett and Iyengar 2008; Holbert, Garrett, and Gleason 2010; Delli Carpini 2013). This fragmentation has resulted in limitations in terms of the potential for collaboration and dialogue among these researchers, though some of this certainly does exist and has proven influential in the growth of communication as its own discipline, growing from others such as political science. This is particularly true when it comes to political communication, and because of this it is perhaps the best example of a working collaboration between communication scholars and those in other disciplines. This project will try to bring all fields that scrutinize *TDS* and similar media into greater dialogue.

Unfortunately, researchers that deal in critical theory, for instance, consider the effects of popular culture in very political terms but are rarely engaged by and engage

with empirical researchers, who James Anderson and Geoffrey Baym say are divided by “an ancient...split as to whether claims need to be fixed in observations or ideas” (2004). This is also related to the objects of inquiry; empirical research is typically directed towards news, which purports to deal with facts and thus is arguably aligned with objective research. Critical theory, cultural studies, and literary studies focus more typically on fictional or other entertainment-oriented texts and this makes sense for the same reasons. The reasons for disciplinary organization sometimes make perfect sense while, at other times, can seem puzzling to the outsider. As Anderson and Baym say, “the difference between a critical rhetorician and a communication cognivist...is great enough that they occupy the same disciplinary space only by administrative convenience” (2004). Further, common understandings of what is serious, information-based media and what is solely meant for entertainment (and is therefore trivial to the empiricist) are reinforced by these same disciplinary divisions.

The very fact that there are commonly understood meanings when I say “information” versus “entertainment” illustrates assumptions based on an older model of mass communication. Williams and Delli Carpini suggest “public affairs media” and “popular culture” as slightly more useful terms, though they too are arbitrary and fail to clarify the proper category for programming that is both widely consumed and politically relevant (2011, 9). While the problematic nature of this thinking is not necessarily new, changes in the media environment have demanded a rethinking of them. Today, Tina Fey beats journalists to the punch in criticizing the Republican nomination of Sarah Palin, the amount of people who claim to have recently consumed news via television is nearly equal to those who have recently gotten it online, and Jimmy Kimmel creates a viral

video from his nightly program in which interview subjects are shown praising the Affordable Care Act and denigrating “Obamacare”³. In this kind of environment, internalized assumptions regarding what is news and what is not require greater scrutiny and perhaps a complete reconsideration (Williams and Delli Carpini 2011, 3; Pew Research Center for the People and the Press 2013). *TDS* stands out as a particularly befuddling example of a program that contests the existence of this binary on a nightly basis.

Jeffery P. Jones notes that academia even plays a role here, as academic research “[works] as a set of mutually reinforcing components of an overall *discourse*” which perceives “news and journalism...as the proper avenue *through which* citizens should and would attend to politics” (2013, 4; emphasis in original). Unfortunately, he elaborates, these conventions “also exclude certain sets of practices” and assume “severely truncated assessments of what constitutes citizenship, and . . . they are also measures of how communication services the needs of the state” (2013, 4). This is not to say that these are the intended aims of research nor that existing research need be invalidated. Rather, there is a need for new methods and purposes for inquiry as the institutions and society being examined are undergoing substantial change. It will be important to bear in mind his suggestion that research tends to search for outcomes that effectively service the state. For instance, external efficacy, or one’s belief in their ability to affect political change, has been taken for granted as requisite for good citizenship. In large part, this is because

³ A fact confirmed by a September 2013 CNBC poll, in which the opposition to “Obamacare” was 46 percent versus 37 percent opposition to “Affordable Care Act.” Kimmel’s method is far from scientific, but far more impactful and not exactly fictional.

external efficacy is a predictor of participation in politics (Craig, Niemi, and Silver 1990). However, since external efficacy is quite clearly influenced by trust in government, it is worth questioning whether external efficacy is always a virtue in the democratic citizen (Pinkleton et al. 2012). A more pluralistic and theorized view of citizenship is necessary to better understand and interpret media effects research.

In W. Lance Bennett and Shanto Iyengar's reassessment of the field of communication, there is a recognition that change is necessary (2008). While they, too, suggest that there could have been problems in past research, the greater concern lies ahead. They elaborate that in "what might be called a late modern twilight, changing social, psychological, technological, and economic conditions require new theoretical perspectives to guide and reformulate a good deal of our research" (2008, 713). Their provocative suggestion is that political communication may be entering a new stage of "minimal effects," a reference to foundational research in the 1940s and 1950s which was unable to find significant influence on citizens by mass media. However, referencing later work (Gitlin 1978; Zaller 1992), Bennett and Iyengar mention that the research interpreted to demonstrate "minimal effects" may have simply been viewed through the wrong theoretical framework (2008, 715). The greater idea, then, is not that the unfound truth is a lack of effects. Instead, the existing paradigm for research is not adapted to assess present-day conditions.

Since market and technological conditions have led to more widespread dissemination and acceptance of political entertainment, scholarly interest has followed. Thomas Patterson (2002) implicated the trivialization of political news in the widespread disengagement of the American public. Others have lamented the fall of conventional

journalism as a respected profession and advocated for change, to buck the trend against sensationalism (see Sabato 1991; Fallows 1997; Merritt 1998; Glasser 1999; Rosen 1999). Matthew Baum might be credited with bringing more optimistic and empirical analysis to what he dubs “soft news,” which led to the so-called “Oprah effect,” which was later repackaged as the “gateway hypothesis” (2002; 2004; 2005; 2006; 2007). The gateway hypothesis is that exposure to political entertainment will lead to further interest and engagement in politics. For this project, the gateway hypothesis will form a substantial portion of my argument that *TDS* benefits democracy. His and similar findings have led to more interest in the potentially beneficial effects of entertainment to democracy, though there has been a decided lack of consensus on virtually all media effects topics (e.g., Prior 2003).

Regardless of effect, political entertainment across media has grown immensely in popularity with no particular end in sight (Prior 2007; Pew Research Center for the People and the Press 2013). More than just *TDS*, outlets like *Good Morning America*, *The Onion*, *Saturday Night Live*, *The Borowitz Report* of *The New Yorker*, *The Good Wife*, *Veep*, and *Real Time with Bill Maher* have been created or revitalized as the demand for political entertainment has grown. Some might describe the rise in political punditry, led by the personalities of those like Rush Limbaugh, Glenn Beck, Chris Matthews, Bill O’Reilly, and Ed Schultz, as another form of political entertainment that appears on television, radio, books, and the internet. The looming question, often influenced by subjective perceptions of quality, is whether this rise has been good or bad for democratic society.

The lack of consensus in the growing body of research about political entertainment reflects several problems. First of all, as covered previously, the line between entertainment and news is not nearly as straightforward as is often suggested (see Williams and Delli Carpini 2011). There is some benefit to attempting categorization, as scholars hope to find validity in research that can span across multiple programs. Baum's early research conceded a great deal of imprecision in his terminology, saying, "soft news has been defined, variously, as a residual category for all news that is not 'hard'" (2002, 92). Most scholarly thought on the definition of the term "soft news" has hardly approached any more precision than what was posed by Baum (Reinemann et al. 2012). Holbert's typology (2005) is an exemplar of a more thoughtful attempt at categorization. While Holbert's "soft news" sub-category probably does not differ greatly from some of the programs in Baum's research, positioning them within a larger matrix of politically relevant media provides important context and terminology with which to discuss the differences among programs and program types.

In this typology, programs are placed along a continuum that range from containing political statements that are implicit to explicit; for instance, soft news programs like *Inside Edition* lie on the explicit end while satirical sitcoms like *The Simpsons* lie on the other. A politician being interviewed on *Inside Edition* will be making statements whose intentions are transparent while political commentary in *The Simpsons* will be cloaked by sarcasm, exaggeration, parody, or other means. The other axis ranges from the subject matter being primarily political, such as in *TDS*, to politics being secondary as in *ER*, which is not about politics but will have politically relevant content within.

The insight of this typology is further supported by Hmielowski, Holbert, and Lee's (2011) research, which identifies demographic and behavioral factors that best predict viewing of *TDS* and *The Colbert Report*; two of the most significant predictors of consumption of *TDS* were viewing satirical comedies and viewing liberal cable news. Satirical sitcoms are at the "implicit messages" extreme of Holbert's typology while cable news would be at the "political as primary" extreme of the other axis. *TDS*, on the other hand, lies at both of these extremes. Without this theoretical framework, the connection between those three types of programs would be rather murky. One would infer from this that while fans of primarily political programs and/or programs with implicit political statements are likely to view *TDS*, fans of programming like entertainment events (such as the Academy Awards) that are not primarily political but whose statements are generally explicit will not be as likely to do so. Ultimately, this typology suffers from some of the same pitfalls as the original soft vs. hard binary; some content will be difficult to categorize and could cause disagreement among researchers. Nonetheless, this remains a particularly useful way of thinking about how different kinds of programs can be political while removing the implicit subjective judgments of soft and hard categories. In evaluating *TDS*, it will be evaluated as political satire specifically instead of assuming that what is true of other politically relevant media ought to be true of *TDS* and vice versa.

The Daily Show as Satire

Satire is distinct from other types of humor, with a long and somewhat varied history. More so than other entertainment media, satire has been characterized by considerable ebbs and flows in popularity for centuries; Griffin (1994) says that only an

“idealist” believes that satire exists outside of its few “exemplars,” referring to its few great practitioners (133). As I will explain in more detail later, satire is a craft that is difficult to execute in a way that is different from other art as well as other criticism; the satirist must offer both insightful critique and humor, meaning he or she has failed if one part is absent. Thinking back to the media choices that predict exposure to *TDS*, liberal cable news and sitcoms, is useful here. Liberal cable news is presumably chosen because it is perceived to offer insightful critiques, which is more or less the goal of most straight news formats in the post-interpretive media. Situational comedies are presumably chosen because the viewers find them funny. Viewers of *TDS* are clearly seeking this hallmark of satire, which is to offer both the insight of news and the humor of sitcoms.

Because of this difficulty, great satirists often do not set out to become a satirist. Feinberg (1967) says of satirists, “many . . . begin either with a quite unliterary ambition or by writing literature quite different from the form in which they find eventual success” (246). This rings true of Jon Stewart as well, who took on his post on *TDS* after a career in standup comedy and brief success on the late-night, talk-oriented *Jon Stewart Show* on MTV for two seasons. Stewart was not an especially political comedian and his MTV program was focused on its musical guests; *The Daily Show with Craig Kilborn* was not very invested in politics either, giving more weight to popular culture topics a la *Saturday Night Live*’s “Weekend Update” segment. Like the satirists before him, satire seemed to just fall into Stewart’s lap as an acquired, almost accidental talent. Perhaps shifting his focus towards the world of news made a turn towards satire inevitable.

Juvenal said in his *Satires* (trans. 1855) that “it is hard not to write satire,” wondering how someone “can restrain himself” given “the unjust city” (1.30-32).

Alexander Pope (1824) also felt compelled to action, observing too many “men not afraid of God” and claiming “the affront is mine . . . and should be yours” when “truth or virtue an affront endures” (387). So what was his *purpose*? He says that, “as [a] man, who [feels] for all mankind” he will make those who are unafraid of God to instead be “afraid of me” (387). While reluctant to accept his role as a journalist, Jon Stewart does indeed seem quite eager to point out the affronts to truth and virtue among journalists and other public figures. His insistence on being a comedian rather than a serious political actor is also not unprecedented. Feinberg suggests taking what literary figures say about their relationship with politics with a grain of salt, noting, “Goethe said that poets and politics don’t mix, although he himself was a poet who had proved extensively successful at politics” (1967, 245). Further, the Greek satirists and other poets “were men of action as well as men of letters” (Christie, cited in Feinberg 1967, 246).

The circumstances of the situations which give rise to such satirists is cause of debate, since political unrest as a common sense predictor is quite difficult to measure. A particularly well-backed argument is that satire “is an urban form” and requires “a fairly small, compact, and homogeneous reading audience . . . located in the cultural and political capital” (Griffin 1994, 137). While in the coming section I will take pains to tease out the heterogeneity of *TDS*’s audience, there certainly can be arguments made that it is homogeneous. Pew Research found in 2007 that the audience for *TDS* was the youngest of all other programs and program types investigated except for its sister show, *The Colbert Show*. Viewers self-identified as Democrats or independent at a higher rate for *TDS* more often than all but consumers of *Rachel Maddow*, *Hardball with Chris Matthews*, and *The New Yorker*. From an ideological perspective, its viewers are less

likely to be conservative than all but *Maddow* viewers (2007a). As for the rest of Griffin's statement, the show's location in New York City as well as Stewart's own identity as a New Yorker are featured prominently on the show.

Griffin's argument loses its prescience as he argues further that satire thrives in aristocratic circles, given the references necessary to tease out the finer points of the humor as well as the subjects of interest in the work. This is not nearly as much the case with *TDS*, whose viewers are much more likely to have attended college than the average person but also much less likely than consumers of some other political media, like *The New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *NPR*, *The Economist*, and another occasional outlet of satire, *The New Yorker*. The incomes of the audience for *TDS* approaches the low end of those of the former media in terms of the portion of viewers that earn more than \$75,000 yearly and has a much larger contingent of sub-\$30,000 earners as well, near the national average (Pew Research Center for the People and the Press 2007a). This serves to complicate the assertion of homogeneity in the audience as well, in addition to emphasizing the difficult nature of assuming a stable understanding of a concept like demographic similarity. This may speak to some democratization of political and intellectual knowledge in the United States as well, since Griffin's more general argument that the audience needs to be "sophisticated" holds up as Stewart's audience has demonstrated political knowledge at or beyond the level of any other popular source of political information, except *Maddow* and *The New Yorker* (Griffin 1994, 141; Pew Research Center for the People and the Press 2007a).

The same technological innovations that have led to worries about the consumption of entertainment explain why this peculiar form of it has gained prominence

when it has. In the early years of television, satire was relegated to the kind of audience conceived by Griffin. *MAD* magazine attracted a decidedly “hip” audience in the 1950s, as did *Playboy* when founder Hugh Hefner hired away much of *MAD*’s writing staff (Gray, Jones, and Thompson 2009, 20). This jibes much more clearly with the notion of a small, demographically similar audience that can collectively understand cultural references in their own way. Media fragmentation should allow for opportunities for more niche audiences to form along with the types of media that can cater to them.

Jonathan Gray, Jeffrey P. Jones, and Ethan Thompson (2009) explain that the mid-century television industry subscribed to a “least objectionable programming” model, since a dearth of channel choices meant the audience would include all types of people that might own or access a television. This precluded potentially subversive satire, which is at worst a threat to the status quo and at its most benign may have asked too much from its viewers in terms of its sophistication, as Griffin had imagined. They argue that examples of satire on American television were few and far between until the emergence of *The Simpsons*, which was not explicitly political but nonetheless has often stirred the passions of the most conservative television viewers. That the fledgling network FOX launched the show in the same time slot as *The Cosby Show* constituted “a volley in the culture wars with more lasting impact on television than any of the flippant criticisms of George H.W. Bush, the man who bemoaned that we needed a nation ‘closer to the Waltons than the Simpsons’” (Gray, Jones, and Thompson 2009, 24). It was not until the ill-fated launch of *Politically Incorrect*, hosted by Bill Maher, on Comedy Central that a show that could safely be defined as political satire made it to American TV for a run of any significant length. *TDS*, once taken over by Stewart in 1999, has

become the first real enduring success of the genre on television. It has its forerunners in the mixed-format programs like *Saturday Night Live* and nightly talk shows, but *TDS* is unique in that it is so consistently satirical. That the first success of its kind came on a cable channel should come as no surprise, given Griffin's insights about the kind of audience necessary for political satire; though *TDS*'s viewership is more diverse than the satirists' of old, it is much too far from "least objectionable" for the tastes of the major networks.

Megan Hill (2013) refers to master narratives as one of the primary heuristics citizens use to make sense of their media environment and lived experience. The traditional news media, led by newspapers and network newscasts, are thought to be some of the most pervasive creators of such narratives (e.g., Wexler 2000; Wyatt 2012). As cognitively limited humans, such shortcuts are necessary and occasionally benign. An understanding of master narratives allows citizens to contextualize new information. For instance, feminist theorists have long recognized a restrictive master narrative in classic Hollywood and television regarding gender roles and objectification (e.g., Mulvey 1989). If a news story mentioned a married woman in the 1940s, this heuristic would allow for a somewhat unquestioned assumption that this woman was a homemaker. This offers efficiency, since there is no need to explain this hypothetical woman's vocation or sexual orientation, but also can have troubling consequences.

Master narratives as propagated by mainstream media can be seen as the reason Fredric Jameson says "texts come before us as the always-already-read" (2002, ix). In this context, the objective news standard purports to be dealing in fact and therefore there is little scrutiny of either the texts by themselves nor the process of "reading" or curating

those texts before they are disseminated. Viewers do not often perceive the “sedimented layers of previous interpretations” attached to the images and stories they hear (Jameson 2002, x). One of the greatest potential benefits political satire can offer democracy, then, is offering a check on master narratives. *TDS*, I would argue, provides a rare opportunity to “confront a text immediately, in all its freshness as a thing-in-itself” (Jameson 2002, ix). Stewart tends to expose not just the contrivances of political life, but those contrivances as constructed by news. Geoffrey Baym (2005) explains that *TDS*’s “Headlines” segment adopts the form of network news, including the rapid change from story to story, bemoaned by Neil Postman as the “now . . . this” format (1986). Unlike the news it emulates, *TDS* makes apparent the absurdity of how trivializing it is to devote 30 to 60 seconds to one serious subject before switching to another without notice or transition. Laughter is particularly useful in this regard, as it is unique in its “remarkable power of making an object come up close, of drawing it into a zone of crude contact where one can finger it familiarly on all sides, turn it upside down, inside out . . . examine it freely and experiment with it” (Bakhtin 1981, 23). In other words, it makes the news and the subjects covered by the news more accessible. In this vein, *TDS* may have risen to particular prominence during the Bush presidency by offering a counternarrative for a young, liberal audience that felt alienated by the neoconservative cultural moment. Given that master narratives can be described as “lenses in a pair of glasses,” then “the ultimate provocation of satire is thus to make people aware of the lenses they see with” (Bennett 1980, 166; Hill 2013, 330). Seen in this light, it should not come as a surprise that research on *TDS* might appear contradictory or inconclusive if the normative assumptions underlying those judgments are not adapted to the political satire format.

An example of the way *TDS* borrows “equally from traditions of authoritative nightly news and the entertainment talk show” while “blending humor with a serious concern for current events” is in its “Headlines” segments (Baym 2005, 260, 262). On September 7, 2001, a monthly jobs report was released from the Bureau of Labor Statistics. This report was received to much alarm since the jobless rate jumped .4% to 4.9%, a rather large increase over the span of a month and part of an already troubling trend. As citizens presumably desired, President Bush made a brief, unscheduled statement to the press corps about the subject:

[. . .]

The unemployment numbers today are evidence that I've seen first-hand as I travel the country, and that is too many people are losing their jobs as a result of a slowdown that began when Dick and I were campaigning across our country last summer. The slowdown is real and it's affecting too many lives. *And we're concerned about it.*

Any American out of work is too many Americans out of work. And that's why it's absolutely essential that we work together to put a growth plan in place to create jobs for hard-working Americans. It starts with having a responsible budget that meets our nation's obligations, without affecting Social Security or dipping into Social Security. We made a great step toward economic growth when we worked together to pass tax relief. One-half of the checks have gone out and more relief is on the way this fall, which should help our economy.

Beginning January 1, Americans will see lower tax rates, lower withholding from their paychecks and a larger tax credit. Tax relief is just now making its way in the economy, and there are some it seems like who are beginning to say maybe we ought to raise taxes. *But I can assure you, the four of us on this stage are not going to let anybody pick the pockets of the American taxpayer.*

To help get our economy moving again, Congress needs to enact an energy plan which will lower energy costs and create jobs. To get the economy moving again, Congress needs to enact trade promotion authority so we can open up new markets for American products. *We've got a plan to get our economy moving, so Americans can find work.*

And today I want to thank the leadership of the Congress from the Republican side that came and strategized with the vice president and me, as to how to get this plan moving. *I want the American people to know we're deeply concerned about the unemployment rates, and we intend to do something about it.* (“Bush Briefly Addresses Slowing Economy” 2001; emphases added)

The statement is rather unremarkable and a search of LexisNexis reflects an amplification of the italicized points throughout the national and international news media. The master narrative in early September 2001 dictated that when the economy was in crisis, the President of the United States was to respond with a plan of action, preferably one that requires little actual or cognitive sacrifice on the part of the average citizen. Bush, still popular at the time, delivered what was expected.

On September 10, however, Jon Stewart brought this statement to light in the “Headlines” segment at the outset of the night’s broadcast. Stewart succinctly explains the jobs report after leading with a one-liner and then mockingly says, “this is disturbing news. The economy is in a tailspin. We Americans are in desperate need of strong political leadership,” with his fingers crossed. Counter to reports like that of CNN, Stewart starts the video clip of the Bush statement as he walks to the podium from the White House lawn; he adds music while the clip plays in slow motion, giving farcical drama to the situation. *TDS*’s predilection for displaying parts of political appearances that precede the “soundbite” portion exemplifies one of the ways in which the show attempts to allow viewers to see the text “as a thing-in-itself,” or at least perceive those “sedimented layers of previous interpretation,” as Jameson describes. Stewart is seen holding his head in his hands as the clip stops, finally driving it home that perhaps *this* is not the person Americans should want coming to rescue the economy. After declaring, “we’re doomed,” he concedes that “maybe, maybe, when he opens his mouth, maybe, maybe, G.W. has a really good, specific plan.” The clip rolls on to Bush saying that he “is going to do something about it.” Unlike the press that simply airs and re-airs these

statements with little editing beyond those made for the sake of brevity, Stewart is interested in doing a more transparent mediation of the message.

Knowing what is to come in his segment, he reassures his groaning audience, “people, he’s going to do...something. Did you hear that? I’m sure everyone at home was probably worried that he wasn’t going to do...something, but he clearly said he’s going to do...something.” Beyond calling out the entire thrust of the message, the deliberate overuse and dramatic pauses around the word “something” signals to the audience that this kind of rhetoric merits suspicion; the master narratives lead citizens to assume that political leaders know what they are talking about when they speak in generalities, but Stewart wants to call attention to the lack of substance in the statement. He certainly knows that perhaps Bush simply did not find that setting appropriate for a thorough policy discussion. On the other hand, the possibility that he either lacks a plan or is obscuring a bad one looms too large to take the master narrative for granted. When Bush says, “we’ve got a plan to get our economy moving so Americans can find work,” the audience is already catching on. Stewart pleads with Bush, “what is your plan?” A final segment of Bush’s statement is played, in which he says that some are advocating for a tax increase, but the President promises not to “let anybody pick the pockets of the American taxpayer.” Stewart, wholly unsatisfied, retorts, “you’re just going to concentrate on fucking our asses.” Clearly, Stewart is no longer suspicious that Bush lacks a plan, but rather that he is trying to obscure a bad one.

To understand the way Stewart’s segment works, a more nuanced understanding of the satirist’s tools of the trade is necessary. Hill (2013) explains that satire can be categorized in two ways: horatian, a lighter form which is “designed to comment on the

ruling elite and macrolevel norms of social behavior” and “has as its ultimate goal the prompting of a wry smile from audience members,” as well as juvenalian, which “adopts an acidic tone,” is “designed to disorient,” and “represents the most pungent form of counternarrative” (2013, 330). More recent criticism on satire has lamented “the long-lived and numbingly reiterated opposition of Juvenalian to Horatian modes of satire” (Bogel 2000, 29). It is important to recognize this criticism and that it is not so much a complete evisceration of the terms but rather that they describe a difference in degree, rather than kind. The Stewart bit begins with a decidedly horatian style, laughing at the contrivances of political life and the awkward ineloquence of the President. The horatian style is palatable to audiences as it is not terribly challenging, pessimistic, nor in bad taste, but has been criticized for being conservative in doing so (Schutz 1977). Juvenalian satire, on the other hand, no longer evokes “an ideal,” but rather “exposes, criticizes, and shames humanity for believing such an ideal” thereby “cutting off master narratives at their knees, while simultaneously leveling an ominous eye at members of the public for ignorantly complying” (Hill 2013, 330). This eye at the public is particularly problematic for the satirist that hopes to have broad appeal, since it destabilizes the triangular relationship typically conceived of for satire: the satirist, who then targets an object of criticism, and finally the reader/viewer who is insulated from criticism.



Stewart glares after spouting off a juvenalian, curse-laden rant.

The problem with juvenalian satire is that pungency. Its critiques are too harsh, too vulgar, and too indiscriminately directed to be taken with too much frequency. For a satirist to be effective, quite a balance must be struck. Effectiveness of the satire, if we are to accept this horatian-juvenalian binary, will be sapped by the horatian style while viewership may be reduced by the juvenalian style due to its negativity. This all takes for granted that the satire is shining a light on something that merits such scrutiny, as well. Given the dual purposes of the pleasurable yet conservative horatian style and the biting yet alienating juvenalian, Hill suggests “horatian satire should function as a gateway to periodic juvenalian performances” (2013, 332). Stewart’s style in the aforementioned segment as well as his general approach reflect this balance. The segment begins playfully, chuckling at the formalities of presidential addresses and George Bush’s colloquial oratory style. The final line is not light-hearted and the smile that often

interrupts Stewart's parody is gone; this is an example of a juvenalian moment. Perhaps more importantly, this responds to an easy criticism of the show; the presence of some nonsense or too-light criticism can now be seen as a necessary component for the influential pieces to be received properly. Further, this demands close scrutiny of experimental methods. If experimental research uses segments that are completely horatian, one will expect fewer or different effects on the audience. This is similar to the need for separate consideration of the interview portion of the show versus the news-style opening (e.g., Becker 2013; Baym 2013).

The heterogeneous audience of *TDS*, which includes a large contingent of high-information, high-motivation viewers as well as some of what Bill O'Reilly refers to as "stoned slackers," will receive the horatian and juvenalian elements differently (see forthcoming section for more elaboration on terms). Low-ability viewers will perceive a great deal more humor in horatian satire than their high-ability counterparts, even though they are not necessarily persuaded any more or less by the different styles of delivery, including the straight news format (Holbert et al. 2011). For low-ability viewers (though perhaps not low-motivation), the horatian elements of *TDS* make it entertaining, whereas straight news is equally persuasive but less appealing. This supports the "gateway hypothesis" (Baum 2003), that low-ability and information viewers will continue to follow issues that they encounter in their entertainment media consumption. Thinking about the function of the different kinds of satire shows that these viewers will find the horatian parts of the show more entertaining than straight news, thus allowing for a gateway and perhaps for these low-ability viewers to achieve high ability over time.

The fact that Holbert and colleagues (2011) found high-ability viewers to enjoy juvenalian satirical articles more than their lower-ability counterparts helps to explain Young's (2013) finding that among *TDS* viewers, about 40% report "learning the news" as a motivation for viewing while another 40% watch because it "enhances the news viewing experience." Though there may be some crossover between these groups, it shows that some viewers rely on the show to learn about public affairs and are likely attracted to the horatian content due to the presumed lower ability that goes along with needing *TDS* to acquire new information. The latter group, on the other hand, is more like another group of around 9% of the audience that watches because the show contextualizes already learned information. They are the group that one assumes would respond more favorably to juvenalian content. Despite the fact that the vast majority in Young's study (83%) reported watching because "it's funny," she finds that viewers who specifically mentioned watching for context or background on already acquired news were significantly less likely to watch the show for its comedy. This finding further emphasizes the difference between the horatian, surface-level content that appeals to those who need a "gateway" and the juvenalian content that is more intellectually gratifying for the high-ability viewer. *TDS* uses this balance to satisfy a dichotomous audience that contains both low and high-ability viewers without keeping the low-ability viewers in the dark. The ultimate goal is, of course, for low-ability viewers to gradually move into that high-ability group after prolonged viewing.

Who Watches *TDS*?

Amidst this turbulence in the media and academic environments, *TDS* has evolved to become one of the most influential political media sources. Its audience, to say the

least, is atypical in the political media sphere. While Bill O'Reilly has taken to calling them "stoned slackers," the truth is far more complicated ("Stoned Slackers' Watch Jon Stewart?; Billy O'Reilly's Viewers Are Actually Less Educated than Stewart's" 2004). Indeed, the audience is quite young, which is likely what led O'Reilly to make his comment. 39% of the show's audience is between 18 and 29 years old while another 36% is between 30 and 49 (Pew Research Center for the People and the Press 2012). Compared to its peers on television, print, and the web, *TDS* has a substantially younger audience than all but its sister show, *The Colbert Report*. O'Reilly's audience is composed of 40% 65 years or older viewers, with only 32% younger than 50. On the other hand, 45% of *TDS*'s audience has a college degree, compared to the 29% national average. Short of being an elite format, several other outlets such as *The New Yorker*, *USA Today*, and *The Economist* have substantially more educated audiences. *TDS* attracts a higher proportion of self-described political independents than any non-finance publication and more self-described moderates than any other political media outlet, bar none (Pew Research Center for the People and the Press 2012). However, it draws a scant few Republicans and conservatives, leaving them underrepresented on a scale more severe than all surveyed programs and sources but *The Rachel Maddow Show*.

The show's audience tends to report trusting only a particular few news sources more frequently than the national average by a substantial margin, which is unsurprising given its content. Though Stewart has over time become aligned by many as part of the liberal entertainment sphere by conservative commentators, his audience tells Pew Research that it prefers politically unbiased news sources more than all other news audiences except those of *The Colbert Report* and *The Economist*. The finding from the

2012 Pew study that attracted the most attention from a variety of news media was the *TDS* audience's ability to answer current events questions, something that it did more successfully than the entire FOX lineup as well as regular consumers of respected sources such as *The Economist* and *The New York Times*. Closer inspection reveals another compelling fact: 10% of the Stewart's audience was unable to answer any of the questions correctly, which is a much larger contingent of very low-information viewers than any of its peers that rated highly on aggregate. This reveals something very important when thinking about *TDS*, which is that the audience is more heterogeneous than reductive statements like O'Reilly's might suggest. The audience consists of strong contingents of moderates as well as liberals. Likewise, a large swath of well-informed viewers coexists with a great deal of underinformed viewers. I hypothesize that this is no coincidence, but rather that the show tends to lead poorly-informed viewers to become well-informed. This is related to the "gateway hypothesis" Matthew Baum applied to what he called "soft news" programs, in which people with a predilection for entertainment end up attending to politics due to the political content on programs they choose principally for their entertaining content (2003).

Motivations for viewing *TDS* suggest that a significant portion of citizens desire public affairs media, but are unfulfilled by the traditional offerings. That is, these citizens are more likely to use traditional or other non-entertainment-oriented news sources, yet still rely on *TDS* for another perspective. At least, this is what is inferred by Pew researchers as an explanation for its viewers' consistently high ratings of political and current affairs knowledge (Pew Research Center for the People and the Press 2012; Pew Research Center for the People and the Press 2007a). Dannagal Young investigated why

college-aged consumers, who make up 39% of the show's viewers⁴, choose to watch or avoid *TDS* and *The Colbert Report*. A certain sampling of the findings might support the notion that these programs are just for entertainment seekers: 80.49% of those that ranked the shows among their most watched programs said that one of their reasons for watching was for humor and entertainment while 40% of those who ranked it among their least watched programs explained that their reason for not watching was that it was not funny, while 45% of the avoidance group also cited boring topics as a reason for avoidance (Young 2013).

Of the frequent viewers, 39% also reported that they were motivated to watch because the show makes the news more interesting. 42% of viewers report watching the shows because *TDS* and *TCR* are where the viewers learn about current events. The subset of the avoidance group that complained the show was not funny did claim to understand the topics, so this subset is opting out not due to the show's public affairs content, but personal taste. With this in mind, these viewers do appear to want public affairs media; they just want it to be interesting. Learning about politics should not be akin to eating one's vegetables, but must be packaged to offer some intrinsic appeal to those who are not attracted to the straight news format. On a related note, notable subsets (8.54% and 9.76%, respectively) reported the shows' ability to put news into its proper context and that they were unbiased/truthful as motivation for viewing. This may explain why Jon Stewart has been frequently named among the United States' most trusted newsmen (Linkins 2009; Pew Research Center for the People and the Press 2007b).

⁴ This is from Pew Research data in 2012, which found that 39% of the show's viewers are from 18-29 years old. 36% were 30-49, with the remaining older than 49. The respondents in Young's study likely have a narrower distribution of ages than the 18-29 viewer group.

One assumes that these people would expect the same integrity and nonpartisanship from any other news sources as well.

Cross correlation data shed further light on the viewers. Those who watch for humor are likely to also use the show to learn the news, "suggesting that learning and laughing may occur simultaneously" for some viewers (Young 2013, 162). Viewers watching the show to put news events in context, on the other hand, were significantly *unlikely* to report watching for laughs. Young reports that the respondents who find the show most funny are those who have pre-existing knowledge of the shows' news topic. She cites a representative response that says, "[the shows] touch on topics I already know . . . but expound on them in hilarious ways" (2013, 163). Beyond shedding light on why those who learn from the shows do not seem to watch it for laughs, this also suggests that those who avoid the shows due to the topics being "boring" may have similar traditional news viewing habits to the "learning" group. The show's topics may seem boring because the viewers are expending too much cognitive effort in gaining new information relative to those who already are familiar with the news content. Young speculates that "boring" may be a surrogate for lack of understanding. Undergraduate college students might be closer to the stereotypical viewer than O'Reilly's "stoned slackers" in that *TDS* viewers are young, more educated than average, earn more money than average, and are twice as likely than average news viewers to self-identify as liberal (Pew Research Center for the People and the Press 2012).

Interpreting Media Effects Research on *The Daily Show*

Media effects research tends to be perhaps the most positivist strand of political communication, focusing on the most measurable aspects of media exposure and often

taking less ambitious approaches to interpretation. Such research tends to investigate persuasion, emotion, and learning, effects which have decades of methodology research to back their claims when measured. The challenge that faces the media effects scholar or those, as in this project, that want to make summary judgments about research is that these ventures into the theoretical and evaluative come at a cost to one of the research area's greatest strengths; narrowing the methods, texts, and claims helps make possible well-founded claims that can be debated on largely objective issues. While I will not try to fit my normative framework into the positivist tradition or argue that there is only one way to interpret media effects research on *TDS*, these studies can be quite instrumental both in comparing the desired effects with the real ones as well as building a more practicable theoretical model.

Given the erratic history of satire as a popular culture text and its relationship with politics, it is no surprise that media effects scholars have generally structured their empirical investigations into *TDS* as if it were not dissimilar to other soft news or comedy programs. As a byproduct of this, an issue that confuses the reception of the literature is a matter of interpretation; there are not specifically crafted standards by which to evaluate the effects of political satire as opposed to traditional news, soft news, or other entertainment media. Megan Hill (2013), considering approaches to the study of political satire, says a primary aim is answering the question, "does viewing political satire influence citizens' political beliefs and values" (325)? While these results are not always easy to come by, even greater confusion comes forth from the second aim of this research, which is to find out whether "this influence [has] a positive or negative effect on the health of democratic government" (2013, 325). For instance, there is compelling

evidence that political satire lowers viewer assessments of traditional news (Holbert 2013). However, “most empirical work on political satire’s influence [fails] to explicitly state what normative assumptions/claims drive their assessments of whether a given outcome is good, bad, or indifferent for democracy” (Holbert 2013, 309). Stating these assumptions, of course, has been a primary component of this project.

Skepticism or Cynicism? Further Measures of *TDS* Effects

Perhaps the most famous experimental work on *TDS* came from Jody Baumgartner and Jonathan S. Morris in 2006, cataloging what they call “The Daily Show Effect.” The headline finding is an apparent increase in cynicism toward the electoral system and news media, which the researchers argue reflects lowered external efficacy. The researchers cite Niemi et al. (1991) to establish a definition of external efficacy, which is “beliefs about the responsiveness of governmental authorities and institutions to citizen demands” (1407-8). To lower external efficacy is to make those beliefs less favorable. First, it is not a given that what was measured was in fact external efficacy. Participants were asked to agree or disagree on a 5-point scale with these two statements: “I have faith in the U.S. electoral system” and “I trust the news media to cover political events fairly and accurately” (2006, 352–3). A third item was asked of participants, which asked for a rating of the media’s performance of covering politics in America. In questioning whether the post-test questions actually measure external efficacy, I refer to the same trio of collaborators, who caution, “external efficacy is separate from political trust” (Craig, Niemi, and Silver 1990, 306). While I have argued previously that lowered external efficacy is not in and of itself a calamitous outcome, it is certainly far more dire than lowered political trust. And though one’s feelings about media institutions are

arguably a worthy part of a theoretical framework of external efficacy, there is no compelling evidence that survey responses like these correlate well with external efficacy (Pinkleton et al. 2012).

Instead of what Baumgartner and Morris call cynicism, which they equate with external efficacy, a better term might be skepticism. The notion of external efficacy used by Baumgartner and Morris (2006) is one that is concerned with trust in governmental outcomes. Researchers often conflate this performance-based idea of efficacy with political trust, the latter of which is more related to character evaluations of government officials and specific electoral (rather than policy) outcomes (Craig, Niemi, and Silver 1990; Catterberg and Moreno 2006; Pinkleton et al. 2012). Cynicism is associated with lowered external efficacy, both of which are predictive of disengagement of politics. Skepticism also reflects dissatisfaction with political and media institutions, but does not discourage important activities like enhanced information seeking as is the case for cynicism (Pinkleton et al. 2012). While cynics and skeptics both are dissatisfied with media performance, skeptics continue to seek public affairs information and report both high efficacy and low apathy. For cynics, apathy is high and self-efficacy, or internal efficacy, is low (Pinkleton et al. 2012). Given the important distinction illustrated by the Pinkleton study, distinguishing whether *TDS* viewers are made cynical or skeptical is a key task of research. This dichotomy of cynicism vs. skepticism does not necessarily reflect the kind of scholarly consensus that terms like internal and external efficacy do, but I propose that building on Pinkleton's working definition of skepticism is particularly useful in this context and perhaps other contexts, too.

Baumgartner and Morris's other finding, of increased *internal* efficacy, demonstrates potential for satire achieving exactly what it should aim to do. Internal efficacy refers to one's self-confidence in their understanding of and ability to affect the political world. The authors do mention that *TDS* "may contribute to an actively critical orientation toward politics," a result they seem to judge less likely than a more worrisome decrease in participation (2006, 362). This acknowledged potential explanation is another way of saying that what they believe to be cynicism could, in fact, be skepticism. Further research will help to clarify that aspect, but given that the worrisome measure of lowered external efficacy is based on low trust and rating of media performance, I do not agree that the 2006 study provides compelling reason for pessimism on the show's effects. Other research has been more ambivalent, noting lowered perceptions of traditional news but less willing to speculate on the practical meaning of the data given the limitations of study (Holbert et al. 2007). The quite consistent research finding of lowered evaluations of news media leaves open the possibility of this constructive skepticism and, at least, confirms that viewers are persuaded by *TDS*.

In terms of internal efficacy and one's perception of politics, the *expectation* should be that one will suffer at the hands of the other when exposure to political satire is the independent variable. To laugh at something "is always aggressive, it 'puts people down' in signaling that they are down-put, but that could not happen unless they were originally perceived as 'up'—as in some way holding power over" (Purdie 1993, 60–61). In this context, making politicians, institutions, and mainstream media sources the butt of a joke reflects this inversion of power structures. If viewers are to laugh, that means they are participating in the putting down of the power-wielding person or institution in

question. Baumgartner and Morris's finding confirms this theory of humor, as the laughing individual (the audience member) loses some faith in politics, which receives the brunt of the jokes in *TDS*. This aggressive act of laughing, however, is empowering. Bakhtin describes laughter as "a vital factor" since without it, "it would be impossible to approach the world" (1981, 23). The benefit, then, is that "laughter delivers the object into the fearless hands of investigative experiment" (Bakhtin 1981, 23). An increase in internal efficacy alongside a decrease in political trust reflects not a worrisome trend, but effective jokes.

Thinking back to Holbert's (2005) typology, traditional satire falls at two extremes. It holds political content as primary, yet its political messages are implicit. Satire's implicit political motives may be easier to discern than another kind of programming at the implicit end of the spectrum that does not feature primarily political content (such as *ER*), but its form is of utmost importance. The usefulness of a general acknowledgement of a typology like Holbert's is illustrated when looking at *TDS* and political satire generally. The normative assumptions about the desired outcomes of external efficacy or theoretically related measures, for instance, are highly contingent on typology. Satire, by its nature, only works when it increases skepticism in some way, shape, or form (skepticism as I have defined it, which does not necessarily reflect any sort of scholarly consensus on the term's meaning). Soft news, on the explicit extreme of the political messaging spectrum, should probably perform the opposite function or have no particular expected effect on cynicism. Since they are both normatively considered political entertainment, results that confirm both of my normative assertions (that satire ought to increase cynicism while soft news needs not do so) might be read simply as

more mixed results in a longer line of mixed results in the study of political entertainment.

Effects on Political Engagement

One very important aspect of a constructively critical orientation toward government and other institutions of power is that it must coexist with some sort of engagement with those institutions. The skeptic does not disengage, but rather increases their engagement to better discern fact from fiction. To simply be a cynical citizen with a critical view of democratic institutions does not necessarily make for a citizen that is either well-founded in that perception or making any sort of contribution toward the greater good of society. For *TDS* to meet the standard for a democratic good, there must be evidence that it does something for society beyond generating underinformed malcontents. Viewers should be deliberating with fellow citizens or making their voices otherwise heard. As a minimum requirement, *TDS* must encourage its viewers to learn about and otherwise be attentive to the political world. Jones's (2006) propositions are useful here, as he vindicates the utility of non-physical engagements such as learning about or paying attention to politics.

In an experiment that measured learning about current events as participants viewed political media over time, viewers of *TDS* outperformed the control group and matched a CNN news program, even when controlling for prior knowledge and media exposure (Young and Hoffman 2012). This continues a growing area of research connecting the loosely defined genre, "political entertainment," with enhanced political engagement (Baum 2002; Baum 2003; Baum 2005). Much of Baum's work focuses on the idea of free political information, or the idea of viewers receiving current events

knowledge without seeking it due to the prevalence of political entertainment programs like *TDS*. However, much like my previous discussion, grouping *TDS* with broader terms like “political entertainment” or “late-night comedy” has the cost of apparently inconclusive research results. Unlike ostensibly similar programs like *Late Show with David Letterman*, *TDS* has as much substantive political content as do nightly network newscasts with the average campaign-related segment lasting longer than network counterparts (Fox, Koloen, and Sahin 2007). This is why criticism of soft news like those posed by Prior (2003), that viewers only learn surface-level information or latch solely onto interpersonal scandals and squabbles, cannot easily be extrapolated to *TDS*.

Further research finds that viewers with low and medium levels of attentiveness to politics become significantly more likely to attend to issues covered on *TDS* (Cao 2010). Attentiveness, for the purposes of this research, includes activities like media seeking/viewing and takes increased knowledge to be evidence of an increase in attentiveness, as is often the case in survey-based studies (e.g., Cao 2010). Feldman and Young (2008) find that attention paid to conventional news outlets increases alongside *TDS* viewing, an effect which becomes more pronounced over time. An even more encouraging finding from that study is that, unlike Leno and Letterman viewers, *TDS* viewers’ increases in attentiveness were not very sensitive to the ebbs and flows of political campaigns; in other words, the program appears to make politics seem more compelling regardless of the electoral calendar, whereas a drop in interest is typically expected once campaign season ends.

In an experimental setting, viewers of *TDS* clips also spent a great deal more time reading online content related to that segment’s subject matter than did viewers of a news

clip or mixed comedy and news clip on the same issues (Xenos and Becker 2009). These effects were especially pronounced among low-interest viewers, who were much more likely to choose political topics online after watching a *TDS* clip rather than after watching any news-containing clip and learned issue-relevant material better from secondary sources if first exposed to *TDS*. The researchers say that their study shows that *TDS* seems to pass “a particularly difficult test of the gateway hypothesis” and that “the equalizing effect of political comedy may actually extend beyond relatively low-threshold conceptions of political knowledge” (2009, 330). This bolsters previous research (Young and Tisinger 2006) demonstrating an association between viewing *TDS* and shows that *TDS* drives other news engagement rather than simply the opposite. More importantly, this works to establish the necessary causation. It is not just that well-informed people watch *TDS*, *TDS* viewers partake in the activities that constitute the engaged citizen.

TDS not only leads its lower-interest viewers to consume more news, but its content is sufficiently sophisticated that Geoffrey Baym (2005) claims the show employs two types of entertainment. First is the sort that both lures in low-interest viewers and likely inspires much of the criticism toward the program. This refers to the shallower amusement and I assert that this roughly maps onto what I have previously described as horatian elements. The second means to entertainment is by substantive discourse, something Stewart tends to do via juvenalian satire. In this case, the juvenalian elements comprise just one part of this “entertainment by serious thought,” which certainly at least also involves the interview segments. This is why that despite the fact that viewers of Stewart’s interviews of electoral candidates evaluate them as serious-minded, they

continue to watch them and learn more about those candidates than they do when watching cable news interviews of those same candidates (Becker 2013). Stewart himself recognizes that many see a contradiction here, that entertainment and substance are at odds. He says, “I think you can make really exciting, interesting television news that could become the medium of record for reasonable, moderate people. And I think it hasn’t even been tried” (“The Kids Are All Right: Young People and News: A Conversation” 2003, 29). While Stewart tends to shrug off the responsibility of making this sort of news, this is exactly what Baym describes when he calls *TDS* “an important experiment in journalism, one that contains much significance for the ongoing redefinition of news” (2005, 273). This subjective observation of Baym’s seems to be backed by the research finding that *TDS* viewers generate significantly more total and relevant thoughts while watching than do viewers of *Anderson Cooper 360°* (LaMarre and Walther 2013).

With that, *TDS* appears to meet the minimum expectation of leading to increased attentiveness to politics. To solve what will come of this attentiveness, other research aims must be considered. Viewers may begin to directly participate in politics by getting involved in interest groups or campaigning for a favored candidate. On the other hand, viewers may opt to express themselves otherwise by talking politics with friends or even in public forums, which would be the expectation for the rights-conscious citizen. It is unlikely that viewers will do both of these things, given Diana Mutz’s research finding that overt participation tends to come at the cost of deliberating as well as the inverse (2006). To measure against this standard, several research findings will be considered positive: increases in internal efficacy and anticipated political expression in addition to

direct measures of political participation. Skepticism, which may be conflated with external efficacy or cynicism, will not be interpreted as a poor result. As Bennett says, “cynicism seems to be part of a contemporary civic tool kit” (2007, 282). This is due to the cynical “prevailing tone of public life” that is not dependent on Stewart’s allegedly cynical brand of humor (Bennett 2007, 283). Rather, the perceived abdication of duty on part of traditional media has created a highly cynical public culture that has had the tendency to alienate citizens and cause them to completely disengage (Cappella and Jamieson 1997). In this context, being able to have skepticism or constructive cynicism in one’s tool kit without feeling disempowered may well be an ideal outcome.

Do *TDS* Viewers Participate in Politics?

Baumgartner and Morris (2006) inspired a great deal of interest when they found that viewers of *TDS* experienced a drop in external efficacy, or perception of political and media institutions. On the other hand, the research also demonstrated an increase in internal efficacy, or viewers’ belief in their ability to comprehend the world of politics. The question that was left to be answered was whether the supposedly lowered external efficacy would lead to disengagement or the enhanced internal efficacy would make viewers empowered to make their presence felt as a citizen. I have argued that a better way to phrase this question would be to ask whether viewers will be made cynical, which is associated with apathy and disengagement, or skeptical, which results in sustained information seeking and political involvement.

Inspired by these lingering questions, further research has demonstrated that cynicism (which is usually operationalized in such a way that does not differentiate between cynicism-as-apaty and cynicism-as-skepticism) does not mediate the

relationship between viewing programming like *TDS* and political participation (Hoffman and Thomson 2009). Internal efficacy, on the other hand, did explain the relationship between viewing and participating. This serves as evidence to suggest that the more optimistic interpretation of Baumgartner and Morris's original research may reflect reality. Another study found a significant relationship between viewing *TDS* and attending campaign events as well as joining a political organization (Cao and Brewer 2008). The only tested participatory activity that did not correlate with viewing *TDS* was making donations to candidates, which makes sense given the show's tendency to lower evaluations of candidates and the fact it is a strongly income-based form of participation (Young 2004; Morris 2009). Political participation, which was inclusive of all three kinds of the previously mentioned research, was 10% more likely than control in another study after controlling for other variables with a high degree of significance (Young and Esralew 2011).

Becker (2013) found experimentally that viewing interview segments of *TDS* increased anticipated political expression to a statistically significant extent, exceeding both its sister show *The Colbert Report* and traditional news. Another study found a highly significant correlation between viewing *TDS* and talking about politics in person with friends and family as well as talking politics online (Young and Esralew 2011). A critical study by Baumgartner and Morris focuses on young viewers that rely on *TDS* for news almost exclusively, finding perhaps an over-inflated sense of internal efficacy and an abundance of apparent cynicism (Baumgartner and Morris 2011). However, the group for which they measure these troublesome effects comprise only 6% of their national

sample of college students, which reflects a remarkably small portion of the *TDS* audience on the whole.

There is also no indication of whether these viewers will eventually diversify their information seeking, which is a critical portion of my hypothesis. My argument is that viewers will often first engage with the show while young, low in knowledge, and generally unengaged by other political media, but *TDS* viewing will lead these viewers towards further information seeking and other beneficial effects. Research that suggests causality like that from Xenos and Becker (2009) becomes even more critical in light of this finding. The question to be answered is whether the finding that paints a small portion of viewers as inattentive while self-satisfied is merely a snapshot in time of a group who will eventually improve upon their low knowledge and attentiveness, or something more enduring. That there is research supporting causality for the “gateway” notion of *TDS* viewing that leads to information seeking while it is lacking for the more troubling finding here is very encouraging. Nonetheless, the results suggest that *TDS* may not have a universally positive effect on everyone.

Establishing Causality

What may not be apparent about the abundance of encouraging research regarding *TDS*'s potential effects upon its viewers and the positive signs about its viewers' knowledge of and participation in politics is what relationship they have with viewing *TDS*. That is, are the viewers of the show benefiting from the gateway effect that is shown to be possible in research? If the audience is already politically interested and informed, then the experimental effects on low interest and information viewers are irrelevant. As Griffin said about satire, it tends to circulate in sophisticated and

aristocratic audiences (1994, 141). While this being true of *TDS* would not necessarily spell doom for its potential positive influence on democracy, it certainly puts a damper on one of the most plausible possibilities.

First, I would like to tackle the tricky topic of whether Griffin's prognostication rings true of *TDS*'s audience. On one hand, an uninformed audience would suggest that *TDS* is not doing a great job at informing its viewer. On the other hand, an audience that is highly informed might suggest that the show is only attracting political sophisticates. The audience of *TDS* is younger than any other political news source, both in average age and in portion of 18-29 and 30-49 years old viewers (Pew Research Center for the People and the Press 2012). However, its audience is not entirely dissimilar in age to those that consume *The New York Times*, *The Economist*, and *The Wall Street Journal*. A key distinction with *TDS* is that its audience is far more highly composed of 18-29 year olds and much less reliant on those 50 or older, with over 25% more of its audience consisting of the younger demographic and 25% less of the older, compared to the aforementioned publications. While the *TDS* audience consists of a higher proportion of both college graduates and those who have completed some college than national averages, the audiences of such sources as *USA Today*, *NPR*, *The New York Times*, and *Wall Street Journal* all range from marginally to substantially more educated (Pew Research Center for the People and the Press 2012). One point to note in regard to demographic data is that in 2007, a Pew survey indicated that 31% of *TDS* viewers had graduated from college while 26% were under 30; the 2012 survey cited here shows those numbers to be 45% and 39%, respectively. That the audience simultaneously became substantially younger *and* more educated is suggestive that it has successfully appealed to a younger

audience, more educated audience, and that some of its audience has become more educated since they first tuned in.

When it comes to measuring knowledge, the results are more confounding. On one hand, Pew Research made headlines when *TDS* viewers measured higher than all but *Rachel Maddow*, *The New Yorker*, *Wall Street Journal*, and *NPR* audiences in answering all current events knowledge questions correctly. However, 22% of surveyed *TDS* viewers only answered 1 or fewer current events questions correctly, making the *TDS* contingent of low-information viewers as proportionately high as all but a few of the measured audiences in Pew's survey (2012). This was not the case in the earlier survey mentioned previously, in which the audience was also less educated and older (Pew Research Center for the People and the Press 2007a). I interpret this to mean that while the audience has gotten more educated, a stronger influence on that audience's knowledge of current events is how much younger the audience has gotten. I make the assumption here that the relative increase in poorly informed viewers can be largely attributed to the increase in young viewers, though there may be other factors, both methodological and demographic, that may explain this change. The larger point I intend to make with this data is that at any given point in time, the audience of *TDS* is well-informed on aggregate, but composed of a significant portion of viewers who would benefit from a gateway effect.

This data makes sense alongside studies that show strong correlations between news viewing and viewing of *TDS* (e.g., Young and Tisinger 2006). Nonetheless, this does not prove causality satisfactorily as it still leaves open the possibility that voracious news viewers later turn to *TDS* for increased gratification. Feldman and Young (2008)

found that, *over time*, interest in the 2004 presidential campaign increased with exposure to *TDS* relative to no late-night comedy viewing. Compared to Leno and Letterman viewers, *TDS* viewers had more sustained interest even after election day, while it fell rather precipitously for the former shows' audience. A uses and gratifications study on college-aged viewers and nonviewers of *TDS* may prove most useful in determining whether a causal effect is in fact what is being observed (Young 2013). While the vast majority of viewers cited the humor element as a motivating factor for watching the show, cross-correlation analysis showed a significant correlation between those who watched for the humor and those who watch *to learn*. Further, those who report watching to contextualize the news and civics knowledge they already know (a small portion of the surveyed viewers) were significantly *less* likely to report watching the show because it is funny. In other words, this study confirms a major tenet of the gateway hypothesis, which is that the entertaining format will draw viewers in and lead them to learn more. Among younger viewers, which is true of a large portion of *TDS*'s audience and usually suggests low levels of political knowledge, interest, and involvement, humor and learning are apparently key motivations for tuning into *TDS*. Notably, both interest/attention and efficacy were not significantly correlated with *TDS* viewing, suggesting once again that the show does more than draw in the sophisticated elite, at least among the college-aged audience (Young 2013).

To summarize, there is very good reason to believe that a gateway effect indeed occurs for viewers of *TDS*. While experiments show increased knowledge (Young and Hoffman 2012) and engagement with political media (Xenos and Becker 2009) as a result of viewing *TDS*, especially among poorly informed or uninterested viewers, it takes more

investigation to see whether these experimental results are likely to occur in practice. My analysis of the audience of *TDS*, in terms of its demographic data, political knowledge, and news consumption habits, shows that much of it can benefit from the gateway effect demonstrated in experimental settings. Furthermore, it is likely that part of the reason the audience is so well-informed and politically active (e.g., Cao and Brewer 2008) is that the audience has already experienced a gateway effect that predates the time of the survey or analysis.

Concluding Thoughts

The Daily Show with Jon Stewart has become, for better or worse, a significant and influential player in American politics. The recent groundswell of research on the show's potential effects is indicative of that fact, as people within and outside of academia scramble to understand the changing media environment. The popular interpretation of the show's influence seems to be becoming politicized as Stewart's critiques of Republicans have persisted after George W. Bush left office. While academic research has not settled along partisan lines, little is settled on this front as well. One key complicating factor in trying to approach consensus in research rests in the conceptual frameworks in which research occurs. Simply extrapolating data from soft news to *TDS* or vice versa is insufficient and likely leads to much of the contradiction in current research data. Likewise, inconsistency in the ways in which the same research results are interpreted contributes to unfruitful debate. This is why research reviews have called for more theorizing as a necessary aspect of understanding political entertainment, which is what this project is offering (Holbert 2013).

Scholarly discussion must first focus on some of the desired outcomes of viewing programs like *TDS*. Following the lead of Lance Holbert's (2005) typology, I have evaluated *TDS* as satire rather than more general terms like political entertainment or soft news. By acknowledging and discussing the peculiarities of satire as a style and genre, it is easier to formulate defensible criteria from which to evaluate shows like *TDS*. That they might be different from other entertainment-oriented programming is of no concern when a pluralistic notion of both good citizenship and good journalism is applied to political communication research. While studies of news (ie. Iyengar and Kinder 1987; Graber 1988; Zaller 1992) tend to hope that political information seeking can adequately occur solely within the narrow sphere of traditional news outlets like broadcast news and newspapers, I do not require that *TDS* be able to function well as a sole source of news. The central question is whether, as a part of a rather broad array of politically relevant media, *TDS* benefits democracy.

By focusing primarily on the ways *TDS* affects its viewers, there is intriguing evidence to suggest that it indeed compels its audience to become better citizens. I have applied a pluralistic and inclusive definition of citizenship that I believe is best-suited both to this question and to 21st century American society. While I hold classically-espoused traits such as knowledge, participation, and voting as examples of productive outcomes of *TDS* viewing, there are other ways in which I deviate from narrower or anachronistic criteria. Stimulating deliberation is among the greatest benefits that may not be an oft-measured or especially hoped-for outcome in political communication, as it underlies a great deal of contemporary democratic theory. Enhancing information seeking or what Baum dubbed the "gateway hypothesis" is another measure that befits a satirical

program that airs at maximum two hours per week moreso than it might other political media. Further, generating political trust, certain types of political participation (such as donations), and other types of arguably state-serving behavior are not as critical to this project's evaluation than earlier studies of traditional news (see Jones 2013 for discussion of research methods and state-serving behavior). It is simply not the vocation of satire to stimulate some of those activities, which I argue does not necessarily make all satire harmful.

The current state of research establishes several things clearly. First and foremost, the *TDS* audience is knowledgeable. Not only do they score well in survey-based research, experimental and time-based studies indicate that learning happens as one is exposed to the show, establishing a fairly strong causal link. While the show may certainly draw in already-knowledgeable viewers, novice viewers both learn from watching the show as well as display an interest in seeking more information from other media (e.g., Xenos and Becker 2009; Cao 2010). A rather consistent finding of increased internal efficacy as a result of viewing *TDS* suggests that this newfound confidence is either empowering viewers to continue learning about politics and/or their learning feeds into the feeling of confidence in their ability to understand the political world. While one study implicates *TDS* in creating a subset of viewers who know little but believe to know a great deal, it implicates an impossibly small subset of both the study's sample and the viewing audience (Baumgartner and Morris 2011). Nevertheless, even that study is useful for understanding the means by which *TDS* benefits the citizen, by emphasizing the fact that it is not a sufficient resource in and of itself to have an adequate understanding of politics. Instead, the increased information seeking is fundamentally important not just

for the ways it benefits its audience, but also how the audience will perceive the program and themselves.

There is a smaller strand of research that shows rather positive indications for *TDS* encouraging its viewers to become active in politics. Viewing *TDS* has consistently correlated with various types of political participation, though not donating to candidates (Cao and Brewer 2008; Young and Esralew 2011). New research has suggested a causal link between viewing *TDS* and political participation in young people, with internal efficacy acting as mediating variable (Hoffman and Thomson 2009). Notably, the same research found that cynical views did not depress political participation among *TDS* viewers, establishing more evidence that the type of critical view of politics bred by *TDS* is a skeptical, productive sort. On political participation, nearly all research returns have been positive, but more research on the topic, especially establishing causality, would be ideal. The correlations between some of the better-established attitudinal changes related to *TDS* viewing and various forms of political engagement are well-enough supported by political science and communication research in general that I feel comfortable concluding that *TDS* is benefiting society in this way as well.

On the whole, the picture painted by existing research on *TDS* is indeed very rosy. That the discipline is not yet in agreement reflects a few different issues, all of which I have addressed throughout this project. First, there is a matter of inertia. *TDS* is unprecedented in a myriad of ways and it will take many people an abundance of evidence to accept that the substantial changes in the media environment may, at least in this case, be positive. More significantly, the conceptual frameworks through which research is interpreted is varied, often outdated, and sometimes wholly unstated. I have

put forward a more coherent and transparent set of criteria to evaluate the program that connects different research outcomes together in a way that seems missing in most existing research on *TDS*. Another issue in terms of interpretation involves not just media effects, but those that may envision *TDS*'s most positive impacts to be on political culture, holding news outlets accountable, or other means of power inversion; there is well thought out and generally favorable criticism in this vein, but this type of argument is much more difficult to empirically measure. This project seeks to combine empirical and critical research, something that has been possible at the individual-level, but was not feasible for societal-level effects. A final and legitimate factor is that the amount of social scientific research is still small, relative to more settled issues. On this, there are no remedies within the scope of this project. However, the extent to which available data can be conceived to be positive is enough evidence to move forward with a positive outlook.

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