

Nightly News or Nightly Jokes? News Parody as a Form of Political Communication: A Review of the Literature

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Abstract

News parody as a genre of political satire has become an increasingly popular form of entertainment in the past two decades. Mirroring traditional news media in format and style has made this genre one that receives both praise and criticism. While some see it as a chance for a wider audience to become politically interested, others point to potentially negative effects such as increased political cynicism. While news parody as a form of political communication has been at the center of various studies, related research has been spread across a plethora of disciplines and sub-fields and some limitations and gaps in the literature remain substantially unexplored. This review article seeks to contribute to this research field by presenting a comprehensive overview of the existing literature and proposing new directions for the study of news parody as political communication.

Keywords

political satire, political communication, news parody

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Introduction

“Fake news” is what some would call it, a source of political information is what others might perceive it as: News parody is a genre that has sparked debates in public discourse and academic research alike. Addressing current events in a manner not entirely unlike traditional news media, this type of political satire constitutes a unique form of political communication. Prominent examples of news parody shows on television include *The Daily Show (TDS)* and *The Colbert Report (TCR)* in the United States, the *heute show* in Germany, or *The Rick Mercer Report* in Canada. And while its hosts and anchors perceive their content to be nothing more than entertainment, research has shown that their audiences do, in fact, receive political information and political orientation from them, thus showing real effects of exposure to this type of political communication (Bode and Becker, 2018).

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While the research body on news parody has grown over the last decades, there are still some limitations and gaps across the literature, particularly with regard to methodological approaches and sampling techniques. This review will examine the common theoretical and methodological approaches as well as findings and ongoing debates. Research on news parody effects has been spread across a number of disciplines and sub-fields. Most often it has appeared in communication studies and political science, two fields that are too often regarded as separate rather than inherently interwoven. This review article will thus consider research from both of these core fields to offer a comprehensive overview of the literature on the effects of news parody. The article will focus on studies of effects of news parody television shows in a US context as the US entertainment industry is largely regarded as one that sets the agenda for entertainment trends globally. In fact, many non-US news parody programs are adaptations of *TDS* (see, for instance, Baym and Jones, 2012). I will first provide definitions of key concepts. Following this, I will turn to a thematically structured discussion of the literature before proposing an agenda for future research.

Conceptualizing Political Satire

Political satire has the ability to present news and social commentary in a way that traditional news cannot as satire does not answer to journalistic standards. It is “designed to keep those in power in check and allow the masses to laugh at our collective folly” (Feinberg, 1967 cited in Becker, 2020: 274). There are three actors: the satirist, the satire target (a politician), and the audience (Kaye, 2020). Political satire comes in a variety of forms, styles, and humor types. Research has shown that different formats of political satire have different effects (Baumgartner and Lockerbie, 2018; Hoffman and Young, 2011; Young and Hoffman, 2012). The scope of this article does not allow for an in-depth analysis of research on all forms of political satire and is thus limited to the genre of news parody. This decision was made because news parody research makes up a large part of the overall political satire literature and it is comparable to traditional news media.

News parody most often features other-deprecating humor (Baumgartner et al., 2018) and is modeled after traditional news media programs in that it includes reporter packages, video clips, and soundbites and addresses real-world current affairs (Baym, 2005; Brewer and Marquardt, 2007). In the US context, prominent examples of news parody programs are *TDS*, *TCR*, and *Last Week Tonight*. Research on all three programs will be considered in this review. It is worth noting that *TCR* slightly differs in style from the other two news parody shows. On *TCR*, the host Stephen Colbert performs entirely in character as a right-wing news anchor. Research has shown that while Colbert’s message is persuasive, the nature of the show can confuse audiences and make the program less accessible than other news parody shows (Baumgartner and Morris, 2008). Furthermore, audiences tend to perceive *TCR* to be less serious than other news parody programs (Becker, 2013). It is thus important to distinguish not only between political satire formats more broadly, but to also regard each news parody show as its own entity with potentially differing effects.

Method

This review of the literature on news parody in a US context will focus on research concerned with news parody effects. While there have been studies focusing solely on the

content of news parody, the vast majority of research has—at least in some regard—looked at news parody effects. Two of the key theoretical approaches to the study of news parody effects were introduced by Matthew Baum. First, the incidental byproduct model describes how less attentive individuals and those primarily seeking entertainment can learn from soft news if the programs “piggyback” information from traditional news and use cheap framing (Baum, 2002). Second, the gateway hypothesis proposed by Baum suggests that soft news can serve as an entrance for the politically uninterested (Xenos and Becker, 2009). For instance, someone who had no prior political interest might be motivated to learn more about politics after exposure to political satire or other types of entertainment media (Xenos and Becker, 2009).

For the purpose of this review, I searched for articles containing the key terms “political satire,” “politics and satire,” “news parody,” “satire effects,” and “television satire.” In addition, I added the search terms “United States” or “US” to filter for this article’s focus area. To generate further results and to avoid search bias, I used the snowball technique. Articles were included in this review if they met the criteria of clearly discussing the effects of a news parody program in the United States. The decision to use only journal articles for this review was made to ensure a higher level of comparability and because this type of research is peer-reviewed and tends to reach a wider audience. The research reviewed in this article represents a range of disciplines and sub-fields. The majority of the reviewed articles is situated in media and communications research. Another group of studies is from social sciences research, with the most common sub-fields being political science and political communications, respectively. The sub-fields of marketing, technology, and international relations are represented by one study each.

In the following, I present a review of the current state of the literature on effects of news parody in the United States. Broadly speaking, the literature can be grouped into three overarching themes which will inform the structure of this review: political knowledge acquisition, political attitudes, and political participation. Following the review of the literature, I will offer recommendations for future research.

News Parody Effects in the US: The State of the Literature

Late-Night Learning: Effects on Political Knowledge Acquisition

In many ways, news parody and traditional news media can be regarded as similar media forms. Both focus on current events and provide at least some level of information to their respective audience. It may seem counter-intuitive to consider satirical news parody to be a source of information; however, research has shown that it does positively impact political knowledge acquisition. Programs like *TDS* have been found to feature substantive levels of political information that are often comparable to the levels of political information found in traditional news media reports. For instance, Fox et al. (2007) compared coverage of the party conventions and the first presidential debate in the US in 2004 on *TDS* and on broadcast network television and found that while there was more humor than substance in coverage on *TDS*, there was also more hype than substance in network coverage, thus leading to the same amount of substantive information on both media formats.

Having established this, researchers have since explored the implications for audience’s acquisition of knowledge and information from news parody both individually and in comparison with traditional news media. On the latter, Young and Hoffman (2012)

conducted an experiment with an undergraduate sample in real time over the course of four days, using up-to-date material from *TDS* and CNN Student News to observe participants' acquisition of political knowledge over time. The authors found that participants in both conditions showed higher current affairs knowledge after the experiment, thus confirming that the two media forms have similar potential for knowledge acquisition. While their over-time approach with up-to-date material certainly has its merits, it should be noted that participants could have still been exposed to the content prior to the experimental setting, for instance, during the live broadcast of *TDS*. Another limitation of this study is the use of CNN Student News as the stimulus representing traditional news. While the authors detail that they chose it because it is comparable to *TDS* in length and headline-oriented format, CNN Student News might not be representative enough of other traditional news formats for it to be a viable stimulus to compare news parody effects and traditional news effects.

In another experiment with an undergraduate sample, Becker and Bode (2018) compared knowledge acquisition after exposure to *Last Week Tonight* and *ABC News*, respectively. Their study generated similar findings in that *Last Week Tonight* was found to have an impact on learning and knowledge gain and thus to be doing as much as traditional news to inform citizens on political issues. Avoiding the undergraduate bias, Kim and Vishak (2008) used an adult sample for a study with an experimental design. While participants were found to acquire less factual information from exposure to *TDS* as opposed to exposure to the evening news, it was found that the different media formats facilitated different types of information processing: Online-based information processing was found to be more likely after exposure to news parody, whereas memory-based processing was found to be common after exposure to news media. It should be noted, however, that while Kim and Vishak avoided the undergraduate bias, their study has other limitations as it lacks a clear explanation of why and how different media formats lead to these different patterns of information processing.

The effects of news parody exposure on political knowledge acquisition have also been studied without a direct comparison to traditional news media. Drawing on Baum's gateway hypothesis, Xenos and Becker (2009) conducted two experiments with undergraduates in the US to examine the causal relationship between exposure to *TDS* and political learning processes. The authors found strong support for Baum's theory as individuals who were previously less politically interested were found to be more attentive to news media content after exposure to *TDS*. Furthermore, these individuals were also found to acquire information from traditional news media more easily after exposure to political satire. Learning effects from *TDS* might, however, be influenced by previously held perceptions of the show. As Feldman (2013) showed, those who perceive *TDS* as news or as a mixture of news and entertainment learn more from the show than those who perceive it as entertainment only due to the level of mental effort invested in viewing and processing the content. These results are based on an online experiment for which Feldman recruited participants from Survey Sampling International's online panel of survey respondents, thus avoiding the undergraduate bias.

Looking beyond *TDS*, Jennings et al. (2019) found support for their hypothesis that long-form political comedy on *Last Week Tonight with John Oliver* has strong effects on information processing. The authors' results are based on an experiment with undergraduates in the US. Similarly, Hollander (2005) found that exposure to political satire has positive effects on recognition and recall of political information. These findings are

drawn from secondary survey data on late-night comedy and satire programs (*Late Night with David Letterman*, *The Tonight Show with Jay Leno*, *Saturday Night Live*, *TDS*). Based on previous findings on differing effects between different forms of political humor, these results must, of course, be regarded with caution as the news parody example of *TDS* cannot be regarded in isolation in this sample.

The literature clearly shows some effect on political knowledge acquisition through exposure to news parody. This makes studies into the types of information presented on news parody shows all the more important. A good example of this is research surrounding Stephen Colbert's political satire. While Colbert's satire, particularly on his former show *TCR* (2005–2014), could be described as “fake news” and not a source of information, results of various studies would suggest otherwise. For instance, Baym's (2007) textual analysis of *TCR*'s segment “Better Know a District” and the popular discussion surrounding it indicated that while it was clearly a humorous segment, it nevertheless featured both issue exposure and institutional exposure, bringing attention to political debates, policy issues, and lesser known politicians. A later study by Becker (2021) examined Colbert's initiative “Better Know a Ballot” and suggested that this satire may not directly impact vote choice but has the potential to impact voting likelihood by providing audiences with information. Colbert's later initiative was a segment on his late-night talk show *The Late Show with Stephen Colbert*, thus falling outside the genre of news parody. Still, it is notable that Colbert has brought segments from his news parody into the realm of late-night talk shows, thus extending his satire style across different formats while still achieving similar effects.

Beyond these two segments, Colbert gained much attention for his Super PAC which he set up to draw attention to a Supreme Court decision on campaign finance (Hardy et al., 2014). Hardy et al. (2014) used data from a cross-sectional telephone survey during the 2012 US Presidential Election and found that viewers of *TCR* gained knowledge about Super PACs and campaign finance regulations through exposure to Colbert's segments on his Super PAC. Furthermore, the results of the study indicated that *TCR* was more successful in informing viewers about these topics than other types of media were, and that exposure to the segments had an effect on viewers' perception of money in politics. Previously, LaMarre (2013) had found similar results in that Colbert's satire about the Super PAC generated more issue knowledge and support for campaign finance reform. However, LaMarre's approach differs from Hardy et al.'s as it explores not only exposure to segments on *TCR* but also exposure to Colbert's Super PAC satire in another context, namely, Colbert appearing in character on the morning news show *Morning Joe* to discuss the topic. An experiment with participants recruited from Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk) found that while exposure to either *TCR* or the *Morning Joe* appearance was positively associated with issue knowledge, those exposed to Colbert's satire on *Morning Joe* reported lower levels of issue knowledge. These results indicate that political satire effects may be restricted to in-context exposure (i.e. on the political satire show) and may not necessarily extend to out-of-context exposure (i.e. a satirist performing on a non-satire show). However, Jones et al. (2012) found slightly different results. Analyzing the *Rally to Restore Sanity*, Colbert's congressional testimony in character, Colbert's Super PAC, and Jon Stewart's advocacy for the Zadroga Bill, the authors found that when satirists extend their content beyond the usual setting, it can have real impact as their performances include a high level of information and they can comment and critique in a way the news media typically does not. These slightly contradictory findings suggest a need for further research into this phenomenon.

Funny and Persuasive? Effects on Political Attitudes

The effects of news parody are not limited to acquisition of political knowledge. Research has shown that these programs have real effects on political attitudes and candidate evaluations. For instance, effects on candidate evaluations were reported by Morris (2009). Using secondary data from national surveys, he explored how *TDS*'s coverage of the Democratic National Convention (DNC) and the Republican National Convention (RNC) in 2004 affected candidate evaluations and political attitudes. The results showed that exposure to the RNC coverage negatively impacted evaluations of President George W. Bush and Vice President Dick Cheney, whereas exposure to either DNC or RNC coverage did not significantly impact perceptions of Democratic candidates John Kerry and John Edward. A common perception is that *TDS*'s viewers tend to be more liberal, and thus these results may, at first glance, indicate a bias in perception; however, Morris' results show that the effect was not limited to partisanship. However, LaMarre et al. (2009) found that partisanship may influence perceptions of political satire. In an online survey with undergraduates in the United States, the authors compared processing of *TCR* between Conservatives and Liberals. They found that while both sides of the political aisle regard Colbert's humor to be "funny," they have different perceptions of who or what is being satirized. While Conservatives thought Colbert was satirizing Liberals, Liberals indicated they thought Colbert was satirizing Conservatives. These findings suggest that partisanship may indeed lead to a bias in perception; however, it is important to consider the research sample in these cases. Morris (2009) used a national sample of US adults, whereas LaMarre et al. (2009) relied on an undergraduate sample. Further research will thus be needed to explore how a possible partisan bias may affect perceptions and effects of political satire across different demographic groups.

As the literature shows, news parody can negatively impact candidate evaluations; however, research has shown that there may well be even more wide-reaching negative effects on political attitudes. Baumgartner and Morris (2006) found that exposure to jokes about candidates on *TDS* negatively impacts candidate evaluations and that exposure to the show increases cynicism toward the electoral process and the news media. Nevertheless, the results from the experiment with undergraduate students also led the authors to conclude that viewers of *TDS* have more confidence in their ability to understand complex political concepts and debates, thus indicating at least some knowledge acquisition effect.

Mobilization with Humor: Effects on Political Participation

The question of whether news parody can influence levels of political participation has been of interest to many researchers. Bode and Becker (2018) used *Last Week Tonight with John Oliver* as their news parody case and conducted an online experiment with participants recruited from Amazon MTurk. The study set out to explore how calls to action on the show encourage political participation among its audience and found that they were indeed highly effective, thus indicating that Oliver has the power to mobilize his audience politically.

Baumgartner and Lockerbie (2018) studied this type of effect from a comparative angle, examining how different types of political satire and comedy programs affect political participation. Using secondary data from the 2012 and 2016 American National Election Surveys, the authors found that viewing late-night comedy talk shows such as *Late Night with David Letterman* does not affect political participation beyond some

political talk, whereas viewing political satire, as can be found on *TDS* or *TCR*, increases political participation. These results suggest that satire can indeed mobilize its viewers politically. They also once again highlight the importance of distinguishing between different forms of political humor in this research field.

As with research on effects on political knowledge acquisition, the literature on political participation effects has offered comparative studies of news parody and traditional news media as well. Hoffman and Young (2011) proposed a mediation model in which media use predicts efficacy, which in turn predicts participation. To test this model, they employed an online survey with university students in the US, exploring how satire, traditional television news, and traditional late-night comedy, respectively, affect efficacy and political participation. The authors found support for their model in the case of television news and satire; however, the same effect was not found for late-night comedy. Similarly, Lee (2012) used an online experiment and a mail survey and found that *TCR* and *TDS*, both regarded as satire shows, play an equally important role as *NBC Nightly News*, a traditional news source, in encouraging political participation. This once again highlights the need for a distinction between late-night comedy (e.g. talk shows) and political satire like news parody in effects research.

New Directions for the Literature

The effects of news parody in the United States have been of great interest to researchers in the past decades. As this review has shown, there are a plethora of effects that can be linked to news parody exposure, ranging from political knowledge acquisition to effects on political attitudes and political participation. Leading theoretical approaches in the study of political satire effects are Baum's gateway hypothesis and Baum's incidental byproduct model, and indeed research continues to find evidence for these theories. Despite the growing research body on this topic, though, a few questions remain. Based on the preceding review, this section will offer an agenda for future research.

Research has suggested that different types of political humor and indeed different shows of the same type of humor have vastly different effects on its audiences. There is a need for further examination and confirmation of these initial findings. Comparisons between types of humor, formats, or programs should continue to be part of the research agenda; however, there needs to be a clear distinction between and examination of different types of political humor (i.e. comedy, satire), formats (i.e. news parody, late-night talk shows, stand-up, parody, user-generated content), and programs or content (e.g. *TDS* vs *TCR*). Indeed, such comparisons would also make studies more representative and generalizable as the inherent bias of single stimulus or single issue experimental studies would be avoided.

Furthermore, the literature on political satire would also greatly benefit from more cross-country comparisons. News parody programs, particularly adaptations of *TDS*, have gained increasing research interest in the last years. Studies have examined news parody across the globe, including in Canada (Onusko, 2011), in Germany (Dörner and Vogt, 2016; Kleinen-von Königslow and Keel, 2012; Lichtenstein and Nitsch, 2018), in the Netherlands (Boukes, 2019), and in Zimbabwe (Källstig, 2021). While there have been some comparative studies (see, for instance, Baym and Jones, 2012), this research agenda should be further expanded. This would open up new possibilities in terms of examining different effects of political satire in relation to cultural, political, or economic settings and influences.

As discussed in this article, there have been some contradictory findings on how various factors such as partisan bias may mediate political satire effects (LaMarre et al., 2009;

Morris, 2009). Further research is needed in this area and would certainly benefit from more cross-sectional and diverse samples. The review of the literature shows that much of the research relies on experiments with undergraduate samples. Undergraduate samples in particular are often justified through audience data that shows younger people are more likely to consume political satire shows on television. While this may be true, future research should still seek to avoid the undergraduate bias in sampling to explore the potentially similar or differing effects across age and other demographic groups to understand the full dimensions of political satire effects. Some researchers have taken the step to diversify sampling by using participant recruitment platforms such as Amazon MTurk. As Berinsky et al. (2012) found, this platform in particular generates samples that are more representative of the general US population. However, the authors also highlight shortcomings of using MTurk samples, including that these tend to be less representative than national probability samples or Internet-based panels. Future research may thus benefit from recruiting participants via Amazon MTurk, but may also benefit from diversifying recruitment methods further to ensure more versatility and representativeness.

In addition, the research on Stephen Colbert extending his satire beyond the bounds of his television studio has raised many interesting points, yet has also generated slightly contradictory findings (Jones et al., 2012; LaMarre, 2013). Other notable studies on this phenomenon outside of the US context include research on comedian Russell Brand in the United Kingdom (Arthurs and Shaw, 2016; Brassett, 2015; Milburn, 2018). Future research should expand on this line of inquiry, particularly as it has become more common for comedians and satirists to extend their satire beyond their usual settings.

This review set out to offer a more comprehensive overview of the literature on news parody across different disciplines and sub-fields and to highlight the limitations and gaps that still prevail in the research. As this review has highlighted, the literature on news parody has been growing over the past two decades in particular but still has significant limitations, particularly with regard to methodological approaches and sampling techniques. News parody and other forms of political satire and comedy have become an increasingly more relevant form of political communication and source for information, and as such, effects of such programs should continue to be studied by expanding on the existing methodological approaches, diversifying sampling techniques, and looking at more contemporary phenomena such as comedians outside of their typical realm.

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