

**“BUT SERIOUSLY, FOLKS...”:
UNDERSTANDING THE POLITICAL EFFECTS OF
LATE NIGHT TELEVISION COMEDY**

A Dissertation

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
Louisiana State University and
Agricultural and Mechanical College
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

In

The Manship School of Mass Communication

by
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B.S.C., Ohio University, 1997
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December 2007

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This dissertation is dedicated to my parents,
William B. and Patricia A. Sarver, for
humor in the face of exasperation,
patience in the face of anxiety,
and, most importantly,
persistence in the face of apathy.

Thanks for being so amazing; here's to the third verse.

And in loving memory of my grandparents:
John Anthony and Mary Zepko Alexander
Carl Bennett, Sr. and Orpha Irene Sarver

I think they would be really proud of this.
We miss you.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

No dissertation that takes this long to write can possibly have a succinct acknowledgements section; without all of the people listed here (and others who remain uncredited), I probably would have given up on this four years ago. Luckily, I have been blessed with a multitude of supportive, patient and— perhaps most importantly — incredibly kind people in my life, and thus have an extensive list of individuals to thank.

First and foremost, I would like to recognize the contributions of Dr. Timothy Cook, my original dissertation chair, who helped shape this project and my thinking. Sadly, Dr. Cook passed away while I was still on my “anti-sabbatical,” but his influence can be found throughout this document. I also owe a huge debt of gratitude to “my lieges,” Dr. David Kurpius and Dr. James Garand. Dr. Kurpius generously offered to take up the reins and direct this dissertation, keeping the faith that I would, in fact, get this done before the clock strikes a metaphorical midnight (since it’s 11:45 p.m. under the most generous of estimates). His good humor made this process more pleasant than I had thought possible. Without Dr. Garand, there would be no quantitative component to this dissertation; while time and again I tried his remarkable patience, he would always help me with a laugh and a smile. Thanks, guys—lunch at The Chimes is on me. Dr. Anne Osborne, thanks for reminding me that, no matter what, I can always make it to the Moon—*muchas gracias*. Dr. Emily Erickson, supporter extraordinaire, thanks for keeping me sane and going with me into the lions’ den when necessary. Dr. Yoshinori Kamo, you showed great tolerance for dissertation (re-) defenses—thanks for sticking around.

I would also like to thank the three Associate Deans of Graduate Studies at the Manship School who worked with me over the past seven years: Dr. Louis Day, who brought me in, Dr. Ralph Izard, who brought me up, and Dr. Margaret DeFleur, who brought me back into the fold. You all are fantastic—thanks for supporting me when the chips were down and for not giving up,

despite the odds. Dean John Maxwell Hamilton, your vision is what made this program happen, and I'm so proud that I can finally close the chapter on the first Manship Ph.D. cohort. Linda Rewerts and everyone else in the Manship School, thanks for always welcoming me back with smiles and hugs—you guys make it a pleasure each time I return to Baton Rouge.

Two people worked harder on this dissertation than I had any right to ask: Patricia Sarver, my main “research rat,” spent hours transcribing tapes, attending focus groups, and doing whatever else was needed to get this done. Christine Alexander, proofreader/editor extraordinaire, was willing to slog through pages and pages (and pages) in draft after draft (after draft), offering savvy recommendations as well as witty asides about my writing proclivities (turns out, commas shouldn't be used just for decoration!). While all remaining mistakes are mine, this dissertation belongs to them as well. And, of course, I have to thank my dad, Bill Sarver, who lovingly and willingly transcribed five words before giving up on the youth of today. I am so lucky to have your support, especially when I've painted myself into a corner.

Special thanks go to those who made the qualitative research possible: in Athens, Dr. Sean McGann, Ryan McGann, and the women of Alpha Omicron Pi. Sue “Dirthead” Olenik, thanks for your expert assistance with interview transcriptions—we could not have done it without you. Finally, a huge thank you has to go to my peeps at Insight Research Group, especially Boaz Mourad and Stacey Matthias. Without my Insight experience, I could never have successfully completed this caliber of research. Your guidance and expertise are invaluable, as are your friendship and support. Erin, Jason, and Peter, who helped me put together the now-lost content analysis chapter, you're coding rock stars—thank you!

While I am a fan of hyperbole, I can honestly say that I am blessed to have the greatest family in the world. Missie, Jason, Johnny, and Kyle, you mean the world to me—I am so lucky to have you as my siblings. Mackenzie, you are the smartest, sweetest, most remarkable child in

the world, and you fill me with joy (this sentiment is extended to all future nieces and nephews as well). Many thanks and much love to the Heckels (Scott, Connie, Kevin, Angela, Adam, Todd, Laura, Rob, Sara, Baby Snyder, Jeremy, Sarah, and Lily) and James “Sonny” Pappas—without all of you harassing me, who knows where I’d be right now. Mary Josephine Alexander, Estelle Murawski, and Sr. Kay O’Malley, thanks for keeping me in your prayers and your hearts. Dave and Jan Troutman, thanks for being both remarkable godparents and political inspirations.

I am equally blessed to have an excellent group of friends, most of whom have put up with me for more years than I would have thought possible. Linda, Heather, Chris, Kim, Mike, Dena, Colleen, Celina, Amy, Lisa, Erik, Alison, Tracey, and all others who I don’t have room to list—thanks for keeping me company, encouraging me to finish, and generally annoying me until I got this done. A special “shout out” goes to my Louisiana/Quantum Kitten family (Tom, Brandi, Simon, Sarah, Nick, and Jason)—I love you guys. To the fine gentlemen at Consolidated Graphics Group, especially Wally and Lenny, thank you for both your printing capabilities and your rock star friendships. And while I don’t actually know her, I also have to thank the incomparable Angela Lansbury for providing me with countless hours of enjoyment.

Finally, I want to thank my great-uncle, Frank Alexander. In the late 1980s, Uncle Frank let me interview him for a social studies project on World War II veterans. His wisdom and humor made for an excellent story, and it was through this that I had my first glimpse at the joys that come from uncovering new information and sharing other people’s experiences. Uncle Frank encouraged me to write, and I can’t thank him enough for that. Uncle Frank, here’s to you—I know you’re toasting Grandpa in Heaven, with red zinfandel all around. Salud.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

DEDICATION.....	iii
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	iv
LIST OF TABLES.....	viii
LIST OF FIGURES.....	ix
ABSTRACT.....	x
CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION.....	1
CHAPTER 2. LITERATURE REVIEW	14
CHAPTER 3. METHODOLOGY.....	43
CHAPTER 4. QUANTITATIVE FINDINGS.....	52
CHAPTER 5. QUALITATIVE FINDINGS FOR LATE NIGHT TALK SHOW VIEWERS.....	92
CHAPTER 6. QUALITATIVE FINDINGS FOR “THE DAILY SHOW” VIEWERS.....	133
CHAPTER 7. CONSTRUCTIONISM AND LATE NIGHT COMEDY PROGRAMS.....	171
CHAPTER 8. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS.....	190
WORKS CITED.....	226
APPENDIX A. DESCRIPTION OF QUANTITATIVE VARIABLES.....	232
APPENDIX B. CROSSTABULATIONS.....	237
APPENDIX C. INTERVIEW PROTOCOL.....	257
APPENDIX D. FOCUS GROUP PROTOCOL.....	259
APPENDIX E. LIST OF RESPONDENT CODES.....	262
APPENDIX F. CONSENT FORMS.....	263
VITA.....	265

LIST OF TABLES

4.1. Differences of means of late night talk show viewers and non-viewers for socioeconomic and demographic variables.....	63
4.2. Differences of means of late night talk show viewers and non-viewers for political engagement variables.....	64
4.3. Differences of means of late night talk show viewers and non-viewers for political interest variables.....	65
4.4. Differences of means of late night talk show viewers and non-viewers for knowledge-related variables.....	66
4.5. Ordered logit estimates for a model of the relationship between late night talk show viewership and political participation.....	69
4.6. Ordered logit estimates for a model of the relationship between late night talk show viewership and news media.....	74
4.7. Differences of means of “The Daily Show” viewers and non-viewers for socioeconomic and demographic variables.....	78
4.8. Differences of means of “The Daily Show” viewers and non-viewers for political engagement variables.....	79
4.9. Differences of means of “The Daily Show” viewers and non-viewers for political interest variables.....	80
4.10. Differences of means of “The Daily Show” viewers and non-viewers for knowledge-related variables.....	81
4.11. Ordered logit estimates for a model of the relationship between “The Daily Show” viewership and political participation.....	83
4.12. Ordered logit estimates for a model of the relationship between “The Daily Show” viewership and media usage and preferences.....	86

LIST OF FIGURES

1.1. “The Most Trusted Man in America...”; drawing by Rogers, © 2003 Pittsburgh Post-Gazette.....	3
8.1. The political evolution matrix.....	203
8.2. LNTS viewers and the political evolution matrix.....	206
8.3. TDS viewers and the political evolution matrix.....	207

ABSTRACT

The potential political effects of late night comedy programs have been a subject of much debate and concern, particularly since the 2000 Presidential election. Research into this area has been characterized by inconsistency in operationalizations of audiences and an almost exclusive focus on quantitative research. This project was designed to address key concerns that are central to this burgeoning literature by examining “heavy” viewers of late night talk shows (including audiences of Leno, Letterman, and Conan O’Brien) and “heavy” viewers of “The Daily Show with Jon Stewart.” A combination of qualitative and quantitative methodologies were used to understand the relationships between late night comedy viewership and how citizens engage with the political world and news media. In addition, I sought to understand the perceived benefits of viewership (entertainment versus information), including how audiences construct meaning around political information and integrate said information into their views of the world.

Findings indicate viewers of late night talk shows tend to be politically unsophisticated and low news media consumers, relying on incidental exposure to news about current events that are introduced throughout the day in the course of other activities (i.e., news headlines on email servers, jokes in late night monologues). Viewers of “The Daily Show,” however, are on the other end of the political spectrum, reflecting high levels of political sophistication and high news media consumption. They tune into “The Daily Show” for a “twist” on news stories with which they are already familiar, expecting Stewart and his team to provide a humorous slant on current events.

The differences between these two audiences can be attributed to their political evolutions. A function of independence of thought and political sophistication, engaging in a political evolution process allows citizens to thoughtfully and deliberately consider (and re-consider) their political beliefs and perspectives. This conscious and effortful engagement with

political information means those who are highly politically evolved have flexible and well-functioning mental schema in place to understand and contextualize new information, draw connections between seemingly disparate issues, and recognize and challenge media conventions in political coverage.

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

The potential impact of late night television comedy programs has become a popular topic for debate and discussion in recent years. While politicians have been utilizing opportunities to appear on comedy channels to change or “refresh” their images since Richard Nixon appeared on “Laugh-In” in 1968, Bill Clinton’s saxophone-playing turn on “The Arsenio Hall Show” in 1992 reinforced the perceived importance of these programs. Since then, politicians have clamored to be booked on one of these programs, trusting in the conventional wisdom that these appearances provide ideal opportunities to show their “softer sides” to audiences they might not reach through traditional media venues. Because of this, “the late night talk shows—whose main purpose is entertainment—have also become prime real estate for political appearances” (Waxman 2003).

Late night programs not only provide fodder for discussion within mainstream media, but they have generated attention within other worlds as well. As the spotlight has increased, these shows correspondingly have garnered significant attention from academics, media pundits, politicians, and campaign professionals, with each of these parties having its own (and often multiple) ideas about what effects these shows have on the American citizenry. Concern and debates reached a fever pitch when the Pew Center for People and the Press released results of its 2006 Biennial Media Consumption dataset. According to these data, a significant portion of young Americans get their news from comedy programs. These findings were interpreted as further evidence that American youth are ill-informed and apathetic citizens, turning away from traditional (and therefore credible) news sources and replacing this substantial fare with what could only be considered inferior sources.

Despite these concerns, scholarly findings on the political effects of late night comedy programs have been mixed at best. As is often the case with emerging fields of literature, inconsistent definitions and operationalizations have resulted in conflicting findings. As this domain continues to grow, however, researchers are utilizing more finely-tuned instruments and research agendas in order to more fully explicate and understand the role these programs play in shaping political understandings and world view.

This dissertation seeks to further that body of work by examining the audiences for the four late night comedy programs that, through the beginning of 2006, were the subject of the most intense public commentary: “The Tonight Show with Jay Leno,” “The Late Show with David Letterman,” “Late Night with Conan O’Brien,” and “The Daily Show with Jon Stewart.” Where this research differs from other studies is in my focus on how audiences assign meaning to the content; in other words, political effects are operationalized to incorporate more than voting behavior or political preferences. Rather, I seek to understand how viewers explain the political landscape and what role late night comedy programs play within that perspective. In order to answer these questions, I utilize one of the most intriguing theories in mass communication: constructionism. This approach is explicitly multi-methodological, inherently non-judgmental, and puts the onus on researchers to uncover the meaning viewers have assigned to content. Only through understanding how audiences construct meaning around the information to which they are exposed on late night comedy programs can we begin to ascertain the effects of these shows.

Late Night Players

Four main players exist in the milieu of late night television comedy: Jay Leno, David Letterman, Conan O’Brien, and Jon Stewart. While other entertainers (including as Jimmy Kimmel, Craig Ferguson, and TDS alumnus Stephen Colbert) host late night television

programs, these four shows are the time period standouts. The hosts are established, and they consistently draw sizable audiences. Leno himself recognizes this as the elite tier, citing the other three hosts as his main competition and “the best in the nighttime talk show business” (Frye 2003). Each of these hosts boasts his own particular brand of humor and has endeavored to personalize his program. Devotees of each are numerous, and each show merits a more thorough discussion.

“The Tonight Show with Jay Leno”

(On “American Idol” runner-up Clay Aiken being named to the President’s Committee for People with Intellectual Disabilities): “So, it looks like he could be working directly with President Bush.”

“The Tonight Show with Jay Leno,” September 10, 2006

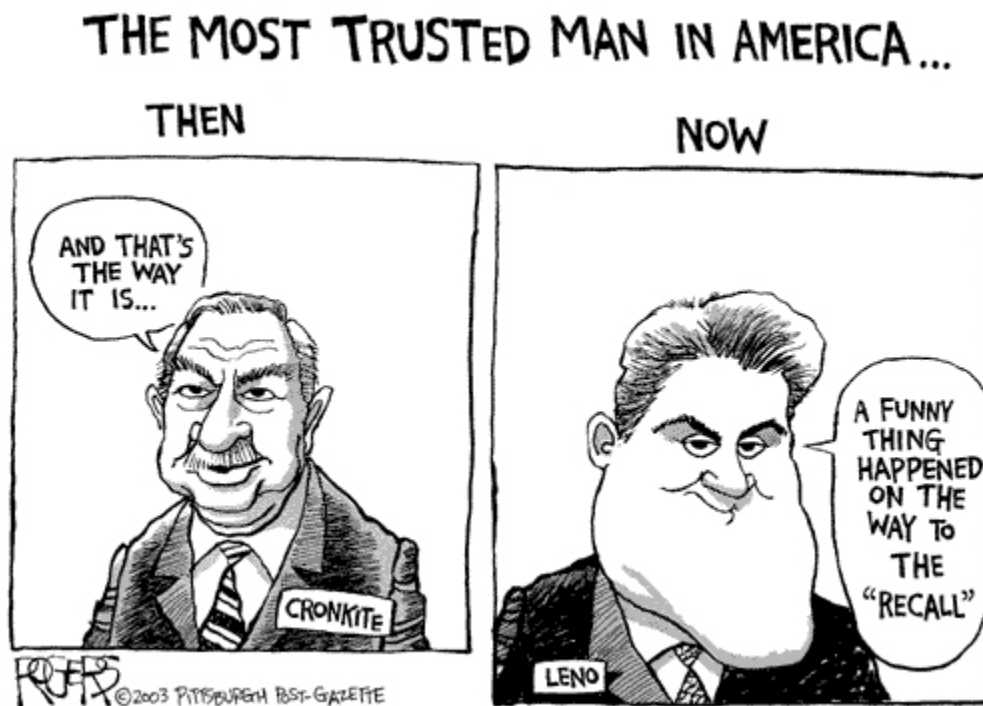


Figure 1.1. “The Most Trusted Man in America...”; drawing by Rogers, © 2003 Pittsburgh Post-Gazette.

Known as “the reigning king of late night,” (Janney 2003) Leno consistently pulls in the largest audience in his time slot with approximately 5.7 million viewers each night (Learmonth

2006). Perhaps even more impressively, during the Spring 2006 ratings sweep period, Leno extended his dominance over Letterman with the coveted 18-49 year old age group, pulling in 33% more of this highly desirable age group (Kissell 2006).

“The Tonight Show” is the progenitor of late night television talk shows. Leno is the fourth host of the show, following in the tradition of legendary comedians Steve Allen, Jack Paar, and Johnny Carson. Under Leno’s watch, “The Tonight Show” has won two Emmy Awards: one for Outstanding Comedy, Variety, or Music Series in 1995, and another the next year for Outstanding Technical Direction. It has been the centerpiece of NBC’s late night lineup for decades, and Leno’s success means that this is likely to continue through the near future. His contract extends through 2009, when Conan O’Brien will take over the program’s reins.

Despite this tremendous success, Leno’s persona is that of a regular Joe. He is “an undisputed nice guy—a 53-year-old version of the class clown, an easygoing joker without a complex or a penchant for four-letter words” (Frye 2003). Much of Leno’s success comes from his ability to relate to the average American. While he is known for his collection of sports cars and vintage motorcycles, “when he hosts his show...he seems more like a T-shirt, jeans, and dented-pickup-truck kind of guy—a televised stand-in for the regular, non-rich, non-city-dwelling American” (Seitz 2003).

According to Lichter, “Jay Leno was the first late night comedian to use politics as a major target” (Smith 2003). As a host, he is by far more explicitly political than his competition on network television. The Center for Media and Public Affairs in Washington, DC monitored the content of late night talk shows over a ten-year period (1992-2002). Their analysis indicates that Leno told nearly 50 percent more political jokes than Letterman over that time period. Bill Clinton was the top target over those years; in fact, he was the subject of more jokes than Al Gore, OJ Simpson, Bob Dole, Monica Lewinsky, Hillary Clinton, George H.W. Bush, H. Ross

Perot, and Dan Quayle combined (Felling 2002). . The programs' show-runners recognize their political import; in the "About the Show" section of "The Tonight Show" website, the program is described as "a barometer of political clout" that allows politicians to "demonstrate their relaxed, good-humored side during the presidential elections" ("The Tonight Show" website 2006).

Leno stepped up his involvement in politics during the 2003 California gubernatorial recall and election. Former bodybuilder and movie star Arnold Schwarzenegger announced his decision to throw his hat in the ring during an appearance on Leno in August 2003, and the comedian returned the favor by introducing Schwarzenegger at his victory party on election night. This appearance in particular engendered concerns that the crosspollination of politics and entertainment may have gone too far, and it "implicitly raise(d) questions about what Leno's responsibilities ought to be—to his audience, to his network, and to his entertainer-friends-politicians" (Waxman 2003). In fact, Leno joked in his introduction of the new governor-elect that the victory was "a testament to how important one appearance on 'The Tonight Show' can be" (McCollum 2003).

"Late Show with David Letterman"

(On the 13th anniversary of the signing of the Israeli/Palestinian peace accord): "Glad they settled that!"
"Late Show with David Letterman," September 13, 2006

When David Letterman moved to CBS during the summer of 1993 after 11 years as host of NBC's "Late Night with David Letterman," it was under the pall of having lost his coveted slot as host of "The Tonight Show" to Leno. His new program, "The Late Show with David Letterman," retained much of his loyal audience from NBC, however, and remains a critical success. While Leno has cornered the market on being the average guy, Letterman is "edgier and more ironic" (Seitz 2003), described as a "self-loathing comic...who is rarely satisfied with his performance and who is never truly happy except when the little red light on the camera is on"

(Gay 2003). Critics tend to favor Letterman's more caustic style, contending "Leno will never catch Letterman when it comes to sophistication and interview skills. Leno is the McDonald's; Letterman, the Algonquin" (McClintock 2003). Tim Goodman, television critic for the San Francisco Chronicle, contends, "Leno is good at what he does. There's something to be said for entertaining the masses, the vast bulk of America tuned in for hey-ain't-that-funny one-liners" (2003). In contrast, according to Goodman, "What Letterman does is another thing entirely. These guys are almost in different businesses. In the modern era, Letterman created subversive. He is so completely copied all across the dial there's no damn point in calling the lawyers."

In recognition of their considerable talents, Letterman, his writing staff and production team won six Emmys for Outstanding Comedy, Variety, or Music Series over the program's decade-long tenure. Letterman has also been honored for his faculties as host: in 1992, he received the prestigious George Foster Peabody Award for taking "one of TV's most conventional and least inventive forms—the talk show—and infusing it with freshness and imagination" ("Late Show with David Letterman" website 2003). According to Kansas City Star television critic and late night television critic Aaron Barnhart, "This was the late night voice of our generation, the guy who reinvented late night TV and took it beyond Carson." Others concur: "He is arguably our most gifted and human TV performer—the guy who was ravaged by shingles and felled by heart disease and exhausted by the grind and tormented by sometimes mediocre ratings and soulless networks. You prick him, he bleeds" (Gay 2003).

Despite critical acclaim, "Late Show" continually loses to "The Tonight Show" in the ratings game. In overall viewership, Leno now beats Letterman's audience by 31%, with Letterman down to 4.1 million viewers (Learmonth 2006). Despite the increasing disparity in ratings, advertising rates between the two remain competitive and Letterman draws a larger salary than his counterpart at NBC. While never shying away from political topics, Letterman

has never had the same emphasis on politics as Leno. According to the CMPA content analysis covering ten years of late night jokes, Letterman told 12,741 political jokes, compared to Leno's 18,801 (Felling 2002). He has taken an increasingly active stance in recent years, however. During the California recall election campaign, Letterman aired a segment called "Meet the Governor" that featured old footage of candidate Arnold Schwarzenegger in a variety of unflattering situations: gripping a woman's buttocks, encouraging a woman to suggestively lick a carrot, smoking marijuana, and dressed in Indian robes. The day after the election, Letterman had lame-duck governor Gray Davis appear on his show and present a Top-Ten List (Letterman's signature segment). He has also addressed the Democratic presidential candidates during the 2004 primary season, inviting several aspirants to appear on the show, including pertinent jokes in his monologues, and creating Top-Ten Lists such as this (airing in June 2003):

**Top 10 Signs that You Are in Love with
Democratic Presidential Candidate Howard Dean:**

10. You've actually heard of him.
9. Whenever he discusses his plan to revitalize economy, you get goosebumps.
8. You named your cats "Howard," "Dean," and "Six-Term Governor Howard Dean."
7. You'll only watch movies featuring Ron Howard or Harry Dean Stanton.
6. When you hear a report on the radio about a highway accident, you murmur, 'Please God, don't let Howard Dean be involved.'
5. Constantly complain rival candidate Dennis Kucinich isn't 'Howardly' enough.
4. Changed outfit four times before watching appearance on 'Meet the Press.'
3. You stand by him despite the fact his infidelities embarrassed you in front of the entire... oh, wait a minute, wrong Democrat.
2. When he announced his candidacy, you didn't laugh your ass off.
1. You're actually considering wasting a vote on him.

Letterman audience members pride themselves on being tuned in to something that is special: “When you watch Letterman do his work, it says you like great, difficult, artful and snarky humor” (Goodman 2003). After all, “Admirers have long cherished the quaint notion that maybe there’s a little bit of Dave in each of them, but God forbid, not too much” (Gay 2003). While Letterman does engage in some political humor, his guests typically come from mainstream Hollywood, including actors pitching their latest project and musicians publicizing their latest releases. While he may host an occasional candidate during key points in the campaign, this is an anomaly rather than a regular occurrence (particularly when compared to “The Daily Show.”

“Late Night with Conan O’Brien”

(On reports that Tony Blair, Prime Minister of Great Britain, will step down): “After hearing about it, President Bush said, ‘Damn, he’s the only foreign guy who speaks American.’”

“Late Night with Conan O’Brien,” September 6, 2006

When NBC announced their replacement for the hosting slot abdicated by Letterman in 1993, few expected that this unknown comic writer would still be around ten years later. In fact, in a nervous attempt to maintain an emergency escape route in case O’Brien crashed and burned, the Peacock network refused to commit to more than thirteen weeks at a time. Their initial faith in him was rewarded, however. Celebrating his ten-year anniversary in 2003, O’Brien’s tenure on “Late Night” is longer than the late night careers of either Steve Allen and Jack Paar. He now earns an estimated \$8 million per year (Simon 2003), and “Late Night” consistently wins its time slot with 2.4 million viewers (Learmonth 2006). Perhaps even more impressively, O’Brien has not lost his time slot during a ratings sweeps period in more than 11 years (Kissell 2006).

Critics originally panned O’Brien, calling his performance “a disaster, an unworthy successor to Letterman.” His style is drastically different from either Leno or Letterman, and it

took some time for audiences to catch on. Willing to do whatever is necessary to garner a laugh, O'Brien is often described as "offbeat" and "innovative" (Janney 2005), or even "weirder and more surprising" (Seitz 2003) than his seniors. Now, fans of O'Brien rave about his quirky interview style and imaginative segments. "(With) his long, lanky frame and pliable face, he's got a gift for physical humor and he's great off the cuff, often absurd, sarcastic, even leaning toward the cerebral" (Benedikt 2006). Rather than embracing Leno's guy-next-door friendliness or Letterman's ironic detachment, O'Brien turned himself into a "crash test dummy" who would stop at nothing to get a laugh: "If the sketch calls for me to get hit over the head with a giant plank, or if it calls for me to weep or sing opera or dress up like Little Lord Fauntleroy, I'll do it." (Battaglio 2003).

"Late Night" is by far the least political of the four shows included in this analysis, both in terms of his monologue and the guests he tends to invite on the program (Hollywood and music celebrities rather than politicians). While O'Brien does not shy away from current events or political subjects, he admits that political humor is not the focus of his show: "It's just not my thing... It's just not how I'm funny, getting it off my chest how angry I am at the Office of Management and Budget" (Aucoin 2003). O'Brien does regularly use politicians in his sketch comedy segments, however, notably in the "Clutch Cargo" routines which feature comedian Robert Smigel's lips superimposed over still photos of such politicians as Bill Clinton and George W. Bush, allowing him to literally put outrageous words in their mouths. When he does focus his attention on politics, however, he does so with a considerable amount of talent: "Among the late night hosts working today, O'Brien boasts the most agile comic mind, the quickest-on-the-feet interviewing style, the cleverest writers, and the most original blend of verbal and physical comedy" (Aucoin 2003).

While O'Brien claims to take a backseat to his comedic counterparts in terms of political humor, he rose to international attention with his coverage of Tarja Halonen's campaign to become President of Finland. Insisting that she was his doppelganger, O'Brien officially endorsed her candidacy: "Why do I support Tarja Halonen? Because she's got the total package: a dynamic personality, a quick mind, and most importantly — my good looks," said O'Brien in a statement to The Associated Press (2006). To show his support, he aired a series of advertisements for now-President Halonen and, more controversially, faux-advertisements that made outrageous claims against her opponents. Because "Late Night" airs five nights a week on Finland's cable channel SUBTV, some were concerned that his involvement would have a negative effect on the election outcome: "He's just making fun of the whole election," said Harri Jaskari, campaign manager for former Finance Minister Sauli Niinisto. "If this decides the election, then we're in trouble. It gives a very poor picture of Finnish democracy" (Associated Press 2006).

"The Daily Show with Jon Stewart"

(On President Bush saying in his address that since 9/11, we have learned that the enemy is "evil"): "I don't want to say anything, but didn't we learn that on September 11th?"

"The Daily Show with Jon Stewart," September 12, 2006

Late night television's newest wunderkind, "The Daily Show with Jon Stewart," bills itself as a program that "takes a reality-based look at news, trends, pop culture, current events, politics, sports and entertainment with an alternative point of view" ("The Daily Show with Jon Stewart" website 2006). Television critics describe the show as "part newscast parody, part late night interview show, this is comedy that's not left or right. It's straight in the back with a velvet shiv and, if you're not careful, you just might learn something" (Rosenthal 2003). Credit for this smart, incisive comedy is rightly given to Jon Stewart, who took over the show from Craig

Kilborne in 1999. Since Stewart's arrival at the anchor desk, his "cut-the-crap humor and endless send-ups of politicians and the world they inhabit have made him a force to be reckoned with in American politics" (Chung 2006).

A surprise hit for basic cable channel Comedy Central, *The Daily Show* mimics the format of a nightly local newscast: it airs immediately after primetime (11:00 p.m. ET) Monday through Thursday and lasts for thirty minutes. Rather than perform a conventional monologue in the tradition of other late night comedy programs, host Jon Stewart opens the show from his anchor desk. A 'story box' is superimposed over his right shoulder to give visual supplements to his commentary. Stewart uses this forum to "make news interesting by pointing out its inherent absurdities and contradictions" (Rosenthal 2003). This format marks one of the key differences between late night talk shows and "The Daily Show." Rather than looking to the traditional stand-up format for political humor and commentary, "The Daily Show" is in the tradition of "Weekend Update" on "Saturday Night Live." Satirizing political content within the familiar constructs of news media allows "The Daily Show" to simultaneously .

Since Stewart and "The Daily Show" rose to the forefront of American political media in 2000, ratings have more than doubled to 1.3 million (Chung 2006), with an audience of the "young, aware audiences the networks crave" (Laurence 2006). Their coverage of the 2000 Presidential campaign, dubbed 'Indecision 2000,' broke new ground for this 'fake news' show, and it solidified the program's credentials as a legitimate (albeit alternative) news source for smart, scathing political satire. Since then, Stewart and his team have only increased their esteem: "(The Daily Show") delivers some of the sharpest commentary on what's been going on in the world lately that you're likely to find anywhere. That it will make you laugh—out loud, at times—is just a bonus" (Rosenthal 2003). Young audiences are particularly drawn to this brand of intellectual comedy, and Stewart is credited with helping "keep political satire alive for

a young audience that—the experts say—isn't very attuned to the news" (Bauder 2003). While some claim that "The Daily Show" is the primary source for a substantial amount of national and international news for this young audience, Stewart disagrees: "I don't believe it. People who are badly informed aren't the audience for our show. I think in general our audience is pretty well connected" (Weintraub 2003).

In recent years, "The Daily Show" has won numerous Emmys, beating out competitors for the Outstanding Comedy, Variety, or Music Series. In an interesting twist, the Television Critics Association nominated "The Daily Show" for Best Achievement in News, along with *60 Minutes* and late night competitor "Nightline." Providing further evidence of the show's perceived status as a legitimate news organization, they were awarded prestigious Peabody awards for their 2000 and 2004 "Indecision" election coverage. This legitimization of "The Daily Show" within the media landscape has led to a series of high-level interviewees coming on set to be interviewed by Stewart, including sitting Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf, former President Bill Clinton, former New Jersey Governor Jim McGreevey, and Senator Trent Lott... all in a two-week period in September 2006. In fact, TDS guests tend to come primarily from the worlds of politics, news media, and academia, marking a clear difference from what is seen in late night talk shows.

Political Effects?

As evidenced in this introduction, these four late night talk shows are popularly credited as serving an important function as legitimate sources of political news and information. The process is twofold: first, through jokes in monologues and sketches, hosts present information and provide a framework for contextualizing and understanding this information. Second, by inviting candidates, elected officials, and others involved in the political process onto their shows as guests, hosts provide a forum through which these politicians can reach an audience that is

often unreachable through other news sources. In addition, as guests, these candidates and politicians can control the message that is being presented, affording an element of control that is lost through the gatekeeper function of traditional news media.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

In the aftermath of the 2000 Presidential vote, media and political pundits clamored to ascertain and remark on the impact of late night television programs on the election. After all, in terms of sheer entertainment value, the 2000 Presidential campaign was one for the record books: according to the caricatures that emerged from comedians and television hosts, voters could choose between a wooden policy wonk with a penchant for hyperbole and a dimwitted Texan with no head for numbers and a poor grasp of the English language. In an unexpected twist, complications in Florida meant the election would not be decided for weeks after the last vote was cast. It was straight out of the movies, including a ready-made villainess (Katherine Harris, Florida Director of Elections) and accusations of nepotism (the governor of Florida, Jeb Bush, is the younger brother of Republican George W. Bush).

By the time the Supreme Court called an end to the Florida recount, handing the election to candidate Bush, late night comedians had achieved a new level of reach and expertise. From the beginning of the campaign season through the end of the Florida debacle, their monologues, jokes, and sketches were played over and over again across media channels. Jay Leno's monologue was rebroadcast daily on MSNBC, CBS News regularly recapped the late night jokes, and David Letterman's Top Ten list was reprinted in dozens of newspapers and magazines. Possibly the biggest winner in the election foray was Comedy Central's "The Daily Show," whose "Indecision 2000" coverage was widely praised for its caustic wit and insightful political commentary (including regular analyst Bob Dole, former Senator from Kansas and the 1996 Republican nominee for President).

Since 2000, the importance of late night comedy programs for political candidates and parties has become conventional wisdom for politicians and their advisory teams. Appearances

on these programs is de rigueur for those aspiring to the Presidency, and the build-up to the 2004 Democratic primary season had a notable number of hopefuls joining Jon Stewart on “The Daily Show” (TDS) as well as the late night talk shows (LNTS). For then-North Carolina Senator John Edwards (and eventual Vice Presidential nominee), TDS was the ideal place to announce his candidacy, fulfilling a promise he had made to Stewart during an earlier appearance. Once the parties’ nominees were finalized, both Democrat John Kerry and sitting Republican President George W. Bush took advantage of this genre, hoping that appearing on these talk shows would give them an advantage with voters that they may otherwise not reach via mainstream media.

The candidates and their campaign teams recognized that these programs often afforded an opportunity to recast images, as evidenced by John Kerry’s appearance on “The Tonight Show” when he rode his motorcycle into the studio. For candidates and campaigns, appearing on late night comedy shows affords an opportunity to control their message and reach a portion of the population that they might miss through mainstream news media. As such, “...(candidates) tailor their messages to appeal to audiences less interested in or knowledgeable about politics than the typical audience for traditional news” (Baum 2005).

Media critics, scholars, and politicians alike are increasingly recognizing the potential impact of these programs on the American public, as the line further dissolves between entertainment and news. Todd Gitlin, a journalism and sociology professor at Columbia University, laments the jumbling of entertainment and politics. According to Gitlin, “These shows are in effect our version of political parties. They’re venues where politics happen... This is a very slippery slope, and we’re way down on it” (Waxman 2003). This sentiment is echoed by Tom Rosenstiel, director of the Project for Excellence in Journalism. “If you have a big show like Jay Leno and reach a lot of people, you have the power to influence hearts and minds. You have a responsibility to the public. If you want to play Peter Jennings, then you have to play by

some of the same rules as Peter Jennings, even if 99 percent of your show is pure entertainment” (Waxman 2003). Rosenstiel continues: “You cross a line when you start to get into this other game. If his responsibility is to entertain people, and it ends there, maybe he should refrain from having political people on the air.” According to CMPA president Robert Lichter, late night monologues are “no laughing matter for politicians. As news and entertainment merge, Leno and Letterman have become the network anchors of late night television” (Felling 2002).

As late night programs have become an essential part of modern campaigning, media watchers and scholars have both praised and lamented the “unprecedented” (Brownfield 2000) role played by these programs in presidential politics. Within the past five years, academic examination of the political effects of non-traditional information sources has increased tremendously. This burgeoning field is notable for a number of reasons, but most importantly, academics and politicians alike recognize that entertainment outlets such as late night talk shows can have a democratizing effect on campaign information. After all, “Many Americans who might otherwise have ignored the presidential campaign entirely were, as a result of candidate appearances on a variety of E-talk shows, exposed to at least *some* information about the candidates prior to the election” (Baum 2005).

Late Night Literature

Developing the Literature

Diana Owen and Richard Davis studied the political impact of new media in their 1998 book, “New Media and American Politics.” After analyzing the 1992 and 1996 presidential campaigns, Owen and Davis argued that politicians in those races increasingly turned to non-traditional media sources—talk radio and television, MTV, television news magazines, print and electronic tabloids, and computer networks—to reach voters. Frustrated by the mainstream press’ insistence on horserace coverage and the ever-shrinking soundbite, these new outlets gave

politicians greater access to audiences while also allowing them to maintain more control over the agenda by circumventing the news gatekeepers. According to the authors, the emergence of these new media as critical channels of political communication “coincides with, and in many ways contributes to, the present commercial and entertainment focus of political news” (Owen and Davis 1998). This phenomenon is accelerated in the late night world, where politicians are turned into a monologue punchline and are willing to put themselves up for potential embarrassment in an effort to reach voters.

As discussed above, serious scholarly investigation into the political effects of late night comedy began in earnest after the 2000 Presidential election. As is often the case with emerging areas of investigation, the beginning stages of late night talk show research has been characterized by conflicting and inconsistent findings. Two possible explanations seem likely for these discrepancies: first, researchers have utilized widely varying categories when investigating the effects of non-traditional media; and second, published research has been almost exclusively quantitative in nature, primarily utilizing datasets provided by the Pew Center for People and the Press (the Pew Biennial Media Consumption Survey and the Pew Center Political Communications Study) and the Annenberg Public Policy Center (Annenberg National Election Survey).

Some of the conflicting findings in existing late night literature can be attributed to inconsistent operationalization of terms and variables. At times included under the umbrellas of “soft news” (Baum 2002; Prior 2003), “infotainment” (Moy, Xenos, & Hess 2005), “new media” (Davis & Owen 1998), and “E-talk” (Baum 2005), researchers have not taken a consistent approach to what programs should be included in their investigations. The earliest research in this field often categorized late night programs with any non-“hard news” programs, ranging from “The Oprah Winfrey Show” to “Entertainment Tonight.” Because these shows have

extremely different purposes, styles, and audiences, these often led to contradictory and unclear findings. This also meant that it was difficult—if not impossible—to parse apart the differences among these programs in terms of audience effects.

In an effort to help organize and clarify differences among research focusing on the political effects of various examples of humorous programming (including everything from late night talk shows to “The West Wing” to “The Simpsons”), Holbert developed a nine-part typology for the study of entertainment and politics (2005). His nine categories included three that are relevant to this study: traditional satire, entertainment talk show interviews with politicians, and soft news. Holbert classifies late night talk show monologues and TDS within the category of traditional satire, along with programs like “Saturday Night Live.” According to Holbert, “...the political messages provided through these outlets are predominantly implied by the very nature of being grounded in humor” (444), distinguishing them from other programming. When candidates and political players appear as guests on these programs, that content is separated into its own category. For Holbert, this separation is necessary because the content is markedly different from the satirically-driven monologues and segments, since “the particular episodes containing politicians as guests are dominated by explicit political discussions of politics, public policy, and the personal attributes required of a leader” (447).

Particularly germane to the late night literature is Holbert’s operationalization of “soft news,” a category that is typified by programs like “Entertainment Tonight.” This category returns the term to how it has been used in communications literature for decades. Traditionally, “soft news” has been used to characterize stories that focus on human interest or celebrity gossip, explicitly in contrast to traditional “hard news” such as current events and international affairs. By clearly separating soft news from late night content, Holbert offers a clear-cut means of

understanding these programs and, by extension, understanding late night satire and interviews on their own merits.

The second possible explanation for the inconsistency of findings among scholars is the abundant use of secondary data in these investigations. While some researchers have developed and administered their own surveys (e.g., Prior 2003 and Eveland 2006), most have tapped into data provided by the Pew Center and Annenberg. Because these datasets provide large-sample data and are available to the public, they offer scholars a unique opportunity to do initial explorations of these effects. Unfortunately, they often limit scholars to utilize single measures or proxies for certain variables, and the reliability of these measures is typically unknown. As Eveland points out, “This may have actually led us to downplay the strength of our non-traditional media measures, which by virtue of their relative innovativeness, may not be as reliable as the standard news media use measures” (25). These surveys are also becoming more sensitive to the importance of these programs, with each new edition putting added emphasis on political effects of late night comedy.

As the corpus of literature focusing on late night comedy continues to evolve, however, these potential problems will be of less and less concern. Already, scholars have continually culled down the programs included in research, with most researchers now focusing either exclusively on TDS or, as is the case with this research, at late night comedy programs in contrast to each other. The importance of this step was first claimed by Baum (2002a), who found that “infotainment content is not monolithic, and that there are important differences between various alternatives to hard news” (125). As measures included in national surveys become more specific, scholars are better equipped to test the effects of late night comedy programs as independent entities rather than part of a broader “soft news” or “E-talk” research

agenda. As this research becomes more specific, it becomes even more critical to understand the content of the programs in order to make reasoned claims about their impact.

Analyzing Content

An important first step in understanding the potential influence of these programs on audiences was taken in 2003 by Niven, Lichter, and Amundson, who used the data collected by the Center for Media and Public Affairs for an extensive content analysis of jokes told on “The Tonight Show,” “Late Night,” “Late Show,” and “Politically Incorrect” (Bill Maher’s now-cancelled ABC program) from 1996 through 2000. Trained coders were asked to note the target and subject of monologue jokes and other comedy material during first-run episodes of these programs. Niven, Lichter and Amundson found that “much of the humor on each show is directed at the president, the president’s circle, and those seeking the presidency” (121). The President and top presidential candidates are by far the dominant targets, which is consistent across the four shows included in the analysis. The jokes were also consistent across programs in terms of topics, focusing on the same specific features of each individual. According to the authors, this “suggests comedians have developed a template of antipolitician humor that they can draw upon whenever a political figure gains their attention.” (127).

These findings were reinforced for the 2004 election by Sarver (2004) and Young (2004). In her content analysis of late night jokes and appearances during the 2004 Democratic primary on the four programs germane to this research, Sarver found that late night jokes tended to follow the same themes for each candidate and were generally negative. While Young’s examination of jokes collected by the Center for Media and Public Affairs only included the political content of Jay Leno and David Letterman, her findings also supported Niven et al.’s contention that these jokes focused primarily on the personal foibles and failings of the candidates, rather than their issue positions.

Assessing the Audience

Research has shown that audiences for late night programs tend to be younger, male, and liberal, (Baum 2002a, Hollander 2005, Young 2004, Young and Tisinger 2006), with higher levels of political interest (Baum 2002a, Young 2004, Young and Tisinger 2006). Viewership of late night talk shows (e.g., Leno and Letterman) has also been correlated with watching local news (Baum 2002a, Young and Tisinger 2006), listening to political talk radio (Baum 2002a), and seeing online information on the Internet (Baum 2002a), while watching “*The Daily Show*” is positively correlated with watching cable news (Young and Tisinger 2006). Overall, Young and Tisinger found a positive relationship between watching late night comedy programs and usage of almost all forms of traditional news, and “young people who report learning from late night comedy shows are significantly more likely to also report learning from other news programs—not less” (128).

There has been some debate over how alike the audiences for late night programming are: Hollander (2005) found “few significant differences” (407) between the audiences, although age had a slightly greater association with comedy viewing (TDS) than with late night talk show viewing (defined as “The Tonight Show” and “The Late Show”). Young and Tisinger (2006), however, found additional differences among the audiences for TDS, Leno, and Letterman. Overall, TDS viewers are much more politically knowledgeable and interested in following politics than their late night talk show counterparts, a difference that can speak to why they tune in to their programs. While Leno’s and Letterman’s audiences lack the political sophistication and interest of TDS’s core viewers, Young and Tisinger did find that Letterman’s viewers tend to be slightly more educated than non-viewers.

While some investigators have found that audiences of these programs have high levels of political sophistication, not all agree. This is an important question to answer, since several

researchers have found that this group is most likely to enjoy the benefits of late night comedy viewership. When defining the audience as those who reported seeing a candidate appearance on a late night comedy program, Brewer and Cao found that “these audiences were not remarkable for their level of political interest, usage of hard news, or exposure to televised debates” (25). Baum (2002a), on the other hand, believes that a certain level of political sophistication is required for viewers to be able to understand the humor: “In other words, jokes about politics are not funny unless the audience member understands what is being parodied...” (125). Baum (2005) found evidence for this claim when comparing people with low political awareness: of this group, those who watched talk shows were “actually somewhat *more* likely to hold strong candidate preferences and to care about the election outcome” (228) than their non-viewing counterparts. Young (2004) also found that political effects are often conditional on political sophistication, with her results indicating that “viewers of different political affiliations and with different levels of political knowledge (whether measured as civics knowledge or as a combination of candidate issue, biography, and civics knowledge) may experience distinct effects of late-night exposure.”

Gauging Political Effects

Scholars have focused on five key areas of potential political effects: knowledge, participation, cynicism, perceptions and usage of other media, and impact on interpersonal discussions.

Knowledge

Previous research provides conflicting evidence regarding the effects of late night comedy viewership with political learning and knowledge, with researchers focusing at different times on candidate appearances versus overall programs and looking for evidence of recall versus recognition.

Several researchers have focused specifically on the effects of candidate appearances on knowledge and learning, since candidate appearances on these programs offer audiences a means of learning about who they are and where they stand on certain issues. According to an analysis done by Brewer and Cao (2006), five percent of the respondents reported seeing a candidate on a late night talk comedy show during the 2004 primary season, “rivaled only by the Sunday morning and cable news talk shows as sources of public exposure to candidate appearances” (33). They found a positive relationship between watching a candidate’s appearance on these types of shows and campaign knowledge, even after controlling for a variety of other relevant factors.

Young (2004) demonstrated that exposure to late night shows was conditionally related to respondents’ ratings of candidates’ traits, but she did not find a direct effect between viewership of late night programs and perceptions of political candidates. Moy, Xenos, and Hess (2005) had more conclusive results when they considered the priming effects of candidates’ appearances on late night comedy shows. They found that there was an effect on evaluation of candidates, with viewers more likely than non-viewers to ground their perceptions of George W. Bush on character traits after he appeared on “Late Show with David Letterman” in 2000. These same effects were not significant for perceptions of Al Gore, however, indicating that the priming effect might be stronger for lesser known candidates. Interestingly, when looking at monologue content (rather than candidate appearance), Pfau, Cho, and Chong (2001) determined that Gore enjoyed the advantage over Bush, finding a positive relationship between late night exposure and perceptions of Gore and a nonsignificant negative relationship between exposure and perceptions of Bush.

In general, most of the research conducted on the overall effects of late night television tends to adopt a “not so bad” approach to the subject, indicating that—despite their emergence as

information sources—“soft news” programs are not as desirable a sources as the traditional news media because of their focus on image over issue. In other words, while late night audiences may be learning about candidates through these programs, in an ideal world viewers would gather information about candidates and their issue positions from traditional news sources in order to make informed, rational choices. It is possible, however, that this perspective has been underestimating late night television and its viewers. Recent experiments indicate that a candidate’s appearance on a late night talk show may actually prime viewers to focus on substantive issue discussion rather than personality in their evaluations, suggesting that “the casual atmosphere of late night comedy causes young viewers to take issue discussion seriously.” (Parkin 2005, 25) This can be good news for scholars, politicians, and citizens who have been concerned with the declining attention to traditional news sources, since “entertainment-based sources of political information may, in fact, cause young viewers to become more issue-oriented than image-conscious in their political decisions which could have positive repercussions for the future of democratic representation in the United States” (Parkin 2005, 1).

While some research has indicated that viewership of non-traditional news programming (including late night television comedy programs) can, under certain circumstances, be associated with greater political knowledge (Baum 2003a) and greater attention to politics (Baum 2003b), others disagree. In an article written to refute Baum’s claims, Prior (2003) contended that little factual knowledge of politics is gained from informal programs. This finding was supported by Parkin, Bos, and Van Doorn (2003), who found “there is little to suggest that those who use entertainment-based sources are more politically knowledgeable because of it. In fact, there is a consistent association between claiming to get information from these sources and lower levels of political knowledge” (19).

There has been some debate over the best way to measure knowledge and learning, which could account for some of the discrepancies in findings (cf Baum 2002b and Prior 2003). While this debate is greatly muddied by the various categories of programming included, it does speak to the important differences in measuring knowledge and learning effects. In recognition of Prior's contention that little factual knowledge of politics is gained from informal programs (2003), Hollander (2005) advocated utilizing measures of recognition of campaign information rather than recall. His results indicate that watching late night comedy was positively associated with recognition of campaign information, and that this effect was stronger among younger viewers. Hollander credits this to the younger viewers' belief that they tuned in to the programs in order to keep up with campaign information: "Or to put it another way, late night television viewing increases what young people think they know about a political campaign but provides at best moderate improvements to actual recall of events associated with the campaign" (411).

Because late night viewers are often tuning in to the programs "primarily in search of entertainment, not enlightenment," (Baum 2003) the information presented is considered differently from that gleaned from other, more traditional news sources. As indicated by Baum's by-product model (which is grounded in Downs (1957) and Popkin's (1994)'s work on low-information rationality), this ancillary process can have an effect on audiences' knowledge, since they incidentally learn new information via the entertainment vehicle. This has been particularly notable in terms of candidate appearances on late night talk shows. Recent findings indicate candidate appearances can have a notable effect on politically unengaged viewers, who are much more likely to find the opposition party's candidate likeable and are more willing to cross party lines than their counterparts (Baum 2005). Young and Tisinger (2006) also found support for this by-product model.

Cynicism

Surprisingly little work has been conducted on the relationship between cynicism and late night viewership. A recent article that has generated coverage in popular press was written by Baumgartner and Morris (2006). In their experiment with college-aged citizens, the authors found that “The Daily Show” viewers “exhibit more cynicism toward the electoral system and the news media at large” (341) than non-viewers. According to the authors, this program specifically may be having a negative effect on the viewing public by lowering support for political institutions and leaders among those who are already less inclined to participate. In addition, their experiment revealed that this cynicism could be undermining a seemingly positive effect: while exposure to the program increased perceived internal efficacy by making the complex world of politics seem manageable, the program’s take on politics and politicians is actually over-reducing this situation:

"Stewart’s style of humor paints the complexities of politics as a function of the absurdity and incompetence of political elites, thus leading viewers to blame any lack of understanding not on themselves but on those who run the system. In presenting politics as the theater of the absurd, Stewart seemingly simplifies it" (362).

It is important to note that these findings were specific to TDS, and no evidence exists in relation to late night talk shows.

Participation

Participation has typically been gauged through a voting metric, including either a past vote or likelihood to vote variable as a proxy for participation. This is not ideal, since voting conveys a small amount of information and can only be done once per cycle (Baum 2002a). In addition, respondents are often inclined to give “socially desirable” answers on surveys, meaning they are likely to say they voted (even if they did not). While it is possible that there is a

correlation between those who agree to participate in surveys and those who actually vote, this could not account for the vast difference between “voted” percentages in national surveys and actual turnout on Election Day.

Baum found that, among those who watch late night comedy programs, demographic predictors of intent to vote included being female, older, and more affluent (2002a); interestingly, these demographic characteristics are the opposite of the “core” viewers (younger males). Baum did find that late night comedy viewing was a positive predictor of campaign participation, however, with younger, white respondents the most likely to report being active. In their analysis of the 2000 National Annenberg Election Survey, Moy, Xenos and Hess (2005 Communication) found that watching political infotainment can, in fact, enhance political engagement—but not for everyone, and not all the time: “...for late night comedy viewing, the positive association between exposure and...intent to vote and interpersonal discussion—was significantly more pronounced among political sophisticates” (111).

Some of the perceived effects on participation can be a result of who the core audience is for these programs. Young voters are notoriously difficult to get to the polls, and this same group makes up the bulk of late night comedy programs’ audiences. In addition, Baum (2002b) found that these viewers are more likely to be Democrats and Independents than Republicans, while Republicans are more politically aware and more likely to vote than either of the other groups.

Media

Graber (2001) has effectively argued that the blame for shrinking news audiences can be placed squarely on the shoulders of media professionals. For Graber, young Americans have been unfairly criticized for their perceived political apathy; instead, she points her finger at the poor quality and irrelevance of contemporary newscasts. In fact, much of the early research published on the effects of late night comedy viewership has assumed that these programs were

used *in lieu of* traditional mainstream programs. Current research is beginning to refute this evidence, including that of Young and Tinsinger (2006) who found support for Davis and Owen's (1998) "overlapping audience" effect, claiming that audiences watch both entertainment and other news sources. Young and Tinsinger (2006) found that "individual young people who are watching late night comedy are still *more* likely than non-viewers of late night to consume other forms of traditional news" (128), and Parkin, Bos, and Van Doorn (2003) found that respondents who claim to learn from traditional news programs also tend to learn from entertainment-based programs, indicating this same cross-media effect.

While investigators have considered how traditional media are used by viewers of late night comedy programs, no research has been conducted on how viewership affects perceptions of traditional news media. Because media conventions are often parodied or mocked on these late night programs, this is a surprising gap in the literature.

Interpersonal Discussion

It is important to consider the impact of late night comedy on interpersonal discussions, since "talking among one's friends, family, co-workers, and others emerges as an important dimension of healthy democratic participation and a significant construct in research on public opinion and democratic citizenship" (Baum 2002a, 115). Research has consistently shown that televised entertainment can provide fodder for conversation. Delli Carpini and Williams (1996), for example, found that audiences will use fictional television content along with news to make sense of their social and political worlds.

Moy, Xenos, and Hess (2005) found that, among political sophisticates, late night viewership was positively related to interpersonal discussions. For Hollander, his discovery that gains in recognition of campaign information were not matched by recall of information gives pause: "There is some good news here, that young people are capable of gleaning at least

moderate amounts of campaign information from such content, but how competent it leaves them to participate in a meaningful manner remains an open question” (2005, 412).

Political Sophistication

Political sophistication is a concept that is often used but rarely defined. Grounded in the political cognitive complexity research of “The American Voter” (Campbell et al, 1960), political sophistication research has been characterized as being “in epistemic disarray” (Luskin, 1987). Traditionally, political sophistication has been understood as a person’s political cognitions, including knowledge, beliefs, and attitudes. The mental organizations (typically referred to as “frames” or “schemata”) of these cognitions are often complex, with subsets acting as cognitions within larger frameworks. Cognitions and their constraints—the associated beliefs and attitudes that are used to organize cognitions—comprise an individual’s political belief system (PBS). In his article “Measuring Political Sophistication,” Luskin defines political sophistication as such: “a person is politically sophisticated to the extent to which his or her political belief system is large, wide-ranging, and highly constrained” (860). In other words, someone who is highly politically sophisticated tends to have a substantial number of cognitions available for recall; while not necessarily top of mind, these pieces of information are available when needed to process and understand new data. These pieces of information cover broad subject areas, and are highly interconnected (constrained).

Recent literature shows that levels of political sophistication inform liberal-conservative orientations (Delli Carpini and Keetter, 1996) as well as issue positions (Sniderman, Brody, and Tetlock, 1991; Zaller, 1992), emphasizing the importance of sophistication for abstract political beliefs and values. According to this body of thought, citizens who are politically sophisticated are equipped to translate their cognitive data into positions on matters of public policy, connecting their abstract mental positions with tangible “real world” outcomes. Luskin claims

“There are many reasons to think sophistication is important, but perhaps its greatest importance lies in its conditioning of the relationship between values and policy and candidate preferences, which can be expected to be tighter among the more sophisticated” (2002, 220). This sentiment echoes claims made earlier by Zaller, who found that “the impact of people’s value predispositions always depends on whether citizens possess the contextual information needed to translate their values into support for particular policies” (1992, 25).

Normative Citizenship

Each of these parameters discussed above assumes a certain level of information and participation should be a standard for a citizen in a democratic country. After all, “[a] healthy democracy depends on an active citizenry” (Haste, 2004, 426), and scholars, media pundits, and politicians have long rung alarm bells about the declining involvement of American voters across all measures. Some have argued, however, that these high levels of knowledge, interest, and participation do not necessarily need to be met. In “The Good Citizen,” Michael Schudson utilizes an historical perspective to shed light on the origins of the current normative ideal to which citizens are held. This model of the “Informed Citizen” was popularized in the reform-minded Progressive Era in an attempt to stunt the power of political parties. According to this standard, “The model citizen, in the reform vision, would be disciplined enough to register, educated enough to read, thinking enough to choose candidates with little or no party guidance, and docile enough to leave matters to the experts” (2000, 185).

In order to meet the needs of these voters, the news media’s sense of purpose and *raison d’etre* shifted as well. To accommodate this model, news media were now responsible for ensuring that appropriate information exists for these active citizens, providing balanced and objective coverage of campaigns and elections. As Schudson points out, however, this shift in voter standards was not necessarily embraced or embodied by the American public: “But just as the

conditions for a rational and active citizenship seemed to emerge, the citizens themselves began a retreat from political activity, voter turnout dropped precipitously, and the fate of democratic rule seemed very much in doubt” (187).

Have we, as Schudson suggests, created a normative ideal of voters that is inherently unachievable and undesirable for most Americans? Are the standards we set for the voting public too high, leading to disillusionment and disappointment at continued failed attempts to reach the bar that has been set? According to some, the answers to these questions is yes: “The ideal of the omniscient, sovereign citizen is, in my opinion... a false ideal. It is unattainable. The pursuit of it is misleading. The failure to achieve it has produced the current disenchantment.”

(Lippmann 1925, 39) What, then, is the standard that should be used? How informed do citizens need to be in order to contribute to a functioning democracy?

According to Schudson, one possible solution lies in acknowledging the utility of monitorial citizens (rather than informed): “Monitorial citizens tend to be defensive rather than proactive... The monitorial citizen engages in environmental surveillance more than information gathering” (311). In other words, citizens who maintain some level of awareness (but are not necessarily well-informed) should be recognized for their role in democratic politics. This standard is both achievable and realistic for the average American, emphasizing competence over expertise.

This focus on realistic expectations for citizen participation is also found in “The Reasoning Voter,” in which Samuel Popkin argues the merits of low-information rationality. According to this perspective, voters use their “gut instincts” to make political decisions: “(this) best describes the kind of practical thinking about government and politics in a way in which people actually engage (1994, 7). Rather than solely relying on mass mediated stories to build understanding of political actors and events, this model acknowledges that citizens utilize a

variety of resources—past experiences, daily life, and political campaigns—along with the media. Drawing on Downs’s work on economic theories of democracy (1957), Popkin points to the importance of recognizing the ways in which voters do think about politics and political information: “Voters will rely on information shortcuts because they do not have much incentive to gather information about politics solely in order to improve their voting choices” (13). This information often is acquired through incidental opportunities, through what Popkin terms a by-product theory of political information: “the information that people acquire to negotiate their daily lives is later applied to their political judgments and choices” (22). Because they come by this information in the course of their daily lives, these pieces of data are low cost; little effort has to be expended in order to attain these types of political knowledge.

How, then, can we best understand the ways late night television viewers fit into our conceptions of citizenship? How can we explore the ways in which they seek out and process information, assigning meaning to data while integrating them into their political worldviews? One promising theoretical approach is that of constructionism.

Theory

While scholars have examined multiple aspects of the political effects of late night television comedy, research thus far has been limited to quantitative examinations that are not particularly linked to broader media effects theories. While some scholars utilize cognitive processing models from psychology (see Young, 2004) and others justify their studies through the use of low-information rationality (including Brewer and Cao, 2006), most have been considering this area strictly in terms of what evidence can be gleaned from datasets rather than grounding research in extant theories. In fact, within the entire existing body of literature specifically addressing late night television, only one article taps into a major media effects theory: Moy, Xenos, and Hess’s 2005 examination of the priming effects of late night comedy,

which found some evidence of priming effects for lesser-known candidates. This glaring dearth of theoretical application can possibly be attributed to the emergent nature of this field of study. As scholars search to define this area, very little has been done to understand meaning. In order to add this level of depth to the discussion and elevate the body of literature, it is essential to develop a more sophisticated understanding of how the audience understands and uses these programs through applying the lens of constructionism.

Constructionism

The constructionist approach to understanding the potential and realized impact of mass media on political understanding was first introduced by William A. Gamson in his seminal 1987 article, “A Constructionist Approach to Mass Media and Public Opinion.” Created in response to what Gamson viewed as a communications tradition of the “methodological tail...generally wag(ging) the theoretical dog” (162), he advocated the use of this emergent paradigm in order to recognize the audience’s active role in understanding the information presented by media sources: “... the constructionist approach makes interpretive processes central. It draws on concepts rooted in cognitive psychology—schemata, constructs, cognitive maps, frames, scripts, and modes of political thinking” (164). By exploring these processes, we can better understand how audiences utilize data, both in terms of constructing meaning around specific data and then using that information to shape, refine, or manage their own political perspectives.

In “Common Knowledge,” Neuman, Just, and Crigler describe constructionism as a research perspective that “focuses on the subtle interaction between what the mass media convey and how people come to understand the world beyond their immediate life space” (53). In other words, a constructionist study encourages researchers to delve into the psychological processes used to contextualize new information and attempt to decipher how individuals can actively interpret media messages. Following in the footsteps of scholars such as Gitlin (1980) and

Tuchman (1978), “The constructionist paradigm is reflected in analyses of the role of mass media frames in shaping political discourse and in reproducing the dominant political culture” (Gamson, 165). This emphasis on active processing of messages and how texts are read by audiences offers a much-needed addition to the literature on late night television viewership, which has thus far avoided examination of how audiences engage with and create meaning around content. A constructionist approach, however, acknowledges that “Reading media imagery is an active process in which context, social location, and prior experience can lead to quite different decodings” (Gamson et al. 1992, 382).

Constructionism focuses on expanding the ways we think about politics and political effects. Rather than exclusively focusing on voting behavior and the decision-making process that goes into casting a ballot, constructionism “emphasizes effects on thinking about political and social issues rather than predispositions to vote for or against political candidates” (Gamson, 164). A considerable segment of political science research conducted on voter behavior focuses exclusively on looking for demographic and psychographic vote trends: suburban soccer moms as a voting bloc, how parental political attitudes and behaviors affect offspring, etc.

Constructionism asks researchers to delve more deeply into the personal processes that are enacted when assessing political information and making decisions, recognizing that individual interactions with new data and information elicit personal responses that affect political thought and actions.

Perhaps the most intriguing aspect of constructionism is its “shift away from viewing the media as an environmental stimulus, seeing it instead as part of a cultural system worthy of a dynamic analysis in its own right” (Gamson, 165). Instead of framing the question in terms of the traditional linear model of communication in which a sender sends a message to a receiver, constructionism focuses on the interplay between two “interacting systems”: first, the media

system that frames discourses and events, presenting information in “some context of meaning,” and second, the “public of interacting individuals” who actively use the media presentations to “construct their own personal meanings about public events and issues” (Gamson, 165). Since Gamson’s article was published, constructionist analyses of political effects within the fields of mass communication and political science have been somewhat sparse. While it has not attained the same popularity in mass communication research as other contemporary effects paradigms (such as agenda setting or priming), the constructionist approach was central to two influential books released in the 1990s, the aforementioned “Common Knowledge” and “Crosstalk,” and has attracted attention from media sociologists.

One component of constructionism that makes it particularly relevant to discussions of late night television comedy is the emphasis on multiplicity of voices. In many ways, constructionism democratizes the discussion of late night effects, giving access to those who have thus far been left out of the conversation: actual viewers. After all, “Constructionists argue that the more socially diverse the participants in public discourse are, the wider the range of options and implications that can be imagined” (Ferree et al. 2002). By giving credence to the audience perspective, constructionism recognizes that late night television is a political actor in its own right, rather than a pop culture exception to the mainstream news world. After all, this genre typifies what Gamson and his colleagues called “the good news”: “The good news is that the messages provide a many-voiced, open text that can and often is read oppositionally, at least in part” (Gamson et al., 373).

An essential component of constructionism is the mass communication concept of *framing*. According to this paradigm, frames exist at two levels: the media frame and the personal frame. Gitlin defines the prior as “persistent patterns of cognition, interpretation, and presentation, of selection, emphasis, and exclusion, by which symbol-handlers routinely organize

discourse, whether verbal or visual” (7). These frames are created and sustained by the media, and are often shared among various media sources. Media frames are used to determine what stories are written, the angle of these pieces, who is interviewed, and what they are asked. When audiences are exposed to media frames, they apply that information to their existing personal frames or *schema*: “a cognitive structure consisting of organized knowledge about situations and individuals that has been abstracted from prior experiences. It is used for processing new information and retrieving stored information” (Graber 1988, 28). These schema are built through personal experience and knowledge, supplemented by mediated and interpersonal depictions.

Constructionism also is ideally suited for examination of late night television comedy because it reflects one of the basic principles of the genre: calling attention to the absurd in the political and media spheres (and the intersection of the two). After all, constructionism is grounded in the need to identify and understand cognitive frames:

We walk around with media-generated images of the world, using them to construct meaning about political and social issues. The lens through which we receive these images is not neutral but evinces the power and point of view of the political and economic elites who operate and focus it. And the special genius of this system is to make the whole process seem so normal and natural that the very art of social construction is invisible.

By using the five devices identified by Fiske (1987) as ideally suited to allowing for individual interpretations and contested meanings in media frames—irony, metaphor, jokes, contradictions, and hyperbole—late night comedy programs explicitly draw attention to and call out this absurdity and counteract the mainstream media frames. As Baym (2005) puts it, “The blending of news and satire confronts a system of political communication that largely has degenerated into soundbites and spin with critical inquiry. The use of parody unmasks the artifice in much contemporary news practices...” (273).

Because viewers are tuning in to be entertained, they are possibly more open to (and less critical of) political information and messages that are delivered in a humorous format. To this end, researchers have found that humor can trigger increased cognitive processing in audiences. Because viewers have to expend mental energy on understanding the joke, advanced thought processes are required. In 2001, Schmidt found that “Perhaps the best explanation of the humor effect is that humorous material may lead to sustained attention and subsequent elaborative processes” (307). While debate still exists about how the jokes are processed and the implications of these processings, findings have been generally consistent that humor decreases an individual’s ability to argue against the presented message. In other words, a viewer may find that he expends all the cognitive energy he is willing to spend on “getting” the joke and, as such, is unwilling or unable to think through and possibly challenge the information being provided. The pros and cons of this type of information processing elaboration model are clearly outside the scope of this research project. What is relevant to this study, however, is the supposition from a growing body of cognitive psychology and political communication literature that humorous messages in an informal context can provide information that is appropriately processed to inform heuristic political judgments.

Using a constructionist approach to political communication research allows a researcher to use a variety of methodological tools and approaches. Rather than being limited by ontological assumptions, Gamson and those who have followed his lead explicitly endorse multimethodological research strategies in order to understand the various and complex relationships between message presentation and audience reception.

Why Not?: Other Major Mass Communication Theories

While constructionism offers a theoretical perspective that is desirable for both its attention to (and emphasis on) the audience or reader’s interpretation of media messages and the

acknowledgement that late night comedy programs can be a center for contesting mainstream images, it is important to also clarify why this theory was chosen over others. Four major theoretical approaches were considered and dismissed from this study: agenda-setting, priming, framing, and cultivation analysis.

Agenda-Setting

Agenda-setting posits that mass media brings issues and concepts to the forefront through the choices they make about what stories to cover and how to cover them. The earliest work in agenda-setting indicted that media effects were primarily grounded in bringing issues to the table, rather than directing us on what to eat once we sit down. In other words, they believed that the media do not necessarily tell us what to think, but they do tell us what to think about. Introduced in 1972 by Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw, agenda-setting research has traditionally used public opinion surveys and content analyses to compare the issues that are in the forefront of citizens' minds with what issues are being focused on by news media. Later research validated this claim and provided evidence of the cause-and-effect nature of the relationship. Originally centered on the salience of issues, more recent scholarship has expanded to include candidates and candidate attributes.

This recent work is beginning to refute the supposition that the media influence is limited to what to think about, particularly in light of the "second level" of agenda-setting. While the first level of agenda-setting (the salience of objects, or what to think about) is still being examined, other researchers are turning attention toward the second level of agenda-setting: the salience of attributes. This second level emphasizes the characteristics of the issues or candidates of level one, examining both cognitive (topical and substantive) and affective (evaluative and emphasizing valence).

The very structure of late night television comedy is inherently reactive to what's being covered in the news, making jokes about what's been covered and—in the case of “The Daily Show”—often calling attention to the news conventions utilized within mainstream media. In addition, agenda-setting often does not account for how audiences are reading the media images they encounter, instead measuring top-of-mind associations and feedback. Thus, while agenda-setting is an effective paradigm from which to examine traditional news and news conventions, a meaningful study of the effects of late night comedy needs to better encompass the alternative and counter-messages that can be interpreted from this content.

Priming

Related to agenda-setting is the concept of priming, which “builds on the argument that the media’s greatest impact is not in changing people’s minds, but in influencing what issues citizens consider when making political assessments” (Kelleher and Wolak, 2006). In other words, the media influence the criteria upon which citizens make their decisions—what pieces of information on which they focus. The concept of priming was introduced by Iyengar and Kinder in their seminal 1987 book “News that Matters”: *“By calling attention to some matters while ignoring others, television news influences the standards by which governments, presidents, policies, and candidates for public office are judged”* (emphasis in original text, 63). According to later work by Iyengar and Simon, “Priming is really an extension of agenda-setting, and addresses the impact of news coverage on the weight assigned to specific issues in making political judgments” (1993, 368). Ultimately, priming influences what is considered “top of mind” for citizens, and these data are then heavily weighted in making a political decision, including evaluations of presidential popularity, vote choice, and group evaluations (cf Kelleher and Wolak, 2006).

Notably, the priming approach was used by Moy, Xenos, and Hess (2005) to examine the impact of late night comedy shows when candidates make campaign appearances on these programs. While this study provided interesting insights into priming effects, it also provides evidence of the limitations of this theory: it's best applied to very specific incidences rather than to broader cultural effects. Because late night programs often take a cynical or skewed view of the political world, priming cannot sufficiently reflect these large scale and deep-rooted perspectives.

Cultivation

Developed by George Gerbner and his team at the Annenberg School for Communication at the University of Pennsylvania, cultivation contends that “television is the central cultural arm of American society...It's chief cultural function is to spread and stabilize social patterns, to cultivate not change but resistance to change. Television is a medium of the socialization of most people into standardized roles and behavior” (Gerbner and Gross, 1976, 175). Within this paradigm, Gerbner and his peers posit that the televisual reflection of culture leads to dystopian perceptions of society and social “reality,” by informing “basic assumptions about the ‘facts’ of life and standards of judgments on which conclusions are based” (175). Research in this tradition has investigated the effects of viewership on perceptions of society and social problems, including perceptions of race and violence, and has consistently indicated that those who watch the most television the most often tend to see the world as a more dangerous place than those who are less engaged with the medium. Scholars posit that this effect is related to the increased cognitive accessibility related to televised images, indicating that “heavy television viewing creates an accessibility bias, and that this bias has an effect on real-world frequency estimates of things often seen on television” (Shrum, 1996, 499).

When Gerbner and his team originally developed the Cultural Indicators project, in which cultivation analysis is grounded, they specifically cautioned researchers that it was impractical to apply this theory to a single genre. After all, the theory is premised on the idea that the same consistent messages are continually reinforced for viewers, regardless of the content form. Because the messages found in late night comedy television often counter the tone of traditional news media, they inherently refute the cultivation perspective.

Uses and Gratifications

Originally articulated by Blumler and Katz in 1974, uses and gratifications posits that audiences use media for specific gratifications, defined as the “rewards or satisfactions obtained by the individual” (Siraj, 2007). This approach “stresses the impact of individual differences on media uses and effects... [the] approach assumes that viewers’ unique social and psychological circumstances help shape their needs, which are manifested in motives to communicate” (Haridakis, 2006, 229-230). This marks a change from other media-effects theories in that it credits the audience with being active decision makers and participants in the media process, rather than focusing almost exclusively on how the media influences a faceless public. The impact of audiences characteristics on media effects (usually negative) are of primary concern, including such characteristics as gender, locus of control, experience with crime, motivation, perceived realism, and involvement with the medium and its messages. By understanding the impact of these audience characteristics, researchers are better suited to understand why audiences make the media choices they do and the potential effects that can ensue.

Uses and gratifications is a natural fit for this type of investigation, particularly since one of the lingering debates in late night comedy research is whether audiences are turning in for information or entertainment. While this is certainly an important question, this approach does

not go far enough in understanding how audiences engage with and construct meaning around the content they choose to use. As such, it is not ideally suited to this research agenda.

Choosing Constructionism

While each of these mass communication theories provides a useful lens for examining media effects on audiences or—in the case of uses and gratifications—how audiences' needs impact media decisions, none of them adequately account for both sides of the media/audience coin. Rather than solely focusing on either media or audience, constructionism explicitly engages with audiences to understand how they assign meaning to content and translate these data into their constructed understandings of society. This duality allows for a more nuanced examination and understanding of the political effects of late night comedy and thus the constructionist paradigm is clearly the theoretical approach best suited to this investigation. With this approach in mind, a multimethodological research design that allows for the voices of readers to be heard and included is necessary.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

Methodology and Research Questions

Previous research provides an important springboard for an examination of late night comedy's impact on its audience, but this emergent area requires a substantive examination that is grounded in constructionism. As this theoretical perspective requires, a multi-methodological approach was used for this study: first, secondary data were examined to understand the political and mediated variables that influence viewership of late night comedy programs; second, depth interviews and focus groups were conducted with heavy viewers of late night programs in order to understand how they assign meaning to political content and how these data are incorporated into their existing political schema.

Understanding the Late Night Audience: Quantitative Methods

The emergence of “soft news” and entertainment-oriented programming as valid, recognized, and legitimate sources of political information necessitates an in-depth understanding of these audiences. Young and Tisinger's (2006) research was the first to parse apart differences between late LNTS and TDS audiences, using data collected in 2004. However, as these programs continue to gain attention as political news sources and attain mainstream recognition, it is possible that the formation of the audience will shift. In addition, newer surveys are accounting for the rise in attention (both scholarly and popular) to these programs by including more specific measures administered to the entire sample, allowing for a more robust analysis. As such, an investigation into the makeup of the core audiences for these programs is in order.

Using the 2006 Biennial Media Consumption dataset provided by the Pew Center for People and the Press, I develop a quantifiable effects model, designed to identify what

relationship exists between late night viewership and political knowledge, interest, and participation, as well as late night viewership and perceptions of/usage of mainstream media. Separate ordered logit models are created for LNTS and TDS viewers, each addressing the following research questions:

- **RQ₁:** Does a relationship exist between viewership of late night comedy programs and political knowledge, interest, and participation? What is the nature of this relationship?
- **RQ₂:** Does a relationship exist between viewership of late night comedy programs and perceptions of/usage of mainstream media? What is the nature of this relationship?

In testing these hypotheses, I use the .05 level of significance, which is the standard commonly held in social science research.

This iteration of the Biennial Media Consumption dataset allows for greater nuance in examination of late night television audiences than in the past. In 2000, the survey had one general late night variable, citing Leno, Letterman, and “The Daily Show” as examples. In 2002, “The Daily Show” was given its own variable, albeit in a split sample form (meaning that only a portion of the total respondent pool was asked about viewership of this program). While this provided researchers with a more refined tool to understand how these audiences may differ, the small sample size limited investigation among viewers. In the 2004 dataset, both late night talk shows and “The Daily Show” are included as separate variables and are administered to the entire survey sample.

While this dataset provides substantial data to examine media effects, two limitations should be noted for the purposes of this study. First, “Late Night with Conan O’Brien” is not included in the question wording as an example of a late night talk show (only Leno and Letterman are explicitly identified). Second, the use of a split sample to cover some of the news media usage variables (including internet news and newsmagazines) means that testing the relationship between usage of those media and late night television viewership is somewhat

limited. While these limitations merit attention, they do not negate the overall value of having access to this sort of dataset.

Constructing Meaning: Qualitative Methods

The qualitative research component of this project was designed to understand how viewers construct meaning around program content as well as how these data are used to shape and inform political schema. As such, two methods were utilized in tandem. First, heavy viewers participated in one-on-one in-depth interviews. Second, interview respondents were invited back to participate in a focus group and asked to bring a friend with them.

Qualitative research was conducted in two markets in Ohio, selected to minimize regional biases as much as possible. These markets included Cleveland (urban, northern) and Athens (rural, southern). Both cities are known to lean Democratic, an important consideration when examining audiences for late night comedy programs (known to be more liberal than the average citizen). In total, twenty-one interviews were conducted with heavy TDS viewers and twenty were conducted with heavy viewers of late night talk shows, representing a mix of Leno, Letterman, and Conan viewers. Because previous research indicates that the core audiences of late night comedy shows tend to be younger, the first round of interviews were conducted with respondents in the younger age category (18-25 years old). Because redundancy was reached early in the process, the age parameters were extended in the second market (Cleveland) to include those 26 through 40. Respondents were recruited via online postings (including MySpace interest groups and Craigs List) and through college newspapers. Men were deliberately oversampled for both program categories.

While Conan O'Brien was not included in the late night talk show variable in the Pew Center Biennial Media Consumption dataset, I decided to include the program within the qualitative research component of this dissertation research for two primary reasons. First, the

program is popular with younger, male audiences (an oversampled group) in this research. Second, Conan's impending move to a primary late night talk show time slot currently occupied by Leno and Letterman (11:35 Eastern, immediately following local news broadcasts) underscores the importance of understanding his audience. Finally, Conan is notable for his longevity; his tenure has far outlasted most "late late" show hosts, which speaks to his importance as a cultural figure.

Depth Interviews

The first qualitative stage was depth interviews. These interviews lasted approximately one hour, and included exposure to and discussion of politically-oriented clips from their program of choice. Interviews were designed to understand four research questions:

- **RQ₃:** How are the LNTS and TDS viewers similar and different in terms of political sophistication?
- **RQ₄:** What other resources do respondents incorporate and cite?
- **RQ₅:** Where do respondents locate their program in terms of their media consumption and preferences? In other words, do they consider the program to be an entertaining news source, or an entertainment show that happens to have political content?
- **RQ₆:** How do respondents construct meaning around the political information conveyed on these programs?

Interviews were conducted in public spaces, usually local coffee houses.

In order to examine the interpersonal dynamic, interviewees were asked to participate in a second stage of research. They returned for a focus group, and were asked to bring someone with whom they regularly talk about politics and content on the program of their choice. "Buddy" or "friendship" groups are a commonly used methodology in applied research, utilized when a researcher wants to tap into the everyday discussions that are pertinent to the topic at hand. A total of eight groups were held (four in each market). Full-size groups were held in Athens, the first research market. After considering the data collected during those groups, I opted to adjust

the group size for Cleveland. Due to the differences in experience and knowledge among participants, mini-groups (with three-to-five respondents per group) were deemed to be a more effective method for investigating our research questions:

- **RQ₇**: How is construction of meaning different in a group dynamic than within the depth interview format?
- **RQ₈**: How do conversations vary between *The Daily Show* audiences and those of late night talk shows?
- **RQ₉**: How are the reported differences in political sophistication manifested during group discussions?

Most Americans are well aware of the societal standards of “good citizenship,” and thus any qualitative research that attempts to examine knowledge or perceptions must be conducted with sensitivity and caution. In order to ensure that respondents felt comfortable giving honest answers within an interpersonal environment that included peers, several research techniques were employed. First, the political focus of the groups was not immediately made evident to participants. While the primary respondents had already been interviewed (and those interviews were explicitly politically-centered), the focus groups were introduced as opportunities to talk about late night talk shows. In order to allow all respondents to fully engage and participate, I opened up the “current events” section to anything and everything that they perceived to be relevant, including (but not limited to) sports and entertainment. This allowed all respondents to offer contributions to the overall discussion and feel confident that their participation was valuable to the overall research. In addition, throughout the discussion, non-political contributions were welcomed to the overall discourse. Within this framework, respondents could feel comfortable showing off their expertise in some areas while exposing their limitations in others. As a researcher, this allowed for a more comprehensive analysis of both the words that were spoken and their underlying meanings.

Over the course of these groups, respondents were asked to participate in several projective exercises designed to uncover feelings and motivations about which they may have been unaware. These exercises included a “projective party,” wherein participants describe what it would be like to be invited to a party thrown by each of the hosts included in this research. Questions ranged from how they would feel at various times (when the invitation arrives, walking in, at the end of the party, etc.) to what they would wear, what food and drinks would be served, what other guests would be present, and what would be discussed. These types of projective exercises are extremely helpful for uncovering insights into how viewers perceive programs and hosts in relation to themselves, and often lead to deeper discussions than would have been possible otherwise. In addition, clips from each of the four programs were shown and discussed. These conversations provided fruitful insights into how program content and design affects meaning construction, particularly since they provided a point of comparison for the four programs included in this research.

It is important to consider qualitative findings within context of the political climate at the time of data collection (November 2006-January 2007). The 2006 midterm election was hotly contested, with Congressional dominance hanging in the balance. This election came at a difficult time for the Republican Party, which had enjoyed a majority in both the House and Senate for over a decade. The incumbent president—George W. Bush—had experienced a reversal of fortune since his 2004 re-election, and his approval ratings were consistently low. This was in large part attributed to the public’s weakening support for the war in Iraq, with comparisons to the Vietnam conflict and claims of a “quagmire” and “civil war” ringing in the press. The political stage was ripe for debate, and both parties clamored for voter support across the nation.

This situation was magnified in Ohio, a state long recognized for being one of the few truly “purple” states in the nation. While the state had voted for Bush in both the 2000 and 2004 campaigns, the Republican Party was considered extremely vulnerable in this election season. Two key positions with national implications were contested. First, sitting Senator Mike DeWine—a first-term senator who previously had enjoyed a lengthy tenure in the House—was feeling the repercussions of the public’s dismay with the Republican Party, and his previously secure seat was now at risk. Second, while incumbent Governor Bob Taft was not running for re-election due to term limits, his position within the state was tenuous at best: after a string of scandals and a midterm conviction on misdemeanor ethics violations, Taft’s approval ratings had sunk to single digits.¹ The Republicans’ national political problems also were magnified in the Buckeye State, with numerous scandals regularly splashed across national, state, and local news media. A prominent Republican supporter had been indicted in a rare coin scandal, costing the state millions of dollars, and this same supporter was charged with laundering money for the Bush campaign. In addition, Congressman Bob Ney was implicated in the Jack Abramoff lobbying scandal and was forced to resign his office.

News coverage of the election, the issues, and the players were constant, and an abundance of national attention was paid to Ohio and its electoral options. In fact, Ohio’s importance to this election was reinforced by “The Daily Show,” with Stewart and his team opting to come to the state capital, Columbus, to broadcast their “Midwest Midterm Midtacular” in the week prior to Election Day. It was within this political and media climate that the interviews for this research study were conducted.

¹ In a Zogby poll taken in November 2005, only 6.5% of Ohio voters rated Taft very or somewhat favorably; only 3% rated his job performance as good or excellent (Tankersley 2005).

Data Analysis

Qualitative data were analyzed with the use of N*Vivo software, produced by QSR International. A program frequently used by social scientists in fields such as anthropology and sociology, N*Vivo helps researchers immerse themselves in the data in order to examine findings, draw connections, and uncover insights. After data were collected, all interviews and groups were transcribed into Microsoft Word and then uploaded into N*Vivo. Each interview was classified according to six characteristics: age, education, gender, late night television program, location, and proximity to election. Focus groups were categorized by late night television program (including mixed), group size, and proximity to election.

Each file was then reviewed and coded according to the topic and the approach. Coding categories (or “nodes” in the terminology used by N*Vivo) were developed organically and remained fluid throughout the process, reviewed and redefined as needed. Nodes were first developed independently, but during the coding process I would periodically review and update the nodes, organizing them into broader categories (known as “tree nodes”). This process helped to clarify relationships and encouraged creative analysis of how data connect across ideas. Ultimately, a total of 78 nodes were organized into nine “tree nodes”: four were specific to the programs themselves (Conan, Leno, Letterman, and TDS), along with general talk shows, issues, news, politicians, and politics.

This process served two important and related purposes: first, this allowed me to examine and understand respondents on their own terms, reviewing their responses and drawing connections within each interview in order to understand their personal political perspectives as well as how they construct meaning around political information. Second, this facilitated an efficient and comprehensive analysis across respondents, ensuring that I could effectively

explore and understand the overarching phenomena surrounding the relationship between late night television programs, politics, and media.

CHAPTER 4: QUANTITATIVE FINDINGS

As evidenced by the literature review, research on late night television comedy audiences has undergone several shifts in focus. The ways these audiences have been defined and understood are many and varied, leading to conflicting findings and uncertain assumptions. With the release of the 2006 Biennial Media Consumption dataset, however, scholars are presented with an opportunity to look at these audiences with more specific measures than what was publicly available in the past. Because this survey includes full-scale, separate variables for both late night talk show viewership and “The Daily Show,” I can now examine these audiences independently from each other. Therefore, this chapter defines two specific audiences: first, late night talk show viewers (who watch Leno, Letterman, and Conan), and second, “The Daily Show” viewers. By comparing the mean differences between viewers and non-viewers for each, I begin to draw a picture of what viewers for these programs are like, both demographically and in terms of political engagement.

While descriptions of these audiences are a helpful means of understanding who are watching these programs, that level of analysis does not help answer some of the key questions raised both in the popular press and academic research about the political effects of late night television comedy. In order to begin to address these challenges, this chapter will also present ordered logit regression models that examine how two key areas—political engagement and media usage—inform viewership of late night talk shows (LNTS) and “The Daily Show” (TDS). While previous research has linked news usage with political engagement, I opt to treat them as separate entities in order to more clearly parse and understand how each category of variables predicts viewership.

The political engagement models estimate the effects of variables related to political knowledge, political interest (how closely specific news stories and types of news are followed), political preferences, and political participation. The media effects models estimate the effects of general media variables, usage of news media, usage of specific news programs, and usage of publications. Unlike the political interest variables utilized in the political engagement model (which focus on how closely respondents follow certain types of news), the media usage variables specifically address frequency of use. Two additional iterations of the media effects models are presented with each: Model 2 includes two additional news media variables, the Internet and newsmagazines; Model 3 includes a summary of online variables. All models include estimates for the effects of standard demographic and socioeconomic variables.

This chapter and these data play an essential role in addressing the overarching goal of this research—i.e., understanding the political effects of late night television comedy. Only by discovering what factors have an effect on viewership can we truly begin a discussion about the effects of these programs. In addition, these results provide a strong foundation for understanding and interpreting the qualitative findings presented in the next chapter.

Before presenting data, I first identify and define the variables that are used in this analysis. After variables are introduced, I present and discuss the mean differences and regression models for LNTS viewers, followed by an analysis for similar data for TDS viewers. A summary of all variables used in this chapter is found in Appendix A. For all variables in which a direction is hypothesized (identified by the inclusion of a “plus” or “minus” sign after the variable in each table) and the coefficient is in the expected direction, a one-tailed test is used. For all other variables, a two-tailed test is used. For all models, variance inflation factors were examined to address potential concerns about multicollinearity, but in no case did I find problematic evidence of multicollinearity. It is important to note that these data are not intended

to provide evidence of causal order or establish causation in any way. Rather, the information presented in this chapter provide us with two opportunities: first, to understand the audiences of late night television programs by comparing viewers with non-viewers; and second, to help us begin to understand the relationships between viewership and political engagement and news media usage.

Dependent Variable: Late Night Talk Show Viewership

Late night talk show (LNTS) viewership is measured by a specific variable within a battery designed to measure behavior around various media sources. The question is worded as such: “Now I’d like to know how often you watch or listen to certain TV and radio programs. For each that I read, tell me if you watch or listen to it regularly, sometimes, hardly ever, or never. (First) how often do you...” Four responses are included in these results, recoded to reflect the highest usage to lowest: regularly (3), sometimes (2), hardly ever (1), or never (0). Any “don’t know” responses are recoded as system missing. This same coding scheme is used for all questions in this battery. In total, thirteen media sources and programs are asked of the entire sample, and an additional seven are asked only on Form 1B. Late night talk show viewership is determined by responses to option *r*, “Watch late night TV shows such as David Letterman and Jay Leno.” Please note that Conan O’Brien is not included in this variable, and Letterman and Leno are treated as interchangeable.

Dependent Variable: “The Daily Show” Viewership

Viewership of “The Daily Show” (TDS) is gauged by response to a TDS-specific variable. It is included in a separate battery of questions that follows the series delineated above that includes the LNTS measure. Respondents are asked, “Now I’d like to ask you about some other television and radio programs. For each that I read, tell me if you watch or listen to it regularly, sometimes, hardly ever, or never. (First) how often do you...” Five questions are asked

in total, and responses are coded according to the same four-point scale described above. This is the first iteration of Pew’s Biennial Media Consumption Survey to administer this question to the entire sample; previous versions had incorporated TDS with other late night programs (2002) or included it as part of a split-sample form (2004).

Independent Variables: Demographic and Socioeconomic

Age. Age is likely central to understanding these audiences and their relationships with political engagement and news media usage, since previous research indicates LNTS and TDS viewers tend to be younger than non-viewers. This measure is also important because research historically has shown that political knowledge and participation—as well as news media viewership and interest—increase with age. This variable is measured as the chronological number of years since birth, and I hypothesize that age will again be negatively associated with LNTS and TDS viewership in all models.

Education. Educational attainment is measured according to the last grade or class the respondent completed in school, ranging from 0 (none, or grade 1-8) to 7 (post-graduate training or professional schooling after college [e.g., toward a master’s degree or Ph.D.; law or medical school]). Because previous research has had mixed results on the impact of education on viewership, no direction is hypothesized for the impact of education on viewership of either program.

Race. This dataset measures race as a series of dichotomous variables, including white, black, Hispanic, Asian, and other. All race variables are recoded as either identifying as a member of that race (1) or not (0). In order to gauge the impact of race on viewership, a dichotomous variable for the largest group—i.e., white—is used in the models. Previous research has not uncovered any significant relationship between viewership of late night programming and race, and thus no direction is hypothesized.

Income. Thus far, income levels have not been examined specifically within late night television programming research; therefore, this variable does not have an expected direction within these models. In order to estimate family income in 2005, these data use a nine-point scale, ranging from less than \$10,000 (0) to \$150,000 or more (8). Respondents who refused to provide an answer are recoded as system missing. Because previous research has not examined the income variable, no direction is hypothesized for the effect of this variable on viewership of late night comedy programming.

Sex. Sex is measured as a dichotomous variable, coded 1 for women and 0 for men. According to previous research, males are much more likely than females to be LNTS and TDS viewers. As a result, I expect a negative association within all models.

Independent Variables: Political Engagement

Political Knowledge. Three separate knowledge-related questions are included in this survey: (1) which party currently holds a majority in the House of Representatives (correct answer: Republicans); (2) the name of the Secretary of State (Condoleezza Rice); and (3) the name of the president of Russia (Vladimir Putin). Responses are recoded as dichotomous variables: 1 if the respondent knows the correct answer, 0 if he does not. The three knowledge variables were summed to create an additive scale (“know all”), ranging from 0 (none of the knowledge questions answered correctly) to 3 (all of the knowledge questions answered correctly). Because findings have been mixed in previous research, no relationship is hypothesized.

Political Interest. Political interest is measured in two categories with a focus on how interest is manifested through news choices and behaviors. The first category includes variables that focus on how closely respondents follow news about certain stories. Three stories are asked of all respondents over the course of the survey: the current situation in Iraq, candidates and

election campaigns in their state or district, and the current high price of gasoline. Two additional stories are added for surveys administered from May 2-21 only: Iran's nuclear research program, and reports that the National Security Agency has been collecting telephone records of millions of American citizens. Respondents are asked to indicate if they followed each of these stories very closely (3), fairly closely (2), not too closely (1), or not at all closely (0). Because the latter two questions are only asked for a portion of the survey, they are not included in the political engagement models.

The second category utilized to measure political interest focuses specifically on types of news (as opposed to specific stories). Respondents are asked, "Now, I'm going to read you a list of different types of news. Please tell me how closely you follow this type of news either in the newspaper, on television, radio or the Internet..." Response options are the same as those for specific stories, ranging from 0 (not at all closely) to 3 (very closely). These questions are only asked on Form 1; as such, the political engagement models have a smaller sample size than other models presented in this chapter. In total, fourteen types of news are included in the survey and eight are selected for inclusion in this study: international, political figures and events in Washington, local government, people and events in the respondent's community, sports, entertainment, crime, and culture and the arts. While they are left as individual variables when examining the difference between viewers and non-viewers, they are grouped into three categories for inclusion in the ordered logit models: *hard news* (including international news and Washington), *local news* (local government, community, and crime), and *soft news* (sports, entertainment, and culture and the arts). These categories are created by summing each individual variable into its umbrella group (i.e., sports, entertainment, and culture and the arts are summed together to create the "soft news" category). Based on previous research that indicates

LNTS and TDS viewers have high levels of political interest, I hypothesize a positive effect of these variables on the dependent variables.

Political Preferences. Political preferences are gauged by two variables. The first variable, party identification, is generated from two separate questions. First, respondents are asked, “In politics TODAY, do you consider yourself a Republican, Democrat, or Independent?” Any respondents who indicate they have no preference, prefer another party, or do not know are excluded from analysis. If a respondent indicates he considers himself to be an Independent, a second question is posed: “As of today, do you lean more to the Republican Party or more to the Democratic Party?” For the purpose of this analysis, these two questions are combined to create a five-point scale, ranging from 0 (strong Republican) to 4 (strong Democrat). Based on previous research, I hypothesize that there will be a strong positive relationship between viewership of late night programming and party identification (i.e., being a Democrat will predict viewership of these programs). Respondents’ ideological perspectives are also included, ranging from very conservative (0) to very liberal (4). As is the case with party identification, I hypothesize that liberalism will predict viewership of both LNTS and TDS.

Political Participation. Two measures are used to gauge political participation: respondents’ presidential vote in 2004, and how often respondents vote. First, respondents are asked if they voted in 2004; those who respond affirmatively are asked a follow-up question about the candidate for whom they cast their ballot. These responses are recoded into dichotomous variables for Bush and Kerry, with each variable coded 1 for respondents who voted for the candidate, and 0 otherwise. The Kerry variable is used as a proxy for the presidential vote in each ordered logit model, and a positive relationship is hypothesized. In addition, respondents are asked, “How often would you say you vote...” with response options

ranging from 0 (never) to 4 (nearly always). Based on previous research, I hypothesize that there will be a negative relationship between vote frequency and viewership of late night programs.

Independent Variables: Media

General Media Variables. To understand how people watch news, four separate questions are included. First, respondents are read a series of five statements about the news and asked how strongly they agree with each, ranging from 0 (completely disagree) to 3 (completely agree). One statement in particular is pertinent to these research questions, “I find that I often watch the news with my remote control in hand, flipping to other channels when I’m not interested in the topic.” This variable is included to understand how respondents are experiencing news, whether they are interested in specific topics or news as a whole. I expect LNTS viewers to have a positive relationship with this variable (flipping channels when they are not interested in a topic), but I hypothesize TDS viewers will have the opposite (negative) relationship.

Previous research (notably Young and Tisinger, 2005) indicate that late night comedy viewers often are using multiple news sources rather than relying solely on these comedy programs for their political information. As such, variables addressing three aspects of news viewership are included in this model: enjoyment of news, news viewing routines, and preferences for particular news channels. To address the first concept, respondents are asked, “How much do you enjoy keeping up with the news—a lot, some, not much, or not at all?” Responses are coded from 0 (not at all) to 3 (a lot). This variable is included to help illuminate how respondents perceive news, particularly in light of the questions surrounding the informational versus entertainment benefits of late night television comedy programs, and I hypothesize that this variable will have a positive effect on viewership. To gauge typical news behavior, responses are included for the following question: “Are you more the kind of person who watches or listens to the news at regular times, or are you more the kind of person who

checks in on the news from time to time?” Responses are coded 0 for checks in on the news and 1 for watch/listen at regular times. This variable is pertinent to this study because it addresses the habits and routines respondents hold around news viewership, and I predict that this will have a positive effect on viewership (i.e., viewers tune in to news at regular times). Finally, respondents are asked, “Which comes closer to describing your view of the news media: all the news media are pretty much the same to me OR there are a few news sources I trust more than others.” Trusting some sources more than others is coded 0, and perceiving news media to be interchangeable is coded 1; I hypothesize that this has a positive effect on viewership. While the wording of this question is somewhat problematic since “trust in media” is only articulated in the second response option, the concept this question represents—established preferences for specific media outlets—is important to the questions at hand and thus is included.

Usage of News Media. Media usage is measured as a dichotomous variable by medium, with respondents asked if they “happen to (read/watch/listen to medium) regularly, or not?” Responses are coded 1 (yes) or 0 (no). Three media items are asked of the entire sample: newspaper, television news, and radio news. Two additional media relevant to this study are asked only on Form 2: Internet news and newsmagazines. As such, a second model that includes these independent variables (but with a smaller sample size) is also estimated. Because previous research has indicated that late night television viewers are more likely to tune in to all forms of media, I hypothesize that a positive relationship will exist between all news media variables and viewership.

Usage of News Programs. In order to understand what types of programs respondents watch or listen to, two batteries of questions are used (these batteries also include variables for late night talk shows and “The Daily Show”). For each set of programs, respondents are asked to indicate how often they watch or listen to each program, ranging from 0 (never) to 3 (regularly).

As is the case with LNTS and TDS variables, any “don’t know” responses are recoded as system missing. Due to the sheer number of programs included in this analysis, variables are grouped into five categories: (1) *television news* (national nightly network news on CBS, ABC, or NBC; cable news channels such as CNN, MSNBC, or the Fox News CABLE [sic] channel; television news magazine shows such as “60 Minutes,” “20/20,” or “Dateline”; Sunday morning news shows such as “Meet the Press,” “This Week,” or “Face the Nation”; “Larry King Live”; and “The O’Reilly Factor” with Bill O’Reilly); (2) *local news* (defined as “local news about your viewing area which [sic] usually comes on before or after the national news in the evening and again later at night); (3) *public news* (C-SPAN, National Public Radio, and “NewsHour” with Jim Lehrer); (4) *soft news* (the Weather Channel, sports news on ESPN, TV shows such as “Entertainment Tonight” or “Access Hollywood,” and morning shows such as “The Today Show,” “Good Morning America” or “The Early Show”); and (5) *radio news* (Rush Limbaugh’s radio show and religious radio shows such as “Focus on the Family”). To create each grouping, responses are summed to create a new variable (i.e., the variables C-SPAN, National Public Radio, and “NewsHour” with Jim Lehrer are summed to create a new “public news” variable). As is the case with news media, I hypothesize a positive relationship exists between each of these variables and viewership of late night comedy programs.

Usage of Publications. Respondents are asked to indicate how often they read a series of publications, ranging from 0 (never) to 3 (regularly). Using the same summing process described above, these publications are collapsed into three categories: (1) *highbrow* (news magazines such as Time, U.S. News, or Newsweek, business magazines such as Fortune or Forbes, magazines such as The Atlantic, Harpers, or The New Yorker, and political magazines such as The Weekly Standard or The New Republic); (2) *entertainment* (including The National Enquirer, The Sun, or Star Magazine and personality magazines such as People); and (3) *newspapers* (a daily

newspaper and local weekly community newspapers). In order to gauge online readership, some respondents are asked (via Form 2) to report their usage of online publications (Internet news websites such as Google News, AOL News, or Yahoo News; network TV news websites such as CNN.com, ABCnews.com, or MSNBC.com; the websites of major national newspapers such as USA Today.com, New York Times.com, or the Wall Street Journal online; the Internet websites of local newspapers; the Internet websites of local TV stations; other kinds of online news magazines and opinion sites such as Slate.com or the National Review online; and online blogs where people discuss events in the news). In order to assess the impact of this online news variable, a third model that includes this variable (again, with a smaller sample size) also is estimated.

I begin our examination of these audiences with a comparison of viewers of late night talk shows with non-viewers through mean differences. After this brief description, ordered logit regression models will answer the key research questions that focus on LNTS viewers. Once I have discussed findings for LNTS viewers, I then will move on to TDS viewers.

Late Night Talk Show (LNTS) Viewers

Overview of Audience

To create the two groups utilized in the comparison of mean differences below, respondents are sorted into two categories based on their responses to the late night talk show measure: viewers (i.e., those who indicated they “regularly” or “sometimes” watch late night TV shows such as David Letterman and Jay Leno) and non-viewers (i.e., those who “hardly ever” or “never” watch late night TV shows). While these data present an excellent overview of LNTS viewers compared to non-viewers, crosstabulations can provide additional detail. As such, a comprehensive table including relevant crosstabulations is presented in Appendix B.1.

Demographic and Socioeconomic Variables

In Table 4.1 I present the mean values for the socioeconomic and demographic independent variables, calculated separately for “viewers” and “non-viewers,” as well as the difference in means tests for each of the independent variables. As the mean differences indicate, LNTS viewers significantly differ from non-viewers on only one socioeconomic or demographic variable: age, with viewers significantly more likely to be young than non-viewers ($p = <.01$). This is somewhat surprising, since previous research clearly indicated that there should also be a significant difference in terms of sex, with males more likely than females to watch these types of programs. While the difference is in the expected (negative) direction, it does not reach the scientific standard set for this study ($p < .05$).

Table 4.1. Differences of means of late night talk show viewers and non-viewers for socioeconomic and demographic variables, Pew Center’s Biennial Media Consumption Dataset (June 2006)

	Mean Values		Difference	t-ratio	N
	Viewers	Non-Viewers			
Socioeconomic/Demographic					
Sex (-)	0.541	0.571	-0.030	-1.596*	3196
Age (-)	48.225	50.540	-2.315	-3.408***	3114
Education	3.571	3.601	-0.030	-0.547	3167
Income	4.183	4.186	-0.003	-0.039	2620
Race					
White	0.817	0.827	-0.010	-0.726	3141
Black	0.111	0.111	-0.000	-0.059	3141
Hispanic	0.061	0.051	0.010	1.234	3171
Asian	0.019	0.015	0.004	0.875	3141
Other/mixed	0.052	0.046	0.006	0.843	3141
Employment					
Full-time	0.468	0.494	-0.026	-1.409	3162
Part-time	0.091	0.109	0.018	1.515	3162
Unemployed	0.389	0.397	0.008	0.450	3162

*** prob < .01
 ** prob < .05
 * prob < .10

Political Engagement Variables

In Table 4.2 I present the mean values for the political engagement variables, again calculated separately for “viewers” and “non-viewers,” as well as the difference in means tests for these independent variables.

Table 4.2. Differences of means of late night talk show viewers and non-viewers for political engagement variables, Pew Center’s Biennial Media Consumption Dataset (June 2006)

	Mean Values		Difference	t-ratio	N
	Viewers	Non-Viewers			
Political Participation					
Registered to vote (-)	0.848	0.834	0.014	1.033	3169
Voted in '04 (-)	0.794	0.798	-0.004	-0.281	3157
How often vote (-)	3.090	3.100	-0.010	-0.223	3148
Ideology					
Party Identification (+)	2.240	2.010	0.230	3.375***	2899
Ideology (+)	1.830	1.774	0.056	1.510*	2943
Voted for Bush (-)	0.465	0.552	-0.087	-3.912***	2311
Voted for Kerry (+)	0.314	0.397	-0.083	3.791***	2311
Voted for other cand.	0.048	0.051	-0.003	-0.357	2311

*** prob < .01

** prob < .05

* prob < .10

As we see in Table 2, when it comes to variables related to political engagement (participation, ideology, and knowledge), more differentiation emerges between LNTS viewers and non-viewers. While late night talk show viewers are not significantly more likely to participate in politics (including registration, voting in the 2004 Presidential election, or frequency of voting), they are significantly more likely to identify themselves as Democrats ($p < .01$) and to have voted for Kerry ($p < .01$) and not to have voted for Bush ($p < .01$). While the coefficient for ideology is in the expected positive direction, it stops short of achieving conventional levels of statistical significance ($p < .10$), suggesting that liberals and conservatives are not different in how much they view late night talk shows. Considered in context with the

high significance of party identification and presidential vote in '04, however, this ideology finding indicates that LNTS viewers do not necessarily “connect the dots” when it comes to politics and their personal perspectives.

Political Interest Variables

In Table 4.3 I present the mean political interests and news type values for LNTS viewers and non-viewers. When it comes to political interest, LNTS viewers claim to be much more interested in politically relevant news than non-viewers.

Table 4.3. Differences of means of late night talk show viewers and non-viewers for political interest variables, Pew Center’s Biennial Media Consumption Dataset (June 2006)

	Mean Values		Difference	t-ratio	N
	Viewers	Non-Viewers			
Political Interest					
Iraq	2.460	2.214	0.246	5.783***	1999
Candidates	1.683	1.425	0.258	5.185***	1996
Gas	2.635	2.422	0.213	5.460***	1993
Iran	1.411	1.169	0.242	4.040***	1493
NSA	2.004	1.780	0.224	2.795***	817
Types of News					
International	1.784	1.622	0.162	3.543***	2000
National	1.906	1.622	0.284	6.321***	1998
Local	1.881	1.700	0.181	3.902***	2002
Community	2.012	1.845	0.167	3.712***	1996
Sports	1.546	1.260	0.286	5.203***	2004
Entertainment	1.606	1.240	0.366	8.136***	2000
Arts/Culture	1.343	1.160	0.183	3.845***	1997
Crime	2.028	1.841	0.187	4.156***	1996

*** prob < .01

** prob < .05

* prob < .10

For all five news stories included in this survey—the war in Iraq, candidates in their state and district, the high price of gas, Iran’s nuclear program, and the National Security Agency’s collecting telephone records—LNTS viewers are significantly more likely than non-viewers to

indicate that they closely follow the stories (all at $p < .01$). When looking strictly at the mean values for viewers, the news stories that most hold their attention are the war in Iraq (2.460) and gas prices (2.635), while candidates in their state/district (1.683) and Iran (1.411) are much lower. When comparing audience members with non-viewers, the most striking difference is in terms of entertainment news (8.136), followed by national news (6.321) and sports (5.203).

In addition, these viewers are also much more likely than non-viewers to indicate that they regularly follow most types of news, including both traditional “hard news” (international and national) as well as “soft” (entertainment and sports). Viewers are most interested in news about crime (2.028), their community (2.012), and national news (1.906), while news about sports (1.546) and arts and culture (1.343) are the least closely followed.

Political Knowledge Variables

Despite this professed interest in news, the summary results presented in Table 4.4 demonstrate that LNTS viewers do not necessarily exhibit a higher level of political knowledge than non-viewers.

Table 4.4. Differences of means of late night viewers and non-viewers for knowledge-related variables, Pew Center’s Biennial Media Consumption Dataset (June 2006)

	Mean Values		Difference	t-ratio	N
	Viewers	Non-Viewers			
Political Knowledge					
House majority	0.738	0.664	0.074	3.320**	2006
Sec of State’s name	0.502	0.457	0.045	1.896*	2006
Russian president	0.388	0.352	0.036	1.581	2006
Know all (scale: 0-3)	0.995	0.935	0.060	1.380	3196

*** prob < .01

** prob < .05

* prob < .10

Of the three questions asked to gauge political knowledge, late night talk show viewers are significantly more likely to know the correct answer to only one: the party that has the majority in the House of Representatives ($p < .01$). While not considered statistically significant within the parameters of this research, findings do indicate that there is a possibility that viewers are more likely than non-viewers to know the name of the Secretary of State ($p < .10$); since this does not achieve significance, however, we cannot assume that viewers are more likely to know this name than non-viewers. Likewise, viewers are not more likely than non-viewers to know the name of the Russian president. Not surprisingly, viewers are not more likely than non-viewers to give the correct answers to all of the knowledge questions (the “know all” variable). It is important to note that the one question for which viewers are significantly more likely to know the correct response differs from the other knowledge-assessment variables in two key ways: first, it is a question that has two obvious possible answers (Democrats or Republicans), and thus can be guessed much more easily than the other two questions; second, this question is the most nationally relevant gauge used in the survey.

Summary: Differences of Means

When considered in their totality, these mean differences help to contrast late night talk show viewers with their non-viewing counterparts. Viewers are younger, Democratic, and voted for Kerry in the 2004 Presidential election. These vote and party claims do not necessarily translate into a deeper ideological affiliation, however, since viewers are not more likely to consider themselves “liberal” than non-viewers. This could indicate that these viewers do not hold deeply rooted political perspectives; instead, their politics can shift easily between election periods.

Late night talk show viewers are much more likely to pay (or claim to pay) attention to news stories and categories across the board. Not all news types are equal for this group,

however: the biggest difference is found in entertainment news, followed by national news; the smallest difference is found in international news. Notably, this news interest does not necessarily translate into increased knowledge. In fact, viewers evidence significantly more political knowledge on only one question: which party holds a majority in the House of Representatives. While this is only one question on one survey, this does suggest that LNTS viewers are more focused on and aware of national issues than international events (such as the situation in Iran). The one international exception is the war in Iraq, which I would argue constitutes a domestic issue in that it overtly and directly relates to Americans through the loss of troops and consistent discourse over the United States' continued involvement with the war.

LNTS and Political Engagement

- **RQ₁: Does a relationship exist between viewership of traditional late night talk shows and political knowledge, interest, and participation? What is the nature of this relationship?**

In order to understand the relationship between late night talk show viewership and political engagement, I estimate a full model of viewership, with levels of viewership depicted as a function of demographic and socioeconomic variables as well as those associated with political knowledge, interest, preferences, and participation. This model is designed to gauge how well each of these variables predicts LNTS viewership and, when taken as a whole, can help us better understand the relationship between viewership and political engagement. As is the case with all models that will be presented in this chapter, an ordered logit regression is used due to the ordinal nature of included variables. The model results are reported in Table 4.5. Overall, this model is highly significant ($\text{Prob} > \chi^2 = 0.0000$). As addressed in the variable overview presented at the beginning of this chapter, the N for this model is somewhat reduced by the inclusion of variables only administered to a split sample (Form 1) of respondents. The sample size (N =

1133) is sufficiently large to give me a reasonable level of confidence in my findings and my inferences about the national population.

Within this political effects model, none of the demographic or economic variables are found to be significantly predictive of LNTS viewership, as seen below.

Table 4.5. Ordered logit estimates for a model of the relationship between late night talk show viewership and political participation, Pew Center Biennial Media Consumption Dataset (2006)

	b	z
Demographics and Socioeconomics		
Age (-)	-0.002	-0.66
Education	-0.066	-1.53
White	-0.003	-0.02
Income	0.034	1.17
Sex (-)	-0.081	-0.68
Political Knowledge		
Know answers to all knowledge questions (-)	0.042	0.65
Political Interest: Stories		
Iraq (+)	0.122	1.46
Candidates in state and district (+)	0.016	0.24
Gasoline prices (+)	0.204	2.34**
Political Interest: Types of News		
Hard news (+)	0.004	0.10
Soft news (+)	0.180	5.36***
Local news (+)	0.025	0.72
Political Preferences		
Party identification (+)	-0.006	-0.13
Ideology (+)	-0.034	-0.48
Political Participation		
Voted for Kerry in '04 (+)	0.295	1.70**
Voting frequency (-)	-0.145	-1.62*
N	1133	
LR χ^2	81.40	
Prob > χ^2	0.0000	
Pseudo R ²	0.0289	
Log likelihood	-1369.5017	
*** prob < .01		
** prob < .05		
* prob < .10		

This is particularly unexpected in the case of both age and sex, since previous research had indicated that both variables are strongly correlated to viewership. While the coefficients are in the expected direction (negative), the coefficients fail to achieve conventional levels of statistical significance. This indicates that the effects of age and gender are negated by the effects of other variables included in this model. Within this political engagement model, neither education nor income has a significant effect on the dependent variable. Political knowledge is also not a significant predictor of LNTS viewership ($b = 0.042$, $z = 0.65$), suggesting that knowledge has null effect on viewership.

When it comes to political interest as evidenced through attention to news stories and types of news, we begin to see a clearer picture of items that do predict viewership of LNTS programs. While neither the situation in Iraq nor candidates in respondents' states or districts significantly impact viewership (Iraq: $b = 0.122$, $z = 1.46$; candidates: $b = 0.016$, $z = 0.24$), following stories about gas prices does significantly predict LNTS viewership ($b = 0.204$, $z = 2.34$). While these questions do not provide sufficient breadth to make strong claim, they do indicate that it is possible that LNTS viewers are more interested in stories that are directly related to their day-to-day lives; in other words, those that directly affect their pocketbooks in immediate and significant ways. It is also possible that this topic is the one out of the three included in these models that would be continuously covered within the late night monologues: the sensitivity around Iraq and the locality of state and district candidates make these topics less likely to be covered on a regular or "light" basis. This propensity for lighter or softer news is reinforced by how types of news predict viewership. Of the three categories included, only soft news has a significant relationship to viewership ($b = 0.180$, $z = 5.36$, significant at a level less than $< .001$). Hard news and local news are both directionally positive, but do not come close to reaching significance (hard news: $b = 0.004$, $z = 0.10$; local news: $b = 0.025$, $z = 0.72$).

In terms of political preferences, the coefficient for party identification is neither in the hypothesized direction nor does it achieve statistical significance ($b = -0.006$, $z = -0.13$). Likewise, the coefficient for ideology is directionally negative and not significant ($b = -0.034$, $z = -0.48$). This is particularly unexpected in light of previous research, which indicated that LNTS audiences tend to be liberal. Taken in conjunction with the insignificance of age and sex, it seems likely that there is fruitful nuance added to our understanding of the effects of late night television by separating LNTS and TDS viewership. While partisanship and ideology are not significant predictors of LNTS viewership, voting for Kerry is ($b = 0.295$, $z = 1.70$). When considered in tandem, these data indicate that respondents might be tuning into these programs for content surrounding specific instances (i.e., candidate choice) rather than overall identity associations (such as ideological preferences). As expected, voting frequency is negatively related to LNTS viewership. While not significant at the scientific standard adopted in this study, there is a strong enough relationship to indicate that some relationship might, in fact, exist ($b = -0.145$, $z = -1.62$, significant at $p < .10$).

Summary: LNTS and Political Engagement

While no demographic or socioeconomic variables achieve significance within this model, the results do reinforce the importance of localized or “pocketbook” issues for viewers. Not only is the price of gasoline the only story that predicts viewership, the single strongest predictor is soft news (including sports, entertainment, and culture and the arts). This is not particularly surprising, since LNTS content tends to focus on celebrities, gossip, and media content. As reflected in the mean differences, voting for Kerry is predictive of viewership, while party identification and ideology are slightly negative. This is surprising, since the mean differences discussed above indicated that viewers are much more likely than non-viewers to be Democratic (a positive value in these models). Since only their 2004 Presidential vote—rather

than party identification or ideology—predicts viewership, it is likely that LNTS programs have some impact on viewers’ perceptions of the President and presidential candidates (and thus their votes). As posited earlier, this effect seems to be most relevant for short-term or “one-off” decisions, such as candidate choice, rather than for their more deeply held beliefs associated with party identification and ideology.

When considered as a whole, these data indicate that political engagement variables are not strong predictors of LNTS viewership. This is somewhat surprising in light of both previous research and concerns in the popular press, which have consistently rung alarm bells about the risks of citizens turning to late night talk shows for political information. Instead, since few political variables are significantly related to viewership, this model indicates that respondents who do tune in to these shows do so for a set of reasons unrelated to political engagement.

LNTS and News Media

- **RQ₂: Does a relationship exist between viewership of traditional late night talk shows and news media? What is the nature of this relationship?**

In order to understand how media usage and preferences predict viewership of late night talk shows, I estimate a model that includes measures designed to gauge the impact of key variables: how respondents use news media, what news media they are using, what specific programs they are tuning in to, and what types of publications they are using. The results for this model are presented in Table 4.6. Because some of the variables are asked only of a sub-sample of the total respondent pool, three versions of the model are presented. The first, Model 1, does not include any of the split sample variables and thus has the largest sample size (N = 1627). Model 2 adds two additional news media usage variables: the Internet and newsmagazines, which are asked on Form 1. In Model 3, a summary variable for all online publications is included; usage of these publications is asked on Form 2. For a complete description of what

specific sites and channels are included in these variables, please refer to the explanations at the beginning of this chapter. While the sample sizes for Models 2 (N = 864) and 3 (N = 864) are considerably smaller than that of Model 1, all three iterations of this model are statistically significant (Prob > $\chi^2 = 0.0000$).

Due to sample size, the log likelihood measure of Model 1 is much larger than its counterparts. All three models reach an acceptable level of statistical significance, however, and thus can be interpreted with confidence.

Demographic and Socioeconomic Variables

As Table 3.6 shows, only one demographic and socioeconomic variable proves to be a significant predictor of LNTS viewership across all three models: age (b = -0.014, z = -4.59 in Model 1; b = -0.017, z = -3.92 in Model 2; and b = -0.017, z = -3.72 in the Model 3). This is consistent with previous research that has continually shown age to be significantly related to viewership. Education and income do not significantly predict viewership in any of our three models. Interestingly, being white is a significant predictor of LNTS viewership in two of our three models (b = 0.352, z = 2.64 in Model 1, significant at $p < .001$; b = -0.350, z = 1.96 in Model 3, significant at $p < .05$). In Model 2, which controls for usage of Internet news and newsmagazines, the impact of being white is negated, although the data still indicate a relationship exists (b = 0.336, z = 1.86, significant at $p < .10$). Surprisingly, sex is a significant predictor viewership in just one of our models, Model 1 (b = -0.176, z = 0.173, significant at $p < .05$).

General Media Variables

When looking at these models, two variables related to media show a significant relationship to LNTS viewership. The first, how strongly respondents agreed to a statement about watching the news with a remote control in hand to flip channels when not interested in the

Table 4.6. Ordered logit estimates for a model of the relationship between late night talk show viewership and news media, Pew Center Biennial Media Consumption Dataset

	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3	
	b	z	b	z	b	z
Demographics and Socioeconomics						
Age (-)	-0.014	-4.59***	-0.017	-3.92***	-0.017	-3.72***
Education	0.038	1.13	0.035	0.75	0.033	0.72
White	0.352	2.64***	0.336	1.86*	0.350	1.96**
Income	-0.007	-0.31	0.002	0.06	-0.001	-0.06
Sex (-)	-0.176	-1.73**	-0.139	-0.98	-0.127	-0.91
General Media Variables						
Often flip channels (+)	0.097	2.19**	0.104	1.71**	0.109	1.81**
Enjoy news (+)	-0.009	-0.12	0.005	0.05	0.007	0.08
News at regular times (+)	0.245	2.26**	0.217	1.43*	0.201	1.33*
News media are same (+)	0.048	0.47	0.134	0.94	0.101	0.71
Usage of News Media						
Newspaper (+)	-0.048	-0.44	-0.157	-0.89	-0.132	-0.76
Television news (+)	-0.091	-0.62	-0.094	-0.46	-0.056	-0.28
Radio news (+)	-0.084	-0.82	0.089	0.64	0.080	0.58
Internet news (+)			0.187	1.29*		
Newsmagazines (+)			0.010	0.06		
Usage of News Programs						
Television news (+)	0.061	3.53***	0.079	3.27***	0.078	3.26***
Local (+)	0.225	3.65***	0.175	1.92**	0.152	1.69**
Public (+)	0.042	1.62*	0.017	0.48	0.010	0.28
Soft (+)	0.076	3.58***	0.043	1.54*	0.042	1.51*
Radio (+)	-0.016	-0.48	-0.031	-0.67	-0.031	-0.68
Usage of Publications						
Highbrow (+)	0.024	0.97	0.036	1.03	0.031	0.89
Entertainment (+)	0.135	3.56***	0.184	3.57***	0.181	3.53***
Newspapers (+)	0.008	0.26	0.006	0.15	-0.000	-0.01
Online (all) (+)					0.025	1.52*

N	1627	864	864
LR χ^2	198.06	114.37	113.13
Prob > χ^2	0.0000	0.0000	0.0000
Pseudo R ²	0.0490	0.0526	0.0521
Log likelihood	-1923.6138	-1029.9779	-1029.2787

*** prob < .01
 ** prob < .05
 * prob < .10

topic, is a significant predictor of LNTS viewership across all three models ($b = 0.097$, $z = 2.19$ in Model 1; $b = 0.104$, $z = 1.71$ in Model 2; $b = 0.109$, $z = 1.81$ in Model 3).

The positive direction of this relationship indicates that respondents are more likely to agree that they do, in fact, keep their remote handy to “tune out” stories that are not of interest to them. The second variable that is a significant predictor of viewership in Model 1 is the propensity for watching news at a regular time ($b = 0.245$, $z = 2.26$, significant at $p < .05$). The positive direction of this variable indicates that regularly tuning in to news is a strong predictor of LNTS viewership. This variable is neutralized by the inclusion of additional variables, however, and fails to reach the parameters for significance for this study ($b = 0.217$, $z = 1.43$ in Model 2; $b = 0.201$, $z = 1.33$ in Model 3; both significant at $p < .10$).

Usage of News Media

None of the news media variables are significant predictors of LNTS viewership; in fact, newspaper readership and usage of television news are negatively related to viewership across all three models. Neither usage of Internet news ($b = 0.187$, $z = 1.29$) nor newsmagazines ($b = 0.010$, $z = 0.06$) significantly predicts viewership.

Usage of News Programs

While usage of news media such as television and newspapers is not significantly related to LNTS viewership, the story is quite different for specific programs. Television news programs are significant predictors of LNTS viewership at a significance level of less than .01 across all three models ($b = 0.061$, $z = 3.53$ in Model 1; $b = 0.079$, $z = 3.27$ in Model 2; $b = 0.078$, $z = 3.26$ in Model 3). As hypothesized, local television news positively predicts viewership across all three models ($b = 0.225$, $z = 3.65$ in Model 1, significant at $p < .01$; $b = 0.175$, $z = 1.92$ in Model 2, significant at $p < .05$; $b = 0.152$, $z = 1.69$ in Model 3, significant at $p < .05$). Soft news sources

enjoy a strong relationship to viewership in Model 1 ($b = 0.076$, $z = 3.58$ in Model 1, significant at $p < .01$), but are no longer significant in Model 2 ($b = 0.043$, $z = 1.54$, significant at $p < .10$) and Model 3 ($b = 0.042$, $z = 1.51$, significant at $p < .10$).

Public news sources and radio news do not fare as well, however. In Model 1, some relationship is found between public news usage and LNTS viewership ($b = 0.042$, $z = 1.62$), but it does not meet the standards set for significance in this study, and this relationship is negated in Models 2 and 3. Radio is the only type of news programming to have a negative relationship with LNTS viewership, although none of the coefficients are even close to reaching a notable level of significance.

Types of Publications

Entertainment-oriented publications (such as People and Star Magazine) are highly significant predictors of LNTS viewership across all three models ($b = 0.135$, $z = 3.56$ in Model 1; $b = 0.184$, $z = 3.57$ in Model 2; $b = 0.181$, $z = 3.53$ in Model 3). This is not surprising considering the similarities between LNTS monologues and these publications in terms of targets and tonality. This is the only publication category that significantly predicts viewership, although online publications come close to achieving significance ($b = 0.025$, $z = 1.52$, significant at $p < .10$).

Summary: LNTS Viewers

When considered in toto, these data identify an audience that has not yet “connected the dots” in terms of politics. For example, while viewers are significantly more likely to affiliate with the Democrats and have voted for Kerry, they are not significantly more likely to self-identify as liberal. Politics is not a strong predictor of viewership, which suggests that political content might not be a reason that viewers tune in to late night talk shows. This does not mean that they are completely disinterested in politics and current affairs, however; these viewers

claim to closely follow all types of news more than non-viewers (particularly news about entertainment, national news, and sporting news). When they tune in, however, they do so with a remote in hand in order to change the channel when they are no longer interested in the topic. Viewers tend to be interested in all types of news, and are much more likely than non-viewers to closely follow news about entertainment.

“The Daily Show” (TDS) Viewers

The most recent scholarship on late night television comedy audiences indicate that viewers of “The Daily Show” are considerably different from those for late night talk shows. As such, the TDS audience merits its own examination on the three fronts identified above: how viewers differ from non-viewers in key areas, the relationship between viewership and political engagement, and the relationship between viewership and news media usage and preferences.

Examining mean differences between TDS viewers and non-viewers helps us draw a brief portrait of these groups. As is the case with LNTS viewers, mean differences are examined for two groups: TDS viewers (categorized as watching TDS “regularly” or “sometimes”) and non-viewers (watching TDS “hardly ever” or “never”). As with LNTS viewers, a more detailed description of the differences is presented in the crosstabulations found in Appendix B.2.

Demographic and Socioeconomic Variables

In Table 4.7 I present the mean values for demographic and socioeconomic independent variables, calculated separately for “viewers” and “non-viewers,” as well as the difference in means tests for each of these independent variables. This table shows striking differences between these two groups. As these mean differences indicate, TDS viewers are significantly more likely to be male ($p < .01$), younger ($p < .01$), more educated ($p < .01$), have higher incomes ($p < .05$), and be employed ($p < .05$) than non-viewers. In fact, race is the only demographic variable that is not significantly different for viewers than non-viewers.

Table 4.7. Differences of means of “The Daily Show” viewers and non-viewers for socioeconomic and demographic variables, Pew Center’s Biennial Media Consumption Dataset (June 2006)

	Mean Values		Difference	t-ratio	N
	Viewers	Non-Viewers			
Socioeconomic/Demographic					
Sex (-)	0.482	0.580	-0.098	-4.441***	3187
Age (-)	43.043	51.408	-8.365	-10.711***	3107
Education	3.808	3.539	0.269	3.749***	3158
Income	4.412	4.137	0.275	2.453**	2615
Race					
White	0.806	0.829	-0.023	-1.375	3132
Black	0.105	0.109	-0.004	0.341	3132
Hispanic	0.066	0.052	0.014	1.382	3163
Asian	0.018	0.017	0.001	0.198	3132
Other/mixed	0.062	0.045	0.017	1.820*	3132
Employment					
Full-time	0.523	0.477	0.046	2.059**	3154
Part-time	0.138	0.109	0.029	2.038**	3154
Unemployed	0.338	0.413	-0.075	-3.434***	3154

*** prob < .01

** prob < .05

* prob < .10

Political Engagement Variables

In Table 4.8 I present the mean values for the political engagement variables, again calculated separately for “viewers” and “non-viewers,” as well as the difference in means tests for these independent variables. These data indicate that, when it comes to political behavior and ideological preferences, TDS viewers are significantly less likely than non-viewers to have cast a Presidential vote in 2004 ($p < .05$) and vote less frequently than non-viewers ($p < .05$). TDS viewers are much more likely to affiliate with the Democratic party and identify themselves as liberal than their non-viewer counterparts, with highly significant differences in terms of party identification ($p < .01$), ideology ($p < .01$), voting for Kerry in 2004 ($p < .01$), and not voting for Bush ($p < .01$).

Table 4.8. Differences of means of “The Daily Show” viewers and non-viewers for political engagement variables, Pew Center’s Biennial Media Consumption Dataset (June 2006)

	Mean Values		Difference	t-ratio	N
	Viewers	Non-Viewers			
Political Participation					
Registered to vote (-)	0.823	0.843	-0.020	-1.264	3161
Voted in '04 (-)	0.765	0.805	-0.040	-2.220**	3149
How often vote (-)	3.017	3.117	-0.100	-1.811**	3140
Ideology					
Party Identification (+)	2.665	1.940	0.725	9.181***	2935
Ideology (+)	2.142	1.705	0.437	10.064***	2935
Voted for Bush (-)	0.321	0.572	-0.251	-9.674***	2305
Voted for Kerry (+)	0.625	0.376	0.249	9.679***	2305
Voted for other cand.	0.054	0.052	0.002	0.214	2305

- *** prob < .01
- ** prob < .05
- * prob < .10

Political Interest Variables

In Table 4.9 I present the mean political interests and news type values for TDS viewers and non-viewers.

As we see in this table, TDS viewers are deeply interested in news and current affairs. They are significantly more likely to follow stories about Iraq ($p < .01$), candidates ($p < .01$), Iran’s nuclear program ($p < .01$), and NSA collecting telephone records ($p < .01$), but are not significantly more likely than non-viewers to closely follow stories about gasoline prices. This does not mean that they are disinterested in that topic, however; looking specifically at TDS viewers, gas is the story they are most closely following (2.094), followed by the war in Iraq (2.410), the NSA collecting telephone records (2.094), and the situation in Iran (1.876). What these data indicate is that the stories about the high prices of gasoline are followed by most Americans, regardless of whether or not they view “The Daily Show.” For topics that are less

likely to be closely followed by the average American, such as the situation in Iran and NSA, TDS viewers are much more likely to tune in and stay abreast of these stories.

Table 4.9. Differences of means of “The Daily Show” viewers and non-viewers for political interest variables, Pew Center’s Biennial Media Consumption Dataset (June 2006)

	Mean Values		Difference	t-ratio	N
	Viewers	Non-Viewers			
Political Interest					
Iraq	2.410	2.153	0.257	5.104***	1995
Candidates	1.647	1.470	0.177	3.001***	1991
Gas	2.547	2.472	0.075	1.627	1989
Iran	1.876	1.652	0.224	3.242***	1490
NSA	2.094	1.785	0.309	3.393***	817
Types of News					
International	1.846	1.632	0.214	3.949***	1996
National	1.965	1.652	0.313	5.879***	1992
Local	1.864	1.729	0.135	2.456**	1996
Community	1.939	1.898	0.041	0.774	1993
Sports	1.497	1.315	0.182	2.782***	1998
Entertainment	1.561	1.305	0.256	4.767***	1996
Arts/Culture	1.487	1.152	0.335	5.994***	1993
Crime	1.925	1.893	0.032	0.618	1991

*** prob < .01
 ** prob < .05
 * prob < .10

TDS viewers are also significantly more likely to closely follow international ($p < .01$) and national ($p < .01$) news, as well as coverage of their local government ($p < .05$), sports ($p < .01$), entertainment ($p < .01$) and arts and culture ($p < .01$). As is the case with the specific news stories discussed above, TDS viewers align similarly to non-viewers in terms of topics to which they most closely pay attention, including their communities (1.939) and crime (1.925). Viewers most significantly differ from non-viewers when it comes to news about arts and culture (a difference of 5.994), national news (a difference of 5.879), entertainment news (difference = 4.767), and international news (difference = 3.949).

Political Knowledge Variables

Finally, in Table 4.10 I present the mean values for knowledge-related independent variables, calculated separately for viewers and non-viewers, as well as the difference in means tests for each of these independent variables. These data show us that TDS viewers are significantly more likely than non-viewers to know the answers to questions related to news and politics, including which party has a majority in the House of Representatives ($p < .01$), the name of the Secretary of State ($p < .01$), and the name of the Russian president ($p < .01$). Not surprisingly, these viewers are also significantly more likely to know all of these answers than non-viewers ($p < .01$).

Table 4.10. Differences of means of “The Daily Show” viewers and non-viewers for knowledge-related variables, Pew Center’s Biennial Media Consumption Dataset (June 2006)

	Mean Values		Difference	t-ratio	N
	Viewers	Non-Viewers			
Political Knowledge					
House majority	0.751	0.671	0.080	3.023***	2001
Sec of State’s name	0.551	0.454	0.097	3.439***	2001
Russian president	0.432	0.347	0.085	3.123***	2001
Know all (scale: 0-3)	0.985	0.917	0.068	3.106***	3187

*** prob < .01

** prob < .05

* prob < .10

Summary: Differences of Means

When considered as a whole, these mean differences provide evidence that TDS audiences tend to reflect a higher socioeconomic status than non-viewers. Despite being younger, TDS viewers are more educated, have higher incomes, and are more likely to be employed. While these attributes have historically been positively correlated with likelihood to vote, that

does not seem to be the case with TDS viewers. This group is less likely to vote than non-viewers.

This does not mean that TDS viewers have rejected politics wholesale, however. While they may not always turn out at the polls, these viewers indicate much higher levels of political engagement than non-viewers as measured by attention paid to news stories and categories, particularly international and national news. This audience is quite well-informed, as evidenced by their high levels of political knowledge compared to non-viewers. In addition, these viewers strongly identify themselves as Democrats as well as ideologically liberal; for those who do vote, those votes are overwhelmingly cast for Kerry and not for Bush.

These comparative data begin to describe TDS viewers as young, educated, well-informed, ideologically liberal Democrats who are not necessarily participating in the political process through voting. They tend to focus on the “big picture” of international and national news as well as news that is more focused on their local communities and personal lives. What we still need to understand, however, is the relationship between viewership of “The Daily Show” and political knowledge, interest, and participation.

TDS and Political Engagement

- **RQ₁: Does a relationship exist between viewership of “The Daily Show with Jon Stewart” and political knowledge, interest, and participation? What is the nature of this relationship?**

In order to understand how political knowledge, interest, and participation predict viewership of TDS, I re-estimate the political effects model utilized for LNTS viewers in research question one, replacing the dependent variable (LNTS viewership) with viewership of “The Daily Show.” This model is highly significant ($\text{Prob} > \chi^2 = 0.0000$), although again the sample size ($N = 1134$) is reduced due to the inclusion of variables only administered to a portion of respondents on Form 1. This sample size is sufficiently large to give me a reasonable

level of confidence in my findings and inferences about the national population. Results are presented in Table 4.11.

Table 4.11. Ordered logit estimates for a model of the relationship between “The Daily Show” viewership and political participation, Pew Center Biennial Media Consumption Dataset

	b	z
Demographics and Socioeconomics		
Age (-)	-0.022	-4.77***
Education	-0.038	-0.75
White	-0.030	-0.16
Income	0.076	2.18**
Sex (-)	-0.029	-0.21
Political Knowledge		
Know answers to all knowledge questions	-0.002	-0.03
Political Interest: Stories		
Iraq (+)	0.343	3.40***
Candidates in state and district (+)	0.049	0.64
Gasoline prices (+)	0.020	0.20
Political Interest: Types of News		
Hard news (+)	0.154	2.62***
Soft news (+)	0.139	3.64***
Local news (+)	-0.016	-0.41
Political Preferences		
Party identification (+)	0.108	1.89**
Ideology (+)	0.264	3.22***
Political Participation		
Voted for Kerry in '04 (+)	0.425	2.20**
Voting frequency (-)	-0.096	-0.92

N	1134
LR χ^2	174.47
Prob > χ^2	0.0000
Pseudo R ²	0.0801
Log likelihood	-1002.0274

*** prob < .01

** prob < .05

* prob < .10

As hypothesized, age is a highly significant predictor of TDS viewership (b = -0.022, z = -4.77), meaning youth is strongly related to viewership. In fact, income is the only other variable in this category that achieves significance (b = 0.076, z = 2.18, significant at p < .05). Education,

race, and sex do not have significant effects on TDS viewership, and most have very low z-scores. The lack of a significant relationship between sex and viewership is particularly surprising in light of previous research, including the mean differences presented in this chapter. This discrepancy can be explained within the this model, however. I suggest that the effect of sex is controlled by the inclusion of political variables. Since males tend to be more interested in and knowledgeable about politics and current events than their female counterparts, it is probable that these variables absorb some of the impact of sex.

This model does not provide any evidence of political knowledge predicting viewership ($b = -0.002$, $z = -0.3$). When it comes to following specific news stories, closely following the situation in Iraq significantly predicts TDS viewership ($b = 0.343$, $z = 3.40$, significant at $p < .01$). Interestingly, this is the only specific news story that is significantly related to viewership; neither candidates in respondents' states or districts nor the high price of gasoline are effective predictors. This focus on non-local issues is reflected in the role following certain categories of news plays in this model. Hard news (incorporating international news and news about Washington) is a highly significant predictor of TDS viewership ($b = 0.154$, $z = 2.62$, significant at $p < .01$), as is soft news, including news about the local government, community, and crime ($b = 0.139$, $z = 3.64$). Local news, on the other hand, does not predict TDS viewership ($b = -0.016$, $z = -0.41$).

As expected, identifying as a Democrat ($b = 0.108$, $z = 1.89$, significant at $p < .05$) and ideologically liberal ($b = 0.264$, $z = 3.22$, significant at $p < .01$) are both significant predictors of TDS viewership. This liberal bent is reflected by voting for Kerry in 2004, which also is a significant predictor of viewership ($b = 0.425$, $z = 2.20$, significant at $p < .05$). Taken together, these three variables reinforce the liberal nature of this audience; liberals are much more likely to watch TDS than others. While ideology is a strong predictor of viewership, this does not extend

to being active voters, however. Although frequency of voting is negatively related to TDS viewership ($b = -0.096$, $z = -0.92$), these data suggest that voting has limited effect on viewership.

Summary: TDS and Political Engagement

This model of the relationship between TDS viewership and political knowledge, interest, and participation provides interesting implications for examining the dynamic. Age and income are both significant predictors of viewership, as is attention to news coverage of the war in Iraq. This focus on news extends beyond that particular story, with both hard and soft news predicting TDS viewership. Finally, identifying as a liberal, a Democrat, and voting for Kerry also predict viewership. Taken together, these findings indicate that TDS viewership can be predicted by multiple political variables, including participation, preferences, and interest.

TDS and News Media

- **RQ₂: Does a relationship exist between viewership of “The Daily Show with Jon Stewart” and news media? What is the nature of this relationship?**

As is the case with LNTS audiences in research question 2, I estimate a model that includes various media-related variables in order to understand how news media usage and preferences predict viewership of TDS. To reiterate, some of the variables are asked only of a subsample of the total respondent pool; thus, three versions of the model are presented. This allows for a more streamlined model that has the added benefit of a large sample size, as well as supplementary models that allow for the impact of potentially important variables.

Demographic and Socioeconomic Variables

Not surprisingly, age continues to be a strong predictor of TDS viewership, significant at the .01 level across all three models ($b = -0.036$, $z = -9.09$ in Model 1; $b = -0.42$, $z = -7.31$ in Model 2; $b = -0.038$, $z = -6.59$ in Model 3).

Table 4.12. Ordered logit estimates for a model of the relationship between “The Daily Show” and media usage and preferences, Pew Center Biennial Media Consumption Dataset

	b	z	b	z	b	z
Demographics and Socioeconomics						
Age (-)	-0.036	-9.09***	-0.042	-7.31***	-0.038	-6.59***
Education	0.035	0.87	0.107	1.85*	0.091	1.59
White	0.291	1.90*	0.298	1.41	0.327	1.56
Income	-0.002	-0.09	-0.020	-0.52	-0.030	-0.79
Sex (-)	-0.286	-2.39**	-0.525	-3.14***	-0.447	-2.70***
General Media Variables						
Often flip channels (-)	0.017	0.33	0.105	1.47	0.084	1.19
Enjoy news (+)	0.068	0.72	0.006	0.05	0.047	0.36
News at regular times (+)	-0.168	-1.32	-0.079	-0.45	-0.092	-0.52
News media are same (+)	-0.245	-2.00**	-0.446	-2.59***	-0.404	-2.35**
Usage of News Media						
Newspaper (+)	-0.080	-0.56	-0.113	-0.53	-0.114	-0.55
Television news (+)	0.178	1.01	-0.084	-0.34	-0.044	-0.18
Radio news (+)	-0.056	-0.47	-0.029	-0.18	-0.049	-0.30
Internet news (+)			-0.082	-0.49		
Newsmagazines (+)			0.193	1.01		
Usage of News Programs						
Television news (+)	0.105	5.12***	0.143	4.88***	0.136	4.69***
Local (+)	-0.131	-1.86**	-0.137	-1.27	-0.172	-1.62*
Public (+)	0.182	5.95***	0.166	3.94***	0.151	3.60***
Soft (+)	0.018	0.72	0.030	0.86	0.036	1.05*
Radio (+)	-0.148	-3.58***	-0.170	-2.93***	-0.182	-3.16***
Usage of Publications						
Highbrow (+)	0.102	3.69***	0.069	1.74**	0.071	1.86**
Entertainment (+)	0.089	2.02**	0.073	1.19	0.072	1.19
Newspapers (+)	0.010	0.26	0.040	0.72	0.042	0.77
Online (all) (+)					0.025	1.33*

N	1625	864	864
LR χ^2	329.81	219.96	213.60
Prob > χ^2	0.0000	0.0000	0.0000
Pseudo R ²	0.1061	0.1306	0.1257
Log likelihood	-1389.4632	-732.26514	-742.53786

*** prob < .01
 ** prob < .05
 * prob < .10

Interestingly, sex is also highly predictive within this model ($b = -0.286$, $z = -2.39$, significant at $p < .05$ in Model 1; $b = -0.525$, $z = -3.14$, significant at $p < .01$ in Model 2; $b = -0.447$, $z = -2.70$, significant at $p < .01$ in Model 3). While not significant in Models 1 or 3, education is close to reaching significance in Model 2 ($b = 0.107$, $z = 1.85$, significant at $p < .10$). Income does not reach significance in any of the models, although it is directionally negative in all.

General Media Variables

In terms of media, TDS viewership is predicted by trusting some sources more than others. This is significant in all three models ($b = -0.245$, $z = -2.00$, significant at $p < .05$ in Model 1; $b = -0.446$, $z = -2.59$, significant at $p < .01$ in Model 2; and $b = -0.404$, $z = -2.35$, significant at $p < .05$ in Model 3). Enjoyment of news is not a strong predictor of TDS viewership, although the coefficients are positive ($b = 0.68$, $z = 0.72$ in Model 1; $b = 0.006$, $z = 0.05$ in Model 2; $b = 0.047$, $z = 0.36$ in Model 3).

Usage of News Media

None of the news media included in this model are significant predictors of viewership. Of these, three are directionally negative: newspapers ($b = -0.080$, $z = -0.56$ in Model 1; $b = -0.113$, $z = -0.53$ in Model 2; $b = -0.114$, $z = -0.55$ in Model 3), radio news ($b = -0.056$, $z = -0.47$ in Model 1; $b = -0.029$, $z = -0.18$ in Model 2; $b = -0.049$, $z = -0.30$ in Model 3), and Internet news ($b = -0.082$, $z = -0.49$). While television news has a positive effect on TDS viewership in Model 1 ($b = 0.178$, $z = 1.01$), this relationship is negative in the more extensive models ($b = -0.084$, $z = -0.34$ in Model 2; $b = -0.044$, $z = -0.18$ in Model 3). Finally, usage of newsmagazines is directionally positive ($b = 0.193$, $z = 1.01$); while not statistically significant, this has the largest coefficient of all media variables included in this model.

Usage of News Programs

While various news media do not significantly predict TDS viewership, programming groups do; in fact, all but one of our variables in this category significantly predict TDS viewership. Watching television news programming (including such programming as nightly network news broadcasts, cable news, Sunday morning talk shows, and TV news magazines) is highly predictive of viewership, significant at $p < .01$ across all three models ($b = 0.105$, $z = 5.12$ in Model 1; $b = 0.143$, $z = 4.88$ in Model 2; $b = 0.136$, $z = 4.69$ in Model 3). Public news sources (C-SPAN, NPR and “NewsHour”) are also highly related ($p < .01$) to TDS viewership ($b = 0.182$, $z = 5.95$ in Model 1; $b = 0.166$, $z = 3.94$ in Model 2; $b = 0.151$, $z = 3.60$ in Model 3). When considered as a whole, the size of these relationships indicates that TDS viewers are actually tuning in to a substantial amount of television news. The notable exception to this is local television news, which—while significant—is negatively related to TDS viewership in Model 1 ($b = -0.131$, $z = -1.86$, significant at $p < .05$). This relationship is neutralized in Model 2 ($b = -0.137$, $z = -1.27$) and Model 3 ($b = -0.172$, $z = -1.62$, significant at $p < .10$). The negative relationship between TDS viewership and usage of radio news (including Rush Limbaugh and religious radio) is highly significant across all models ($b = -0.148$, $z = -3.58$ in Model 1; $b = -0.170$, $z = -2.93$ in Model 2; $b = -0.182$, $z = -3.16$ in Model 3). This is not surprising considering the liberal leanings of this audience, particularly considering the typically conservative nature of religious radio and the overt right-wing ideology of Rush Limbaugh.

Usage of Publications

Highbrow publications (such as Time, The New Yorker, and political magazines) are highly predictive of TDS viewership in all three models ($b = 0.102$, $z = 3.69$, significant at $p < .01$ in Model 1; $b = 0.069$, $z = 1.74$, significant at $p < .05$ in Model 2; $b = 0.071$, $z = 1.86$, significant at $p < .05$ in Model 3). This relationship is weakened in the more extensive models,

however, and is not significant in either. Entertainment publications (such as Star Magazine and People) are also significantly predictive of TDS viewership in Model 1 ($b = 0.089$, $z = 2.02$, significant at $p < .05$), but are no longer significantly related in Models 2 and 3. Notably, local dailies and community newspapers are not significantly related to viewership, although they are directionally positive (unlike newspapers in general, as evidenced above). Finally, usage of online publications does not significantly predict TDS viewership to the standard set for this study, but comes close ($b = 0.025$, $z = 1.33$, significant at $p < .10$).

Summary: TDS and News Media

As was the case with LNTS viewers, the consistency of these three models allows me to focus this summary on the first iteration (the most robust of the three). This media effects model indicates that TDS viewers are savvy and sophisticated news consumers who have made deliberate choices about their news sources. Their choices seem to lean more toward the highbrow (such as public television and radio and print publications like Time and The New Republic). Television news options are often preferred, as are public news offerings. While mean differences indicate that these audience members are high consumers of all types of news, “soft” options such as morning shows and “Entertainment Tonight” do not predict viewership. These viewers also are actively rejecting news sources that they find less appealing, such as local news and radio news. This model provides further evidence that, while interested in stories that directly affect their lives, TDS viewers are deeply concerned with the “big picture” of international and national news.

Summary: TDS Viewers

The data presented above paint an intriguing portrait of TDS viewers. This is an audience with members who have figured out what works for them, in terms of both politics (liberal Democrats) and media (television and public news, highbrow publications). These news source

preferences indicate that TDS viewers seek out sources that will give them more than headlines: they look for content that provides depth and context rather than quick summaries.

In many ways the TDS audience embodies the “liberal elite,” reflecting a high socioeconomic status (including income and education) and levels of political knowledge and interest that belie their youth. As such, we would expect them to have high levels of participation in the political system. These data tell us, however, that this audience, while politically engaged, is not necessarily participating in the political system through the measure used most frequently in political research: voting. This does not necessarily mean that they have turned away from the political system in its entirety, however, particularly when we consider their high levels of political interest and knowledge about political events and actors. It seems that these viewers look beyond the local, choosing sources and stories that have broader implications, with an emphasis on national and international news.

Setting the Stage for Qualitative Analysis

These findings reinforce Young and Tisinger’s contention that late night comedy viewers are best examined as separate entities. While LNTS viewers are older than TDS viewers, they are less informed, less interested in international affairs, and more focused on entertainment. They are watching local television news and keep their remote handy so they can change the channel when they are no longer interested in the topic at hand. TDS viewers, on the other hand, are in many ways a young version of the liberal elite: they reflect a higher socioeconomic status, are much more politically knowledgeable, and have higher levels of interest. Despite these advantages, these viewers are actually less likely to vote in elections than non-viewers. They have an established “stable” of news sources upon which they rely, including television, public, and highbrow publications.

The data presented in this chapter have provided important insights into the make-ups of these audiences and the potential effects of their program choices. In order to dig more deeply into potential effects of these shows, however, it is essential to allow audiences to “speak for themselves.” By supplementing these statistical findings with qualitative methods, we can better understand how viewers construct meaning within their political worlds, as well as specifically around the content in these programs. In an effort to maximize the effects of late night talk shows and “The Daily Show,” we will focus specifically on self-described “heavy” viewers of these programs, with an emphasis reflecting the demographic characteristics of core audiences as described by previous research (young and male).

CHAPTER 5: QUALITATIVE FINDINGS FOR LATE NIGHT TALK SHOW VIEWERS

Overview

The quantitative data begin to paint a portrait of two audiences who are considerably different in terms of both political engagement and news media usage. While late night talk show and TDS viewers have historically been considered in tandem, research is increasingly uncovering the substantial differences between the two groups. Thus far, however, all of the research has been quantitative in nature. Audiences have not been asked to “speak for themselves,” and thus our understanding of how audiences construct meaning in their political worlds and, more specifically, around the content of late night television comedy, is limited at best. This study seeks to rectify this limitation to the literature through a thorough investigation utilizing qualitative methods to build on the quantitative findings.

Political Sophistication

- **RQ₃: How are the LNTS and TDS viewers similar and different in terms of political sophistication?**

While there was some variance among LNTS viewers in terms of their political sophistication and interest, their levels were generally low. Politics was not a priority for these viewers, who tended to see politics as relevant only in times of crisis, often described as a time when something happens on such a scale that it is impossible to escape the story (i.e., the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001). Interest in politics and current events is peripheral at best for most of these viewers; while they know something is going on, from their perspective, little attention is merited. As expected, an “age effect” is evidenced in these findings; older respondents are generally more politically sophisticated than younger. This clearly fits with previous political science literature, which has consistently shown that political interest and attention tend to increase with age. The older LNTS viewers were more likely to see connections

between the political system and their lives. Politics is still not a priority for these viewers, however, and most do not seem to be overly concerned that they acquire and analyze political information on a daily basis.

While older LNTS viewers tend to have higher levels of political sophistication than younger and there was variance among the younger viewers, even the LNTS respondents who are the most politically sophisticated are still—at best—moderately sophisticated. Because these moderate respondents also tend to be the most articulate and conversationally adept in general, it is possible that these respondents' political sophistication indicates a higher level of natural intelligence than their LNTS peers. While no metrics were included in this research to gauge intelligence, these viewers tended to be more articulate and evidenced clearer thought and speech patterns (i.e., less likely to use conversational pauses such as “umm” and “like”) in their responses, and they generally did a better job of addressing questions with thoughtful responses than their less-sophisticated LNTS counterparts.

Even when these respondents are aware of a political situation or current event, these pieces of information are often “siloesd.” They do not seem to draw connections or identify patterns in terms of news, politics, and current affairs. For example, LNTS respondents who are at least aware of the Mark Foley scandal perceive it to be an isolated incident, indicative of one man's behavior rather than part of a larger pattern of corruption. They do not reference the role of the Republican leadership in terms of how they dealt with early reports of and complaints about Foley's behavior, nor do respondents address how the then-current Congress was addressing Foley's actions. Finally, these respondents know, at best, the basic (and most scurrilous) information about this news story; none are aware of Foley's public face as one of the top Congressmen on a child abuse panel. This example demonstrates a typical LNTS viewer's

perspective on political stories: even when it comes to politics and current events, sex sells... but only enough to get on his or her radar, rather than inspiring further investigation.

It is important to note that these respondents do not seem to actively reject politics or current affairs; that rejection would entail having actively considered their positions and consciously deciding to turn away. Rather, LNTS viewers simply exist without this knowledge and do not particularly care that they are not invested in these events:

Uh, I'm in, I think I'm more in my own, my self-interests, or maybe not necessarily my self-interests, maybe like, the people around me's self-interests, you know like, I guess you could call me self-orientated, but not so self-orientated that I don't care about the people that I know. Like, I care about the people that I know, but that's like it. Like, the people that I know and speak to, that's all I care about, you know (LY13).

While most recognize that they "should" be more informed according to normative citizen standards, they are just not motivated to engage with this type of content. As such, their knowledge and interest is tangential at best, focused on one specific event (rather than recognizing patterns or identifying trends), and triggered only by stories that by their sheer ubiquity enter the consciousness of an LNTS viewer.

These findings were remarkably consistent among viewers of all three programs. During both data collection and analysis, particular attention was paid to seeking out and identifying potential variance by program. This was in part confounded by how common cross-viewership of these programs is, particularly with the inclusion of Conan O'Brien in the survey. While Conan is often considered the "lowest tier" of the late night talk show hosts (due to ratings and share), his popularity among this research sample was considerable. This was notably salient for respondents in the 18-24 age group; even those who were not primary Conan viewers would often tune in at the conclusion of Leno or Letterman to "see what Conan is going to do."

In general, primary Conan viewers tended to be concentrated toward the extremely low end of the political sophistication scale, with very few identified as moderate. Leno viewers were

a bit more dispersed, although the younger (18-24) Leno viewers remained extremely low, while the older (25-40) group was closer to moderate. Letterman viewers were the most bifurcated of all the late night talk show audiences. These respondents were divided into two diametrically opposed groups: those who represented the “lowest of the low,” with little-to-no political sophistication or interest, and the “highest of the moderates,” who generally showed more overall knowledge and awareness of politics and current events than other LNTS viewers. The high end of the Letterman viewers is not unexpected, considering Young and Tinsinger’s (2006) findings that this group should be considered separately from Leno’s and Conan’s viewers. It is surprising, however, that the same program represents both the highest and lowest ends of the political sophistication scale for LNTS viewers.

For LNTS viewers, awareness of what is going on in the world outside of their immediate circumstances is often directed by others, whether through interpersonal discussions (at home, in the classroom, or in the office), headlines that automatically appear when logging in to check email, or a newspaper graphic that catches an eye while walking past:

Um, anyone, any of my professors, any of my classmates, stuff like that comes up in class, or on the phone with my parents or if it pops up on the internet websites. Just kind of, whatever I bump into throughout the day (LY3).

These interpersonal discussions can also be an incentive to pay attention to the information that comes their way; as one respondent claims, “It’s embarrassing to have someone ask, ‘Hey did you hear about this?’ and you have to say ‘Uh, no.’ You look like an idiot. That’s the main reason I pay attention at all—so I don’t look dumb (laughs)” (LY1).

Political Knowledge

Knowledge of issues and candidates was extremely limited among these respondents. Even for those at the moderate end of the political sophistication scale, knowledge tended to be limited to headlines at best, and these respondents often had difficulty identifying political

players and connecting the dots among events and people. For some, this was information they claimed to have known earlier, but as soon as the election was over, it was lost, which could indicate the shallowness of the frames they use for context:

Um... let's see... I don't know, but I had this all thought out, too... I was talking about this with my mom just a few weeks ago . . . I could side with the Democrats because of this and I could side with the Republicans because of that and now I can't remember... (LY12).

That temporal nature of political knowledge and awareness was overwhelmingly evident among this group. During interviews conducted in the immediate vicinity of the election, LNTS viewers typically focused specifically on the state and local issues in which they were most interested or closely following. One specific issue that generated considerable interest among LNTS viewers was a statewide smoking ban.² A grassroots campaign had sprung up around the campus of Ohio University, with “No on 4, Yes on 5” posters, signs, and chalked sidewalk messages becoming extremely prevalent during the days leading up to and immediately following the elections. This issue was also particularly relevant to this group (college students who tended to spend considerable amounts of time in local drinking establishments). As time passed after the election, however, statewide ballot issues were no longer as relevant. Instead, respondents tended to recall issues for which they were primed at the time of the interview. For example, respondents who were interviewed around the time of President Bush’s proposed troop surge tended to claim the war in Iraq was the issue with which they were most concerned during the election. When asked about the relevance of the smoking ban, most said that it was a concern, but Iraq was more pressing.

² Two smoking issues were on the Ohio ballot in November 2007: Issues 4 and 5. Issue 4 was sponsored by the tobacco industry, and would result in a state constitutional amendment that would make it unconstitutional to ban smoking in public places. Issue 5, on the other hand, would make it illegal to smoke in any public space, including bars and restaurants. If both issues passed, Issue 4 would “trump” Issue 5 as a constitutional amendment. As such, an extensive “No on 4, Yes on 5” campaign was launched across Ohio.

This phenomenon can also be related to the wording of the question. At the beginning of each interview, the interviewer asked respondents, “What was the issue you were most concerned with during this past election?” Because these respondents tended to be at the low-to-moderate end of the political sophistication scale, they took the word “issue” literally; since they were hearing about “Issue 4” and “Issue 5,” the term was explicitly linked to ballot issues. This was not the case with individuals at higher ends of the political sophistication scale, as will be shown in respondent findings for “The Daily Show.”

Political Participation

Most LNTS respondents did not vote in the 2006 general election, despite hotly contested ballot issues and the two pivotal races (Senate and gubernatorial) that had garnered considerable state and national attention. Among those who claimed to vote, few seemed to put too much thought and effort into deciding for whom they would cast their ballots. Respondents offered a range of reasons for not voting, including complications with absentee ballots:

But I’m going to be honest, I didn’t actually get to vote, um, I had an absentee ballot sent to me, I got it too late, actually I could have gotten it out but I was kind of busy and I didn’t really get a chance to get it done, so I didn’t actually vote... (LY11).

Some reported they just did not have time to vote: “Umm... I actually didn’t even (vote), I didn’t have time to vote, so I didn’t go vote” (LY15) while others cited poll closing times...:

But I was disappointed in myself because I actually didn’t take the time to vote, so... No, this was the first year I haven’t, so...

Did you intend to vote?

Yeah, yes. Just ran out of time, went to work early that day, never had a chance to drive from Painesville and my voting station is all the way in Middleburg Heights, so it’s just like, never gonna make it and didn’t do it (LO3).

Some claimed to forget:

I forgot. I forgot. I’m like, “Today’s November 7th... today’s a very important day... and I’m reading the paper . . . and oh yeah, I’m voting . . . and then November 8th I wake up... Ohhh, I should have voted . . . I totally forgot (LY12).

While others felt they just did not know enough to cast a ballot:

I was like, well, not going to vote. And I'm totally guilty of not paying enough attention, I was like, well, I'm not going to vote and it's going to turn out one way or another whether or not I pay attention to it (LY3).

For these respondents, failure to vote was not a political statement in and of itself; rather, it seemed to be evidence of their emotional distance from the political system. Rather than feeling as if they are rejected or ineffectual, LNTS viewers exist outside of the political sphere, and even the hoopla of an election of national importance is not enough to draw them into this world.

Trust in Government

Respondents had mixed levels of trust in the government, although none were particularly positive about the government having their best interests at heart. Most respondents seemed to be uncertain about whether or not they could trust the government as a whole, especially the younger LNTS viewers who grew up during the Bush administration. Although some could point to specific incidents of what they considered to be poor or inappropriate behavior by politicians, awareness of salacious political scandals was minimal. As discussed earlier, even respondents who were able to reference the Foley scandal did not link it to any broader context, with none of the LNTV respondents remembering his name without aid, despite recognizing the frequency of these jokes on their LNTV program of choice:

Yeah (laughs), well when that, I can't remember his name now but that, um, that politician who was having a sexual relationship with one of the pages like I can't remember his name, that was every night, consistently, making jokes about it (LY7).

Despite the involvement of several prominent Ohio Republicans in various political influence scandals (including Governor Bob Taft, who was convicted of a misdemeanor campaign finance charge while in office, and Congressman Bob Ney, who resigned due to his connections to

disgraced lobbyist Jack Abramoff), none of the LNTS respondents brought up Republican corruption as a personal concern that affected their vote during the election period.

Some respondents were unsure about whether or not to trust the government; while they could not think of specific examples of political or governmental wrongdoing, there was a general sense that media authorities and well-informed peers were talking about corruption. As is often the case with LNTS respondents, these individuals were looking to others to help them determine what their perspective should be. Without having that level of information at hand, they tend to remain uncertain:

I don't know, that's a rough question. The government is a broad term. There's some things you might not be able to trust, but, I don't really know—I mean you hear so many bad things about the government these days, you pretty much always have, and, a lot of people say you can't trust the government, that's all I hear. But I don't think I'm experienced enough to know if I can or cannot (LY11).

Other respondents perceive that the government could not be doing too bad of a job, since the United States is still the most powerful country in the world with a relatively high standard of living:

Do you think you could trust the government?

Yeah, I would say for the most part yeah.

How come?

Uh, because the United States would not be as far along as we are right now if we could not (LY13).

For these viewers, the lack of evidence to the contrary is enough to maintain their faith in the government: things seem to be okay, so they probably are. Others share this perception, advocating that our current system is likely the best option available:

So, as opposed to whether or not the government can be trusted yeah, you have no choice. Anyone who wants to get rid of everyone out of Washington and start a renegade government is probably not thinking the clearest that he or she should. Um, you have to put up with the government as it is. It's better here than it could be in a lot other situations (LY9).

As expected for these viewers, very few had adamant positions on whether or not they could trust the government. Most seemed to feel that they wanted to say yes, but were aware enough of public sentiment to know that there was probably more out there that they did not know. As such, they refrained from making an absolute statement.

While LNTS viewers tended to be ambivalent about the government in general, some viewers link their mistrust explicitly to the Bush administration. While respondents did not tend to provide specific policies or events that could generate mistrust, they did have a general sense that the President and his team might have engaged in questionable behavior:

I want to say yes, but I know President Bush has been kind of flaky with, you know, saying one thing and doing another. You know, he's been sending a lot of mixed signals through his campaign. Um, I want to say that I believe I can trust the government but I think President Bush has kind of shaken my trust a little bit in the government (LY10).

Respondents who were the poorest and least educated of the LNTS respondents were the most likely to perceive the government to be the least trustworthy, citing broken promises in war recruiting as an example of how the government would mislead the public:

Do you feel like in general that you can trust the government?

No (emphatic).

Why not?

Because I know a lot of people in the government that say they've gotten screwed over by them.

What do you mean?

Like how, like uh, certain jobs they get in the military that they won't go to war, and they wind up going over there. They pay, they get screwed by the pay, they say all these good things about it and then they're not true.

Is this always the case, or is this where we are right now?

Uh, I hope it's not always like that, but as of now, yes (LY14).

The war in Iraq was cited somewhat frequently as problematic for LNTS respondents; their doubts tend to center on the lack of an exit strategy rather than the decision-making process that led to the initial invasion:

Do you think you can trust the government?

I would hope so, but I think I have my doubts.

Tell me more.

Um, you know I guess for example for the war I don't know that um we have individuals who have individuals in place right now who are going to make the right decisions. I mean, I don't know that I trust the level or the plan moving forward to know that that really is going to make a positive outcome, and I, it bothers me to know that we're, that we're trusting our government to spend that much money on a war that we may never win when we have wars within our own states, within our own country, um, that we don't, we're not taking the time to address and pay attention to, so... (LO3).

This seems to indicate that war-related concerns about the government are in large part primed by current political climates, which at the time of these interviews had become pervasive enough to enter LNTS viewers' limited political worldviews.

Media Usage

LNTS viewers tend to utilize mass media primarily for entertainment purposes: they are looking for an escape, and will tune in for content that will make them laugh or engender an emotional response. While they seem to be heavy media consumers overall, their media preferences do not include news programming. Across the board, their preferred channels, programs, and sites are those that provide opportunities to be entertained (particularly in the case of television and radio) or maintain communication with their interpersonal circles (notably the internet, both through email and social networking sites like Facebook and MySpace). News media usage will be discussed in detail in the next section.

Trust in Media

LNTS viewers do not tend to be overly cynical about mass media, generally perceiving that the news media are presenting facts that, by virtue of the visually recorded nature of most news sources (i.e., video or still cameras) must be grounded in truth:

Thinking about the media, do you think you can trust the media?

Uh, yeah? Sort of?

How come?

Um, they have the camera I guess.

What do you mean?

They have proof, I guess? I dunno (LY14).

Others felt that the institutional standards to which journalists were held meant that traditional news outlets could be trusted:

Yes, which may be naive, but I feel if it's on the news, then I can believe what they're telling me is true, like, they're reporters and their job is to report the truth, and, like unbiased. So, I mean, when it comes to politics everyone's biased, but when it's just like events that have happened, I expect them to be hopefully most unbiased (LY1).

As was the case with trust in government, some do not feel they are equipped to judge the veracity of what they see, hear, and read in mainstream news media, and thus can only answer with uncertainty:

I think... in general I guess that for media I think that I can get the information I'm looking for, I often don't know how much the media is one-sided or what they're really, are they taking two sides or are they getting different opinions or different perspectives... I just often wonder what the media is telling the, you know our population (LO3).

While some LNTS respondents cited a perceived bias in mainstream media, they often had difficulty providing concrete examples: for some, it seemed that they had heard about media bias, and were trying to give the "right" answer without having the data needed to justify their claims. In other words, this perception came second-hand, grounded in what they had heard from those they perceive to be informed, rather than conclusions they themselves had drawn through

experience. These respondents' perceptions of where corruption or bias could come into play within the news media institution was limited to only what actually aired on television or was written in the newspaper. Almost none of the interviewees raised concerns about media ownership or the role editorial choices play in determining what gets covered and who gets a voice in mainstream media, and those who did were not able to articulate how these institutional factors could be problematic.

It is important to note that, among most of these respondents, it was evident that little thought had been given to whether or not media can, in fact, be trusted. Most, particularly those where were toward the lower end of the political evolution matrix, were surprised that they were asked to give an opinion about the veracity of stories or the role news media can play in society. This was clearly not something that was of major concern; in general, they seemed to perceive that the news media—while certainly not perfect—was performing sufficiently well and thus did not require attention or concern.

Other Resources

- **RQ₄: What other resources do respondents incorporate and cite?**

News Sources

As discussed above, news media usage is quite low among these respondents; they rarely seek out any traditional “hard news” sources. Rather, LNTS viewers tend to emphasize information that is either “candy-coated” (such as morning television programs like *The Today Show* or *Good Morning America*) or “stumbled across” in the course of another task (including headlines on Yahoo! while checking email, noticing a newspaper headline on their way to class, or noticing text on a scroll while flipping past cable news stations on television). For example, one respondent claims:

Um, if I like wake up and I've been watching something and it's on and I find it interesting I'll watch it. It's never purposely switching to a channel, uh, I just accidentally stumble upon it... (LY6).

While they recognize that this is not an ideal way to acquire information about politics and current events, this passivity reflects LNTS viewers' general apathy about and disinterest in the political system. Not surprisingly, LNTS viewers did not cite any rituals or routines surrounding their news consumption; in fact, their routine is the lack of any conscious effort to access news and information about politics and current events.

Perceptions of News Media

In general, LNTS viewers perceive mainstream media as entertainment resources rather than informational. As such, they tend to gravitate toward content that will keep them amused or intrigued, rather than fare which is intellectually challenging:

I know that murders go on, but sometimes watching the news can be depressing, especially like local news, or even, especially national too, with the war going on, suicide bombings you hear every day and that's probably one of the main reasons I don't watch the news, and my news is ESPN (laughs)... (LY11).

Local Television News

For LNTS viewers, local television news does not seem to be perceived as necessarily relevant. This was particularly the case in Athens, which carried local news broadcasts from Columbus, OH and Parkersburg, WV affiliates. For students who came from other Ohio cities (such as Cleveland or Cincinnati), these news broadcasts had no information that was relevant to them or their lives and thus did not merit attention. These respondents would claim to watch local television news when at their parents' homes, but did not even necessarily know what channels they would watch, indicating that they are not the drivers of these channel choices:

Um, no, I don't watch Fox News, I don't watch MSNBC, I don't watch local news—I watch local news (at my parents' home), but um I don't even know what channel that is... (LY7).

A lack of truly “local” information was not the only deterrent reported by LNTS viewers. Many of the respondents who did not watch local television news claimed that their lack of attention was directly related to the type of stories covered in the newscasts. This reason was cited by respondents in both study locations and across age groups. For these respondents, the focus on sensational stories about crime, scandal, and corruption was not appealing:

Do you ever watch local news?

No, not local. Like, no.

How come?

Uh, (long pause), I don't know I just... I... I guess I do, I'd say I do because I hear things that happen locally you know like, but the only thing you hear happening locally is like rape or murders or something in the school, you know what I mean? Something like that. So I guess I hear that, so I guess I have to listen to it, but uh, I don't like look for it. I don't seek for it (LY13).

This sentiment was echoed by a fellow Clevelander:

So what do you think about local news?

Um, I have... I, it's like the local news is good just to see a general overview. I think sometimes the local news depicts too much violence and focuses on, um, those issues rather than focusing on some other positive issues that are going on in the Cleveland area that I don't think they shed too much light on... It's more about negative and violence and crimes that I, you know sometimes I think that leads to people just turning it off 'cause they don't want to hear all the negative going on in the world.

Do you ever shut it off because of the negativity?

I... yes. Yeah, sometimes I do. Just because I, you know it's just, it's not that I (don't) want to understand or know about it, it's just maybe it's the mood I am in, maybe it's like I'm getting ready to go to work and I have to face a long day and I'm like, you know I wanna get a little more uplifted than see that, so I'd rather wait until like I'm settling down at night and just you know start thinking through some of those issues (LO3).

Not only was viewership of local television news quite low among LNTS viewers in general, it also was not perceived to be of the same informational caliber as other news sources. Even for those viewers who did tune in at least occasionally, local television news provided a brief update or overview, but did not contain enough information about topics to be a sufficient news source in and of itself.

This is in large part related to the format of local newscasts, where a 30-minute broadcast is expected to cover international, national, state, and community news, as well as staples like weather and sports. Because most packages are limited to minutes, there is an inherent lack of depth to coverage. In a world where cable news channels are providing coverage and commentary throughout the day and the internet offers constant access to multiple stories about events, local television broadcasts cannot possibly have the same depth.

In addition, respondents seemed to perceive that local television news stations were trying to generate the largest possible audience and thus did not want to alienate potential viewers by pushing one agenda over another:

And the local news, it's, it's difficult to say. You know the local news, about national politics they don't talk about it much so, they give like half-news. Then you have to figure it out.

What do you think about the half-news that you have to figure out?

I think they want as much audience as possible, the local news, so they don't want to upset one part of the population that sees the news, so they, they try not to have point of views generally, usually (LO1).

While LNTS viewers are likely to make these claims about local television news, it is essential to consider these perceptions within the context of their overall rejection of mainstream news media. It is unlikely that these respondents would tune into local television news if it did do a better job of giving complete and comprehensive coverage of news stories and stopped sensationalizing local news. While they may not like what is currently on local news, they would most likely reject any type of content within this format.

Cable Television

For most LNTS viewers, cable television news channels are not even on the radar for anything more than flipping past on their way to other channels. Most are rarely, if ever, tuning in, which makes sense considering their lack of interest in news and current events. Despite this

dearth of attention, most recognize that certain channels are associated with political agendas, particularly Fox News (conservative). As was the case with perceptions of media bias overall, however, perceptions of the political leanings of cable news networks seemed to be something respondents had heard, rather than a perception that came from direct personal experience. This was particularly true for respondents who were enrolled in college during their interview, since most had taken media studies and/or political science courses in which they had heard about associated bias on cable television channels.

These perceptions of bias are exacerbated by LNTS viewers' belief that most of the content on these networks consists of party loyalists engaging in mean-spirited and hostile debates. This was extremely unappealing for a number of respondents:

Um, sometimes I just get too fed up, 'cause like when I'm flipping through channels, sometimes, and I come across CNN. Like most of the time I just flip it, sometimes it's in the middle of a debate, whatever, between two parties, and uh, I just, sometimes I see drunk people acting childish... (LY11).

As was the case with local television news, this focus on the negative was cited as a reason for tuning out and turning off. For LNTS viewers, there is enough negativity in the world, and they do not feel the need to introduce more via media coverage of politics and current events.

Broadcast Television

Most LNTS respondents typically did not differentiate between national news and local news broadcasts, and tended to use the network's name as the referent regardless of the news programming to which they were referring. They did recognize that the national nightly news broadcasts focused more strongly on international and national stories and issues, but these topics did not seem to be more attractive to LNTS respondents than local news broadcasts.

Morning television shows, on the other hand, are often pointed to as examples of how LNTS respondents like to get their news and information. From their perspective, these programs

give more information than local news broadcasts and do so in a manner that provides the context they need to understand a story. Morning shows are in many ways the epitome of the “candy-coated” news LNTS viewers prefer; because information is presented in small, easily digested “bites,” viewers feel like they are keeping abreast of news and information in a manner that is much less painful than traditional news sources:

You know, I don’t know... I don’t know what it is, why it or maybe it’s the way it’s portrayed or it’s the people that do the news channels that I feel like I get good information from like the Today Show or like the, the I get the good overview of like one segment (LO3).

These programs also offer the types of information in which these viewers tend to be more interested, such as popular culture:

No, I do like the information I’ve been getting from (the Today Show). Um, I mean I do like being informed on stuff other than politics and current events, like they do talk about, like more pop culture or what ever you want to call it, entertainment, um, and I just, I do like the information, I think it is presented well, and I enjoy them, Matt and Al and all the kids... (LY1).

As previous research has indicated, women are more likely than men to watch morning shows and are much more likely to cite these types of shows as a preferred news source. Even those who point to morning shows as news sources recognize that getting news and information is not the primary reason they tune in, however:

I watch the Today Show in the morning, but that’s not always really current events, it’s like, you know, how to baste your turkey and how to dress, like, so it’s not always real current events that I catch. And like the one hour that I get to watch it (LY1).

Most recognize that this is not a satisfactory way to keep up with news, but for viewers, it seems to be “good enough” to meet their needs.

Internet

Regular internet usage seems to be the norm for LNTS viewers, particularly among those with college educations. Because they are constantly going online to access information (such as

sports scores, movie times, and restaurant recommendations) or to check their email, the internet is often a go-to source if they do want to learn more about a particular topic. For example, when they do come across a headline that is of interest, LNTS viewers will occasionally attempt to learn more about it. In these instances, most claim to go online to learn more, whether via a search engine (typically Google or Yahoo! News) or going straight to the website of what they consider to be a reputable news outlet (such as CNN.com).

Most respondents did not seem overly concerned with the veracity of news gathered online; they seemed to perceive that, as long as they stayed with news sources that come from national or widely respected publications, they could trust the information they found. While Yahoo! News headlines are a major source of “stumbled across” information for LNTS viewers, most had not thought about where Yahoo! accessed their stories. They were trusting in the Yahoo! brand to ensure they were getting accurate information.

Newspapers

Newspapers are not in the media repertoire for most LNTS viewers, particularly for those in the Cleveland area. For those who are using newspapers at least occasionally, they are often choosing to engage with content that is not related to news and current affairs: “I read the horoscope and the funnies, and sports” (LO4). Other respondents agreed:

Maybe the Plain Dealer or USA Today, and I’ll be honest, I go straight to the sports, and that’s it! I might read the headlines of the very front page, um, but I don’t read anything in there.

How come?

Um, a lot of stuff doesn’t interest me, a lot of politics don’t interest me, I think, now, this is my own opinion, I think a lot of stuff people argue way too much about and sometimes I just can’t stand it, so I just go to something I’m interested in, that’s sports... (LY11).

In Athens, respondents were somewhat likely to pick up the free University-related paper (The Post), but most seemed to feel it was “barely a newspaper”: “I mean I read The Post, I don’t

really consider that a source of, a news source, but... (laughs)" (LY7). In keeping with this group's preference for entertainment over news, many respondents claimed to pick up The Post to complete the crossword puzzle, get sports scores, and keep occupied while waiting for class to start, rather than for news about politics and current events. These findings are not surprising in light of previous research that has consistently found newspaper readership steadily dropping, particularly among young adults.

Radio

No LNTS respondents cited radio as a news source; if they did hear news via this medium, it was while being entertained (such as during a morning show or during a disc jockey's patter between songs). Notably, no LNTS respondent cited radio as a "deliberate" news source; rather, they talked about "hearing about something" during an interstitial break or during a DJ's patter. While radio is used for entertainment purposes, respondents seem to miss most informational content that is not expressly related to their purpose for tuning in: music. As such, any content that does not serve this need is turned off (usually literally, by changing the channel). This is in clear alignment with quantitative findings, which indicated that radio usage is not predictive of late night television viewership.

Interpersonal Sources

Because they rarely pay attention to news media, LNTS viewers often cite family and friends as primary sources for news and information. This provides a type of "information bypass," allowing respondents to keep tabs on the world at large without having to engage with actual news sources. According to one respondent, his preparation for voting primarily consisted of getting input from family and friends:

A lot of really just kind of unofficial research, talking to individuals I trust, my father mainly, um, friends, I just kind of got a widespread opinion and made my choices from

there. I never did any, like, actual research like on the internet and stuff like that... (LY8).

As discussed above, these interpersonal relationships also provide an incentive for staying abreast of current events, since LNTS viewers do not want to be perceived as “dumb” if they are not aware of a major news story.

Family

For most LNTS viewers, politics and current events were not frequent topics of conversations within their homes during childhood. Some attribute their current lack of interest and involvement in politics to this lack of communication during their formative years:

I feel like that's such a personal question for people, at least that's how I was raised in my family, if you say, “Are you a Republican or Democrat” or “Who did you vote for,” I feel like, at least in my family, I don't know if that's common for everyone else, but at least in my family it's like “Well, don't you think that's rather a personal question?” and you never got an answer. So especially growing up I feel like I was always clueless, like I didn't know, like I might have had an idea of where my parents stood but I couldn't relate it to one party or another or one stance or another. So, actually a lot more fuzzy than I think it should be because it was so hush-hushed on a personal level (LY3).

This type of experience appears to be fairly common among LNTS viewers, most of whom indicate that they rarely discussed politics with their families.

Among those whose families did discuss politics within their homes, these conversations tended to be limited in terms of both scope and participation. Respondents remembered these conversations as happening between their parents and considered themselves observers rather than participants. Even awareness of parental political positions has affected these respondents, however, as discussed above in the “political evolution section.” Reinforcing previous findings, LNTS viewers tended to reflect their parents' politics:

When you were growing up, did your family talk about politics?

We did, not very often, but they would, especially during voting time um, and my parents... I grew up under a Republican household, so when I do vote I usually do vote Republican, and I think I do agree with some of the... most of the things they stand for,

um, some of the things, there are always gray areas, um, some subjects, I really don't go too far into it like a lot of people do (LY11).

Respondents also frequently cited using their parents as educational resources during a campaign, looking to them for guidance in terms of how to cast their ballots:

Do you ever talk about politics with your parents?

Um, well, they, I know that they mentioned that like something, just something about um, how Strickland and things about him that they didn't like, but, pushed me toward the other one, Blackwell, who obviously lost by a lot of people, like 65 to 30 something votes—quite a lot (LY2).

Because parents are perceived as experts who can be trusted, some respondents reported regularly tapping into their parents as political resources. These respondents were the ones who talked about politics more frequently in their home growing up, but—as was the case with their LNTS counterparts—they had not yet undergone any sort of political evolution on their own. Younger respondents were also much more likely than older respondents to turn to their parents for political advice; older respondents tended to seek out the advice of their partner/spouse or their close friends.

Friends

Not surprisingly, LNTS respondents typically reported minimal discussions about politics and current affairs with their friends. When these discussions did occur, they were usually triggered by one specific event (such as Election Day or a major event of national importance). It is important to note, however, that these political discussions are rarely—if ever—initiated by the LNTS viewer. Rather, these viewers typically report one of two scenarios: a topic that has come on their “radar” is raised to find out if anyone knows anything about it (with the goal of reassurance that they are not the only one who is tuned out), or one of their few “political friends” who is more aware of politics and current events will initiate a conversation. This is not necessarily desirable for the LNTS viewer, however:

Do you and your friends ever talk about current events/politics?

Yeah. I got my one buddy Ross's brother's all into it and it's bad news 'cause they'll go on for like hours about it. And I think it's annoying.

And so, when they talk about it, do you participate?

No.

Do you ever want to?

No. It'll just make the conversation go on longer. It's just annoying.

Is there ever a time when you do want to talk about politics?

Not really, no. I don't really care about it (LY14).

Others take a more positive outlook on talking about politics with their friends and family, however. For some, this provides a good opportunity to tap into the expertise of respected others, saving time and effort when making decisions:

Honestly, um, I took a lot of ah, input from other people other than the TV, other than the media. I took a lot of input from my brother, ah, who works on campaigns and stuff (LY13).

Others appreciate the "headline plus" nature of friends' assessments of current events, wherein the friend cuts through the clutter of what is reported in the media and gives a skeletal outline of pertinent information and events. Because these "bite-sized" pieces are more easily digested, LNTS viewers feel less overwhelmed and more capable of understanding the event or story.

Entertainment and/or Information

- **RQ₅: Where do respondents locate their program in terms of their media consumption and preferences? In other words, do they consider the program to be an entertaining news source, or an entertainment show that happens to have political content?**

Because they were recruited as "heavy" viewers, LNTS respondents tended to be passionate about their program of choice. They often had limited perspectives of the other programs, particularly Leno versus Letterman (which air at the same time). Notably, very few LNTS viewers watched "The Daily Show," with only the Letterman viewers at the higher

(moderate) end of the political sophistication scale showing any cross-viewership between their program and “The Daily Show.”

While viewers could clearly differentiate among the three hosts, their programs were less clearly defined in contrast to each other. Most respondents felt like the content of the monologues was generally interchangeable, both in terms of targets and the nature of the jokes told. Leno’s monologue was thought to be the longest and Letterman’s the shortest (with supporting evidence provided by Letterman respondents who would “flip over” to see who were the scheduled guests on Leno), while Conan’s monologue was thought to be the least predictable in terms of length and content.

Perceptions of “The Tonight Show with Jay Leno”

Viewers of “The Tonight Show” appreciated Leno’s humor, which they perceive to be “classier” than the other hosts. According to one respondent, “It’s smart humor, and classic, and I like it” (LO1). Across the board, LNTS viewers perceive Leno to be the most mainstream of the hosts, which was a positive trait for Leno’s audience but much less appealing to those who do not watch him. For his viewers, being mainstream was associated with professionalism, kindness, courtesy, and an overall good nature:

I think it’s a almost a nice humor, like he means well, like he doesn’t really want to hurt anyone’s feelings and he realize—I think he realizes like it’s just a joke, like, this isn’t anything against you. But, I think that he’s a gentle human, I don’t even know if that’s it, (laughs) but, um, um, yeah, that’s how I’d guess is the best way to describe it (LY1).

For Leno viewers, the program offers an opportunity to relax and unwind while they get ready for bed. They are not particularly looking for cutting edge or intellectual humor; rather, they want “brain candy” that will give them a good chuckle without much thought or effort.

Letterman, Conan, and “The Daily Show” viewers perceived this mainstream quality in quite a different light, however, considering it to be evidence of Leno’s lack of originality and

passion for his job; for these respondents, “He’s pedestrian. Average” (DO5). These respondents did not see Leno as a time-tested stand-up comedian who was writing his own jokes or putting his personality out there for the world to see; rather, they perceived him to be a performer who relied on others to script his program:

I just feel like Leno... I mean some of the stuff that he says is just so, it’s almost like they kind of told him to say it, so then it’s almost more like a sitcom and not like a talk show (LY7).

Others found him to be predictable, going for the “easy” joke rather than looking for a more sophisticated punchline. This was related to a sense of “staleness,” making Leno feel like a program that was geared toward a much older generation. When asked to describe Leno’s humor, a Conan viewer gave the following response:

Ah, dated. I don’t know, I can’t watch him anymore. I used to watch him but I can’t watch him anymore. I feel like it’s so, I feel like his jokes are just so, like, you know where he’s going before he even gets there. It’s like all right, this joke ... it’s just so typical... He’s – I just can’t stand him... I just feel like he’s outdated. I feel like I see my mom laughing at Leno a lot more than I would (LY6).

These perceptions are particularly interesting when considered in relation to ratings data, which indicate Leno increasingly dominates the 11:35 p.m. time slot against Letterman, including among the 18-24 demographic.

Contributing to the “mainstream” perception of Leno is what viewers perceive to be the simplistic structure of his jokes. Most of Leno’s political content comes in the opening monologue of his program, which typically stays true to the “set-up, punchline” format of traditional stand-up. Leno rarely uses video or any sort of effects in his comedy segments, unlike his late night counterparts. For some, this is further evidence of Leno’s rigidity: “Leno just seems straightforward, like ‘I’m going to do my show; this is what I’m going to do’” (LY5).

For some Leno viewers, however, this is part of his appeal. Because he is straightforward in his approach, his jokes are perceived to be more easily understood:

Like he doesn't like, his jokes are pretty much like, saying it as it is. He's not using big words to cover it up, he's not... he doesn't try and cover it up at all. Like he is like "Bush is an idiot," yep, he's an idiot, you know, so it's just kind of like—I don't know. Often when I watch David Letterman I'm not laughing, I don't get it (laughs). But when I watch Jay Leno, it's like "oh, that's hilarious." So, I don't know (LY4).

Regularly broadcast segments on Leno's program were credited as reasons to tune in, notably "Headlines" and "Jaywalking." Respondents appreciated the opportunity to poke fun at the hilarity found in everyday life, and, surprisingly, no one questioned the legitimacy of the content.

Honestly, to be completely honest, I always make sure I watch on Monday nights for the Headlines – the funny headlines. That's my favorite part, I don't know, something about funny typos get me excited (LY1).

These two segments were cited by non-primary Leno viewers as reasons to tune in, with some Letterman viewers positing that they would turn to Leno at the end of Letterman's Monday monologue to catch "Headlines."

Leno is also recognized as the host with the best "gets," boasting the highest caliber A-list actors and musical acts. Because Leno has the highest ratings of the late night programs, he is perceived as getting acts on his show at the peak of their popularity. For some, this was evidence of his somewhat sycophantic interviewing style:

Uh, he sucks up to his guests. Definitely sucks up to his guests. He's definitely just looking for, you know, he wants them to come back again you know, he's just... He wants to be liked. Yeah, definitely (LY13).

In general, Leno is perceived to be "soft" on his guests, staying away from asking tough questions and instead sticking to scripted exchanges that show the guests in their best light.

While some criticized Leno for this approach, most recognized that this emphasis on a positive experience for guests ensures that Leno remains the program of choice for top-tier celebrities, and—as a result—the A-listers keep coming back. This was perceived to be a central component of Leno's appeal for viewers, with most admitting that they did tune in to see their

favorite celebrities when they appeared. Perceptions of Leno are often driven by his ability to attract guests. During the focus groups, respondents were asked to describe what it would be like to go to parties thrown by each of the late night hosts. Invariably, Leno's parties had by far the best guest lists, with expected attendees including such luminaries as George Clooney and Julia Roberts. For most respondents, this was a reason to attend: they could meet and greet with Hollywood's finest. While politicians might attend these parties, they were also the A-list of that world, including former President Bill and Senator Hillary Clinton as well as California Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger.

Targets

Despite the perception that Leno has a longer monologue than other hosts, most felt that he targeted the same people as Letterman and Conan. Almost all Leno viewers cited a standard stable of celebrities who regularly found themselves in a negative spotlight as the main victims of Leno's humor, including Paris Hilton, Britney Spears, and Lindsey Lohan, all of whom had been fodder for ridicule due to various (and numerous) scandals and peccadillos during fall 2006/winter 2007, when data were collected for this project. Viewers also perceived that Leno ridiculed a regular group of politicians, including President Bush, Vice President Cheney, and the Clintons. Respondents at the higher end of the political sophistication scale also identified politicians who had recently been involved in political scandals, notably Congressman Foley (albeit not by name). As expected, based on their news media attention and levels of political sophistication, very few respondents had limited levels of unaided recall of political names and stories that had been covered in Leno's monologue.

In general, Leno was perceived to be the most likely to keep making jokes about "old news" and dated topics. For example, his Halloween monologue (used as stimulus in this research) included a joke about Dick Cheney shooting a quail, referencing a hunting accident

that had occurred months earlier.³ Others cite his continued mocking of the Clinton family as evidence of the dated nature of his humor: “But, because he makes fun of the Clinton family a lot, still, and they’re, ah, they’re not even, haven’t even been in office in so long” (LO2). It is notable that this respondent did not associate mocking of the Clintons with Hillary Clinton’s Senate position or her bid for the Presidency, which was widely considered to be extremely likely during the data collection period. This sentiment was echoed by another Leno viewer:

(I don’t like), you know, just the fact that some people haven’t been in the news for years and they’re constantly brought up, you know.

Like what?

Um, like, you know, um Bill Clinton, for example. He’s almost like a private citizen now, so... (LO2).

Ideology and Bias

Leno’s viewers did not have a clear or consistent perception of his personal ideology, nor did they particularly recognize a bias in terms of his joke content or interviews. Most did not associate him with either political party or any ideological perspective, perhaps supported by the perception that he is a mainstream entertainer who makes an effort not to offend anyone. When pressed to make a guess in terms of Leno’s party affiliation, some viewers felt that his location in L.A. indicated a “left-leaning” perspective:

I think he’s little more left wing – little more on the left side with issues. I don’t know, honestly I don’t know, he could be, honestly just because of the way I’ve noticed, he’s just been a little more left wing throughout the years but, um, it’s possible. He does do his shows from California, obviously, a heavy Democratic state, so maybe that has some influence on how he handles his comedy (LY10).

Others, however, saw this non-offensive, mainstream nature as evidence that Leno leans conservative. Those at the higher end of the political sophistication scale (particularly viewers of

³ On February 11, 2006, Dick Cheney was on a quail hunting trip in Kenedy County, Texas. During the hunt, he accidentally shot Henry Whittington, an elderly lawyer from Texas, in the face with buckshot. While Whittington was in the hospital, news of the accident broke. Cheney and the Bush administration were criticized for attempting to keep a lid on the event.

“The Daily Show”) were more likely to perceive Leno as conservative, citing his relationship with California Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger and the more centrist nature of his program. Again, these perceptions were vague at best; most could not clearly associate Leno with either party or ideological perspective.

Entertainment-Information Scale

One question that has consistently run through literature on late night television comedy is whether respondents consider the programs to be entertaining information sources or informative entertainment sources (Young and Tinsinger, 2006). For Leno, respondents clearly perceive the program to be an entertainment show, with information as an ancillary by-product (Baum 2003) that comes through the jokes and interviews. Notably, viewers were more likely to cite information learned regarding popular culture and celebrities than politics or current events, including finding out about new movie releases and hearing information about the happenings of the young “jet set.”

Perceptions of “Late Show with David Letterman”

David Letterman is generally considered to be the most acerbic of the late night talk show hosts, with a cutting humor that takes no prisoners. He is perceived to be willing to go to an extreme to make a point, and he is less concerned with popular appeal than Leno is. For viewers, this is a core part of his appeal:

I think it's more, um, it's very sarcastic, it's more I think sometimes he just has the ability to hit home. He doesn't do it to the point—how do I want to say this—he doesn't, he often I think hits home when he needs to hit home, so he doesn't, um, he might take it to an extreme, but it's a needed extreme.

He's poking fun at something that for whatever reason, I can—the person that comes to mind would be Bush. Whatever, whatever, whatever person he's ridiculing he has, they have to at some level deserve the ridicule. And so when um, when he speaks to it, is when it's hitting home. So if it's, um, you know sometimes it's, if he's making a sarcastic comment or he's saying something that really, um, I think it's just, it's people—it's shock value, but at the same time it provokes, like, yeah, like it's, I'm not disagreeing with you,

or I'm not not laughing with you, so at some way you've kind of um I don't know, I don't know how to describe it. You, you've kind of just maybe, it's everything I wanted to say, but you're saying out loud. I guess that describes it (LO3).

Non-viewers also share in this perception:

I don't want to say, like, he wants to hurt people's feelings, but I feel like he's less worried about people liking him, like he's like, "well, I'm Letterman... you can like me or you don't have to like me" (LY1).

This "gruff" persona in many ways defines perceptions of Letterman, for viewers and non-viewers alike:

I feel like, when I picture Letterman in my head, he has this frown on his face, his eyebrows are always down and I feel like that's, he's got that serious (unclear) about him and he makes his jokes but he always doesn't laugh about himself, he just kind of has this seriousness about his face and makes his jokes and other people laugh and that's the way it is (LY3).

While viewers find this to be quite appealing, non-viewers are often turned off by Letterman's demeanor, which is often perceived as elitist and pseudo-intellectual, and can be more difficult to comprehend than Leno's. One Leno viewer was particularly vehement in her explanation for why she prefers Leno over Letterman:

I'm just aw... I'm just ah—there's nothing else on unless you want to watch – what's that short guy's name, ummm, the other one's that on, channel ummm, David Letterman. He's annoying.

Tell me more.

He tries to stay mad. Like, Jay Leno I actually find funny. David Letterman I find obnoxious.

How come?

Um, I don't know. It's like his jokes are big and not funny.

What do you mean by "big"?

Yeah, I think it's just like, I think what it is, is that it's over my head. Like, I don't like, get it. Like maybe it's a little bit more political, little bit more – like Jay Leno kind of is like blatantly out there and his jokes are just like – this is really – you know. I mean, granted, David Letterman's not always like that but sometimes I'm just like, (laugh) what? (LY4)

To that end, Letterman is perceived by viewers to be a good mix of “highbrow” and “lowbrow” humor, with his own personal cocktail of intelligent commentary juxtaposed with stupid tricks (of both the pet and human varieties). This range of humor means that his program can appeal to people across the political sophistication scale, which helps explain why his viewers are located at the highest and lowest ends of the LNTS respondents. Letterman is also perceived to have the most variety in terms of format in his show, using video clips and audience segments more often than Leno or Conan. This could have implications for viewers’ learning political information from Letterman’s program, since respondents who watched clips that included videos were more likely to remember the content presented and could more accurately repeat those themes to the interviewers than typical monologue jokes.

Viewers also appreciate and cite Letterman’s preference for using “running jokes” throughout and across episodes:

I mean, the one thing I know about Letterman, that he’ll make a joke early in the show and then more times or not, he’ll come back with it at some random time, like later in the show, and I just think that’s hilarious (LY11).

This seems to lend an “inside joke” nature to his comedy, reinforcing viewers’ perception that they are part of what can be likened to a “clique” for those in the know. Non-viewers also recognized this but felt it was a strike against the program. Because they did not watch often enough to understand these jokes, they could not understand why they might be considered humorous. For example, the clips shown of Letterman as stimulus during data collection included two references to Hillary Clinton and pantsuits. For those who did not regularly tune into Letterman, these jokes made no sense. Viewers explained, however, that these jokes were frequently made over the course of a show and was a running “gag.” It is important to note, however, that none of these respondents connected the pantsuit jokes to any sort of overall theme about Hillary Clinton as a powerful woman operating within a typically male world, nor did this

inspire any discussion on gender bias in the political system. For Letterman viewers (and LNTS respondents who were exposed to these clips during focus groups), this joke was simply about a clothing option.

When asked to describe what a party thrown by Letterman would be like, respondents tended to be a bit hesitant about attending. They seemed to perceive that they might be judged in this environment and were not certain that they could fit in with Letterman and his crowd. While some of the A-list guests in attendance at Leno's party might be present at Letterman's, this was perceived to be a smaller, more intimate affair. Respondents also expected that high-class beverages would be served that required a certain modicum of knowledge or expertise, such as wine or scotch. This exacerbated their perception that this would be a party at which they might not feel comfortable, although Letterman viewers still wanted to attend.

Targets

Letterman's targets were perceived to be similar to Leno's, with a particular emphasis on celebrities and politicians. While he was known to make jokes about pop princesses and celebutants (such as Spears and Hilton), Letterman was more closely associated with Martha Stewart and Oprah Winfrey. These women are both subjects of running gags (as discussed above in relation to Hillary Clinton). In fact, Letterman's fixation with getting Oprah onto his show became significant enough that it became the subject of a Super Bowl advertisement in January 2007. Letterman is also known for making fun of high-level politicians, including Bush, Cheney, and the Clintons. Respondents who place higher on the political sophistication scale also cite key figures in the Bush administration as frequent targets, including former Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, Secretary of State Condeleeza Rice, and former Secretary of State Colin Powell. It is likely that these respondents are more likely to retain these names because they have

a generally higher awareness of news and current events, and thus have a framework for contextualization (as evidenced by the quantitative findings discussed in the previous chapter).

Ideology and Bias

Respondents did not have a clear perception of Letterman's personal political stance or party affiliation. While most viewers recognized his personal antipathy toward the administration of George W. Bush, particularly in terms of the war in Iraq (about which Letterman had been fairly vocal), this was not attributed to an overall political agenda. Rather, it was perceived to be specific to this administration and this war. Viewers also reported that they felt Letterman would be critical of any political leader, regardless of party, and felt that the same amount of attention would be paid to any president, not just President Bush.

When asked to guess Letterman's party affiliation, responses were mixed. Some felt the very gruffness that defines Letterman indicated he was probably a Republican: "They're all grumpy old men, and he is, too, so that would make sense I guess (laughs)" (LY6). Others perceived him to lean toward the Democratic Party, citing their perception that most people in show business were thought to be Democrats. As was the case with Leno, however, respondents admitted that they were making "wild guess(es)," and had no clear idea what Letterman's ideological perspective would be in reality.

Entertainment-Information Scale

As was the case with Leno, Letterman's viewers perceived that this program primarily serves as an entertainment vehicle. While the informational content is pertinent and appreciated, it is not central to viewership. Letterman viewers were more likely than Leno viewers to say that the politically-charged content is necessary for their entertainment, although this perspective was essentially limited to those at the higher end of the political sophistication scale. This is likely

because these respondents are more tuned into and appreciative of this content, unlike those at the lowest end of the scale.

“Late Night with Conan O’Brien”

As mentioned earlier, “Late Night with Conan O’Brien” was the show that boasted the highest levels of cross-viewership among respondents. This was particularly true among younger LNTS viewers, most of whom tuned in at least occasionally. In general, Conan was perceived to be goofy, unique, and willing to go to any lengths to get a laugh: “He’s just a big, tall, goofy red-haired guy that doesn’t mind making an ass of himself.” Respondents perceived that Conan was capable of making smart, sophisticated jokes, but was just as comfortable playing the fool. When asked to describe his humor, one Conan viewer responded:

Um, very juvenile, um, but at the same time, um, I feel like he’s very intellectual, he’s very smart, but at the same time he’s just, he’s just, his humor’s so, just, adolescent, I don’t know, I love it (LY7).

Conan is also credited with constantly keeping his program fresh, experimenting with new sketches and segments that are wholly original. This is considered one of the program’s best assets for most viewers:

Um, just the way he’s very off the wall, and very, um, very kooky, very zany, um, I like the fact that his show isn’t cookie cutter per se. I like the fact that he’s kind of all over the place, you know, with jokes, how he makes fun of himself and just the way he does like skits and everything. It’s not like a traditional late night show like a Leno would be (LY10).

Viewers and non-viewers alike are quick to recognize that Conan comes across as the most down-to-earth and genuine of the hosts. Respondents perceive that Conan’s “comedic standard” is what he finds funny, and they believe that he is quick to make fun of himself when things do not go as planned during the course of his show:

Um, I, he, I like that he can make fun of himself, instead of, and like making, like when they do stupid stuff on the show like he’ll make fun, he’ll say like “Wow that was really dumb.” You know, I think that his humor is, um, like I just think it’s genuine. I don’t

think he's putting on a show. I think he like enjoys what he's doing, I think that he finds his stuff funny and if he doesn't find it funny then he makes a joke about how it's not funny, so...

Why does that work for you?

It just makes it seem more real, it doesn't seem scripted, I just feel like Leno, I mean some of the stuff that he says is just so, it's almost like they kind of told him to say it so then it's almost more like a sitcom and not like a talk show... I mean it's just very obvious that Conan is just kind of winging it most, a lot of the time, so I just like that he's more like he does mess up and they do say stupid things and he you know just makes it seem more real and not as, I don't know, not as fake as some of the other shows. Not as like big as some of the other shows (LY7).

This self-deprecation is appealing to viewers, who associate this with accessibility and relatability.

While Leno is typically credited with being perceived as the "everyman" in the mainstream press (as discussed in Chapter 1 of this dissertation), young LNTS viewers clearly associated this perception with Conan. In fact, almost all of the younger respondents felt that Conan was the most attuned to their demographic:

I think because, just, I don't know, um, I guess, I think that his rate of comedy is geared toward people our age and our um demographic, and I think that I pick up on that humor and even if I don't necessarily get the joke, just his delivery and like the way he goes about it. I feel like I understand all the time (LY6).

Not only is Conan perceived to be the most relatable for young viewers, his program is also credited with bringing in cutting-edge musical acts and guests who are just beginning to come into the public eye.

Because Conan is so closely associated with young viewers, some worry that Conan will have to become more mainstream when he takes over Leno's time slot in 2009. They recognize that his original and quirky style may not translate to Leno's older audience; in fact, they anticipate that it will not:

I think Jay, watching Jay verses Conan, I think Jay is more, I don't know what the right word is, but I think Jay would hit more of a general audience, where as Conan is for more

of, um, more of an – I think Conan is very, very popular you know, for our generation, but not so much, you know, among maybe people 40 and older.

How come?

Um, just the way his humor is, just the way he's off the wall, and very spontaneous, I don't think a 40-year-old is going to find a masturbating bear all that funny. I don't know, I just think Jay, um, and Dave too, just have um a better way of handling the older crowd where Conan's more for the younger crowd (LY10).

According to another respondent, there is a discernable difference in terms of maturity between

Leno and Conan:

Leno does, like, more things relating to the public, relating to – and I think Conan, like he definitely like, touches the concept of what's going on, but at the same time he does more like, skits and types of things that I just think funny- like he'll do two people mating and what they'll look like and just all kind of weird things that may seem like, corny and lame, but, you never see that kind of stuff coming on Leno. Like Leno, I think, has more of a mature atmosphere and Leno has more, or um, Conan has more of an immature atmosphere (LY5).

This perceived spontaneity and the belief that anything can happen are central to viewers' appreciation for this program and, as a result, respondents hope that they do not start recognizing signs that Conan is taming himself in preparation for a mainstream audience.

This sense of Conan as being the most “like us” was reflected through respondents' expectations for a party thrown by Conan. They expected it would be held at his apartment, featuring good beer and “bar food” (potato skins, mozzarella sticks, pizza, etc.). The guest list would be eclectic and represent all areas of popular culture, including the new acts with which Conan is associated. Respondents felt this party would be the most laid back and comfortable, and announced their intentions to stay until they were forcibly removed. For respondents, this party would be the one opportunity they would have to meet cool people and just relax and have fun, rather than feeling like they could not quite measure up.

Targets

While respondents felt that Conan tended to focus on the same targets as Letterman and Leno, they did not feel as though he had the same focus on political content. While Conan was not thought to shy away from these types of jokes, his program tends to include a variety of wacky sketches that take up time Letterman and Leno might spend focusing on politics and politicians.

Ideology and Bias

Because Conan is perceived to be the least political of the late night talk show hosts, respondents had the hardest time placing him on the political scale. He is perceived to be an “equal opportunity offender,” making jokes about whoever is in power rather than focusing specifically on one party or another:

I really don't think he's trying to set up an agenda or trying to attack, you know, a certain president's policy, it's just kind of like more playful jokes, you know, President Bush is a little dumb, or you know, Clinton had an affair with Monica Lewinsky, it's just, it's just kind of like basic stuff like that. I don't think he's trying, you know, to attack anybody or set up kind of an agenda to put anybody down. I think it's more of a moderate stance toward politics (LY10).

When asked to make a guess, most respondents felt that Conan was more likely to be a Democrat than a Republican, citing his Irish-American heritage (a main joke topic on the program) as well as being a New Yorker. They did not feel that there were any signs of his political leanings on the program, however, and felt that he was as likely to mock Democrats as Republicans.

Entertainment-Information Scale

As was the case with Leno and Letterman, Conan was overwhelmingly perceived to be an entertainment program rather than an information program. Respondents were less likely to cite information gained from this program than either of the other talk shows, and their discussion post-clips were limited at best.

Late Night Talk Shows as News Sources

While LNTS viewers were clearly tuning in to their program of choice for entertainment, they still recognized that these programs do serve as informational resources as well. Most LNTS respondents indicated that they learn new pieces of information from these programs at least occasionally. When asked if she ever learned new information from late night talk shows, one respondent replied, “Yeah, actually I do. Um. He’ll talk about something and I’ll be like ‘wow—that’s in the news? I didn’t hear about it’” (LY12). This occurs at varying levels of frequency.

For some, this is not unusual, but happens regularly:

I’d say four times out of five, uh, when they begin the joke, I know what they’re getting into, but I, but yeah there’s always that one time that yeah, that I learn something new. Yeah.

What do you think about that?

I think that’s good for me, but you know, all I pay attention to is myself and my money and sports, like, so it’s kind of different for me, you know, but... I think that’s good, yeah, you know (LY13).

For others, being exposed to new information over the course of a program is the norm rather than an unusual occurrence:

Um, well, just stuff, like stuff, I can’t think of anything recently, um, I mean just stuff in his monologue, stuff will come up and like I might hear something about, like read something in a blurb, in the paper, and just read, like, the headline and then hear more, I don’t know, just him, like his segue into the joke, like, give a little bit of the background like on what actually is going down, and like foreign affairs or another dumb (thing) Bush has done or said or just stuff like that.

How often do you learn from watching Conan?

Like, daily (LY6).

It is important to note that, while respondents may claim they are learning new information, this is not often the case. When asked to “play back” the jokes they had just heard and explain why they were funny, most had a difficult time even remembering what they had heard. It might be more accurate to report that respondents were often exposed to new information, and—thanks to

the strictures of late night comedy (particularly the joke structure during monologues and use of video clips on certain programs) they were given at least some context through which to process and understand the joke.

While no one claimed that these shows are ideal sources of information, most recognized that late night programs do serve an important role for them as viewers. For some, their talk show of choice is one of the few sources of news they are exposed to regularly:

On Letterman, and stuff like that, you know on the monologue or whatever, and that's where I'd get most of my information, because I don't watch the news, I watch the comedy shows (laughs) (LY11).

Because they are not tuning in to other news channels, some advocate that LNTS programs are better than nothing:

Um, it shouldn't be a main source, but I guess it's good that it's a source, because I don't have a lot of them, so... I guess at this point in my life it's probably good to have any source rather than none. So, it's good that at least I'm exposed to it so, to a certain extent (LY3).

Ultimately, LNTS programs seem to serve as a television equivalent to Yahoo! News headlines; respondents are exposed to information as a "by-product" (Baum 2003) while seeking out other benefits (such as email access or entertainment). This information is more acceptable to LNTS viewers because it sates their need for entertainment, offering an opportunity to "check in" with political affairs without having to experience the depressing nature of traditional news:

Some information and a good laugh and in, like information in an interesting way. It isn't just, you know, you turn on the news and it's all, it's all is almost bad news, there's very little good news. And so um, it's bad news as far as, like, they're not reporting badly, but the news is not happy. Um, and so this way you get it with a laugh...

What's good about that?

Doesn't make the world seem as dark and dreary (laugh) um, it's like, well, you know, all this bad crap is happening, but at the same time, you know, you can laugh at it and we'll be fine. It will work itself out, so. I just don't like having to watch – go through all that "ahhhhhggg" like the, like the sad, ugly news... (LY1).

Because they are being exposed to at least a minimal amount of information about politics and current events, some respondents report using these sources as “springboards” to learn more:

There may be times where (Letterman) has, you know where I want to find out more about like why was he just poking fun at so-and-so, you know, or you know, um, he may, it, usually when he brings information forward I’m already pretty much aware of it you know. Um, there’s been a couple times where he’s, like, said something about someone and I’m like, “What? What happened?” so I’ll look the next day on the news or on the radio or ask someone about it (LO3).

While this seems to be a somewhat rare occurrence, this indicates that—while not sufficiently informative to serve as news sources independently—late night talk shows can serve the important role of inspiring viewers to tune into mainstream media for additional details and context.

For some respondents, late night talk shows provide an appealing alternative to mainstream news sources. As discussed above, most LNTS respondents have turned away from news, and some cite the negativity and scurrilous nature of news as reasons to remain tuned out. For these viewers, late night talk shows provide a means of getting information that is less depressing and negative than what is shown on mainstream news; instead, these programs show the humorous side and provide “comedic relief” while getting headlines: “But through (Leno), I get more (information) than I need, you know. But he is just so funny, that I don’t mind to get this news” (LO1). He continues to expound upon the benefits of learning new information from late night talk shows:

So, you know, sometimes what politicians do is ridiculous, and uh, this way it’s a good way to show how ridiculous they are. Not, you know, it’s not like they are politicians like, perfect people that want to do good or like you know, not everything’s corruption, so it’s um, it’s another way to see the news. I like to see both sides of news or presented in a serious way and a funny way.

Showing the public how ridiculous politicians can be is also perceived to be a benefit of late night talk shows for some respondents. These viewers express surprise that the mainstream

media does not cover some of these events, particularly when focusing on Bush's habit of misspeaking. This is a favored topic for respondents, many of whom used examples of "Bush jokes" as a late night staple. For some, the fact that this type of content is more easily found on late night talk shows than on mainstream media is surprising:

Um, I learn from the media in that sense, I think, because they'll pick up a lot of things that I might have missed, like little tiny things that are going on, and they'll show like the presidential clip of the week on Letterman or something like that, and it will be something amazingly entertaining, like how did NBC News not broadcast this? (LY9)

It is important to keep in mind, however, that this is based almost entirely in perception, since these viewers rarely tune in to traditional news sources.

Ultimately, politics and current events are not central to viewers' late night television experiences—while they add value in terms of providing another headline opportunity, they are not core to the programs' appeals. This perception helps explain why LNTS viewers had such a hard time associating hosts with political parties and ideological stances; because politics is not perceived to be a core part of the programs, viewers spend little time considering the political stances of the hosts.

Rituals and Routines

LNTS viewers typically report watching their program of choice while relaxing on a couch or in bed. While they are not explicitly multitasking while watching the program, most report that they are paying tangential attention at best. In other words, respondents indicate that their attention is rarely fully focused on their program of choice; rather, they tune in and out to various parts of the program, often engaging in conversation or getting ready for bed while watching. This type of passive viewership likely contributes to the lack of long-term information recall reported by respondents; since they do not fully mentally engage with the program, the short information "bites" can go by unprocessed. In addition, because respondents are tuning in

to these programs to be entertained, they are not cognitively primed to receive and engage with new information.

Because these programs are rarely rebroadcast in their entirety, most respondents made an effort to catch originally broadcast episodes as often as possible. These programs are perceived to have extremely short shelf lives: jokes and guests quickly become dated, and LNTS viewers felt it was essential to watch the show as close to the original airdate as possible. While the proliferation of digital video recorders (DVRs, including the TiVo brand product that has become the popular reference name for the technology) means that respondents have the option of recording programs and timeshifting them to meet their own schedule needs, no respondents indicated that they consistently record the program for later viewing. Instead, those who recorded the programs did so for one of two reasons: to have a “back-up” in case they were not home on time (although their preference was to watch when the show aired), or to “re-watch” key jokes or fast forward through commercials and parts of the program that did not appeal to them. Regardless of the reason, programs were typically deleted after one viewing.

Uses and Gratifications

As discussed in the literature review, this research question lends itself to examination through the theoretical “lens” of uses and gratifications. As that theory purports, viewers tune into a program that meets their media needs, and—in this instance—LNTV viewers tune into their program of choice because it entertains them. This primary benefit draws their attention and incites them to tune in. What uses and gratifications does not answer, however, is how these viewers then utilize the content to which they are exposed. For that, we must turn to the constructionism.

CHAPTER 6: QUALITATIVE FINDINGS FOR “THE DAILY SHOW” VIEWERS

Political Sophistication

- **RQ₃: How are the LNTS and TDS viewers similar and different in terms of political sophistication?**

Politics and current events are not just a way to pass time for TDS viewers; rather, they are considered hobbies or avocations. These respondents are constantly immersing themselves in these worlds through both media usage and interpersonal conversations. This is not because they have more time on their hands available to spend on news and politics; rather, these respondents deliberately carve time out of their days to ensure they can keep tabs on what is happening in the world around them. Ultimately, TDS viewers seem to be “political hobbyists,” paying close attention to what is going on in the political world because they are passionate about it. This seems to be the same type of relationship others might have with other media-driven arenas, such as sports or music. In fact, one respondent explicitly likened his political avocation during the election period with that of a sports fan:

A typical day, well, see, right now it’s different than the way it usually is, because the election just happened. I mean, I’ve been following that like a football game (DY7).

Because TDS viewers have high levels of political sophistication, new information can be easily understood and integrated into an existing framework. They are quick to identify patterns of behavior, and they tend to contextualize events rather than perceive them as isolated incidents. To continue with the Foley example introduced in the LNTS section, TDS viewers took a wholly different perspective on this scandal. They typically indicated a high level of knowledge about this event and could delineate specific details about the scandal (including Foley’s IM handle, the ages of the alleged victims, and Foley’s rank on the child abuse commission). Perhaps more importantly, these viewers would talk about the Foley affair in terms of broader implications:

potential impact on the November election, evaluations of the Republican leadership who had not responded appropriately to earlier allegations, with respondents noting that this scandal was yet another example of Republican officials being connected to scandal. The Foley case would often inspire TDS respondents to reference other examples of Republican corruption, including such players as Washington lobbyist Jack Abramoff and his connections to Republican leadership (including aforementioned former Ohio Congressman Bob Ney and former House leader and Texas Representative Tom DeLay, who had to step down from his leadership position and did not run for re-election), Ohio Governor Bob Taft and his misdemeanor conviction while in office, and the Thomas Noe rare coin scandal that had rocked the Ohio statehouse.

This high level of information means that TDS viewers are typically all too aware of the faults and foibles of political leaders. As such, some of these respondents exhibited high levels of cynicism about politics and politicians; they were cognizant of multiple examples of corruption and unethical behaviors and thus expressed suspicions about their motivations and behaviors. As the quantitative findings indicated, this does not mean TDS respondents have rejected the political system wholesale. For some, this cynicism is reported to be specific to this administration, and some found hope in the results of the November 2006 election results which found Democrats taking both the House and Senate, as well as the Ohio Governor's seat. This perspective also has inspired some respondents to be active participants in the political system, making an effort to be part of a solution.

Political Knowledge

As indicated above, TDS respondents tend to be incredibly well-informed about politics and current events. Responses to politically oriented questions tended to be lengthy, intricate, and well considered, drawing from multiple sources and proffering numerous examples to support their claims. The information cited in their responses tended to cover an extensive period

of time, indicating a long-term interest in politics as well as a capacity to recall examples and information. The sophisticated and complex schema they have in place serve them well in this capacity; because they have the necessary and appropriate frameworks to promote recall, these data are veritably at their fingertips when needed to construct meaning around new pieces of information.

These viewers had a strong focus on international and national current events, which was often coupled by a lack of knowledge about local news. When asked what issues were most important to them during the November 2006 election, these respondents typically focused on issues of national importance: the war in Iraq and the need for a “regime change” in Washington were two that were frequently cited. Unlike LNTS viewers, TDS respondents did not interpret “issue” to mean a specific ballot issue; rather, they understood this term in a broader sense as overarching subjects of concern (the meaning most often used in politics and mainstream media).

Political Participation

Most TDS viewers voted (or at least claimed to have voted) in the 2006 election, with the vast majority of those individuals supporting Democratic candidates. This is not surprising in light of the political engagement ordered logit regression model presented in the previous chapter, which indicated that support for the Democratic presidential candidate (Kerry) in the 2004 election was a significant predictor of TDS viewership. This does not mean that these respondents were blindly voting on party lines, however. In fact, these respondents seemed to vote based on knowledge and thoughtful reasoning, rather than strictly on party affiliation or other low information heuristics. TDS respondents were also somewhat likely to participate or say they were willing to participate in other ways, including registering voters, signing petitions, or volunteering for campaigns. Most seemed to approach opportunities to participate with the same discerning eye used to evaluate political parties. As such, they are not wholly reliant on

party-affiliated opportunities and instead attempt to find organizations that more fully fit their philosophical perspectives:

To voice my opinion? I'll sign petitions, I send things into like, pre-made letters and stuff like that to send to congressman and stuff like that, if it's stuff that I'm truly passionate about. But ah, I don't, I'm not really involved in political organizations, I'm not part of the Democrats or College Republicans. I don't interact or anything like that here. It's just something, if I want to voice my opinion, I feel like I need to know about it. So if the time does come that I need to go and join an organization or something, I'll know which one to join, which cause I want to be for, and how much time I want to give to something like that, because that's important too (DY5).

This willingness to participate was not across the board, however. As mentioned above, some TDS viewers were disillusioned by the Bush administration (notably, the administration in which the younger respondents came of age, thus providing their sole experiential frame of reference), and they felt that their vote would not matter. For these respondents, accusations of vote fraud, both in Ohio and around the nation, led to a sense of distrust in the electoral system's processes, as well as distrust with the political actors involved in upholding regulations and promoting equal access to voting. Because they typically are incredibly well-informed about politics and political affairs, TDS viewers tend to be all too aware of the "dark side" of American politics; sometimes that awareness leads to a sense of distrust and cynicism.

There is an important point of differentiation here from LNTS viewers. Those respondents tend to be apathetic and are less (or not at all) engaged with the American political system due to a lack of interest—they are just "tuned out." TDS viewers, on the other hand, have actively collected vast amounts of data about politics and politicians and use these data to inform their own personal political perspectives. For some, this led to the choice to "turn away": consciously opting out of the political system in terms of traditional measures.

This does not mean that these respondents see themselves as being politically inactive, however. Rather, some TDS viewers consider their political engagement as its own form of

participation. Their sheer level of political activity, including staying up-to-date on current affairs and regularly engaging in sophisticated discourse, means that these respondents perceive themselves to be politically active, regardless of their voter status. For these TDS viewers, talking about politics is an example of participating, since often they are informing those around them and thus informally campaigning for the candidates and issues about which they are passionate. This can be an important—even essential—role to take, since these viewers often are acting as “news interpreters” for their less informed peers, translating complex information into manageable pieces of information that others can use to construct their own meaning within the political landscape.

These respondents also evidence participation in terms of their daily intake of news and information; by their very nature, TDS viewers are active participators in the democratic process, since they keep abreast and actively process data to form thoughtful opinions. These respondents seem to be opinion leaders, and it seems likely that they will continue to play this role as they continue to develop their personal political perspectives and belief systems.

Trust in Government

With vast political knowledge at their disposal, TDS viewers tend to see the proverbial “man behind the curtain” and thus perceive that the American political system is working on behalf of corporations and lobbyists rather than the good of the American people. In defense of this position, TDS viewers pointed toward recent examples of money buying influence, particularly the Jack Abramoff scandal. Because this scandal involved a prominent Ohio Congressman (Bob Ney), it hit particularly close to home. As mentioned earlier, this also seemed to fit a perceived pattern of corruption that included then-Governor Bob Taft, who had been convicted of a misdemeanor charge for failing to disclose perks, including golf excursions with energy company executives. TDS respondents also cited examples of President Bush and his

administration's duplicity in their rhetoric leading up to the Iraq war, as well other instances of perceived deception and "dirty politics."

While TDS respondents indicated varying levels of trust in government theoretically, it is important to note that none of them were happy with the Bush administration or the Republican control of the House of Representatives and Senate. Even TDS respondents who identified themselves as more politically conservative had become disillusioned with GOP leadership, including the White House, Congress, and across the state of Ohio. Most TDS viewers seemed to differentiate their distrust in and animosity toward government in this instance from an overall perspective on politics and government. While they were upset with the state of politics as they stood in November 2006, this did not seem to be their expectation for an indefinable length of time in the future. In fact, some viewers took hope from the results of the 2006 midterm elections, interpreting election results as evidence of a change among the American electorate that brought respondents into closer alignment with mainstream America. While not all TDS viewers believe that they can affect change as individuals, they have faith that the current political reality can—and probably will—get better.

It is important to note that TDS viewers who have consciously "turned away" from traditional forms of participation in the political system (such as voting) also seem to be those who have the highest levels of distrust in the government and the political system. The correlation between negative perceptions and lack of participation does not bode well for the American political system, particularly since these respondents are often opinion leaders for their peer groups. When compared to their TDS cohort, however, these viewers tended to have the most simplistic and "black and white" perspective on politics. They evidenced the highest levels of anger and animosity toward the current administration, but they were less likely to distinguish their attitudes toward contemporary political actors from the political system as a whole. These

viewers did not express the same hope for the future as other TDS viewers, and they seemed to be resigned to a never-ending cycle of corruption and disdain.

Media Usage

TDS viewers tend to utilize mass media primarily for informational purposes; while they will watch programs for solely entertainment purposes, they claim to prefer programs that also will entertain while introducing them to new information. When it comes to strictly entertainment-oriented programming, there also seems to be a high correlation between TDS viewers and programs that are renowned for biting social commentary, including the Peabody Award-winning cartoon sitcom “South Park” and “The Colbert Report,” a parody of Fox News Channel programming which features TDS alumnus Stephen Colbert.

Trust in Media

Not surprisingly, TDS viewers seem to have a fairly sophisticated understanding of news media and their conventions. Because these respondents are likely to think of news outlets as businesses, they tend to expect that bias will exist within any news outlet and that citizens who limit themselves to only one news source are not getting an accurate perspective:

Um, (long pause), the, it's the big conglomerates that control everything, like Clear Channel and all that; they're voicing their one opinion, and that, I don't know... Like this past, uh, Presidential election, my grandparents like watched Fox News hours out of the day. Like in Florida, they sit there and watch it. And they, and I would talk to them about like who they were voting for, and they just spewed the things that they had been shown on TV and I'm like “What about this? What about this?” and like they don't even think about it. It's kind of like brainwashing. (DO2)

As heavy news consumers, however, TDS viewers believe that they have the tools available to discern “fact” from “spin.” They trust their own judgment, and most perceive that they can get the information they need to be appropriately informed by properly managing available news outlets: regularly checking multiple sources, differentiating between punditry and news reporting, and maintaining an awareness of bias:

Um, yeah, I feel, like, as long as you... as long as you can tell, like, when, like, there's some sort of spin, then you can trust it. But, if you take the facts and not, like, I don't know, it's if you take the facts and you don't rely on one source, I say. 'Cause sometimes you can, you know, get contradictory information from different sources. And sometimes it's good to look at the opinions looking at both sides and, like, like, maybe talk to, maybe not talk to, but listen to a um, an opinionated um, pundit, I guess, and then, you know, listen to the other side. Just, you know, get, get a good idea and, I think, if you're smart about it, you can trust it. Yeah (DY14).

Because they are so aware of the biases in news coverage, however, TDS viewers place the onus of responsibility on audiences to discern what is or is not believable:

... I feel like you have to really be careful of what you, what you choose to believe. You know, right or left.

How come?

Just from reading about it, it's, it's... things aren't always how they appear. You know, it's, you can see how things can be taken out of context, how things are often taken out of context for political games. Namely Fox News, namely the Republican Party. And, and it's easy to see how the public can be misled, and that's why you can't take things at face value (DO4).

- **RQ4: What other resources do respondents incorporate and cite?**

News Sources

As discussed above, TDS viewers tend to be heavy news media consumers. Most TDS viewers report a voracious appetite for news and information and make effort throughout the day to keep up-to-speed with what is happening in the world around them. Their attention tends to be focused on international and national news, with little attention paid to local affairs. Some TDS respondents cite this as a point of criticism from others, who feel as though their attention would be better spent on paying attention to news that is situated closer to home:

A lot of people probably uh think I, I don't follow politics the way I should because I don't really follow local politics and people think, you know, local politics have a bigger effect than national or international politics, but I like to watch international politics, national politics, a lot, so uh... (DY2).

This interest in national and international affairs is clearly correlated with TDS viewers' priorities in terms of issues; as discussed earlier, these viewers were much more likely to cite matters of national import (such as the Iraq war and the need for a shift in partisan control of Congress) as primary concerns on or near election day.

Because they spend a considerable amount of time each day consuming news, TDS viewers tend to have specific routines they regularly follow. For example, respondents would start their day off by checking favored sources, typically either online or on television. These respondents often continue to "fit" news breaks into their day, finding time in between classes or during breaks at work to get online and ensure they are up to speed on what is happening in the world:

I wake up, get a cup of coffee, get on my notebook (computer) and read. And then normally if I have time throughout the day I'll sit down, you know, if I have ten minutes, and just browse around and see what's up (DY10).

Other respondents cited similar experiences, with varying degrees of depth:

I try to pay attention pretty well. I try to read... The Washington Post and The Columbus Dispatch are only the two I try to do on a daily basis, like when I'm having breakfast. Um, so I like to do, in that regard, I'm at least keeping abreast of the developments and things. I know, I'd love to think that I know what's happening, what's going on. Um, that said, the more in-depth stuff, maybe if I read something I'll think "What is that?," maybe I'll go back to that. Um, or if I hear something that wasn't necessarily in the paper that sparks my interest, "What exactly are they talking about?" or "Why is that an issue even?" then go back. That's probably—obviously that doesn't happen every morning as I'm having breakfast, that would be more, you know, maybe once, twice a week, maybe once a week, but I mean, that's really, to go do tons and tons of research would be more on things that I've heard about and I'm not sure, or things that I've heard just passing by (DY9).

While these routines seem to be in place for almost all TDS respondents, some did not recognize these routines existed. Because their lives tend to be hectic and full, these viewers do not seem to identify the patterns in their own behavior, citing instead a "catch-as-catch-can" approach to news consumption. Despite their own personal lack of awareness, over the course of

their discussions, routines did emerge. This is noteworthy because it seems to indicate how ingrained these processes are; they have moved from “routines” to “habits,” and thus are not explicitly recognizable. These processes are just part of what happens over the course of a day, rather than something deliberate and recognized.

In order to best manage the biases in the news, TDS viewers tend to ensure they are accessing multiple sources:

I guess so, I take it as, you’ve got Fox News, you’ve got CNN, you got all these people that have their own views that they’re trying to put out on these, their distortion of polls and things like that. So, if you take it from one person, one place, your own can be distorted. So I think it’s better to look at different outlooks, outlets than take it from one (DY5).

Because they are such heavy news consumers, however, TDS respondents seemed to have already “vetted” the sources that work for them. As a result, they did not need to check multiple sources continually to ensure all viewpoints are reflected; while they may check different sources, these are typically ones that have already survived respondents’ personal filters.

Perceptions of News Media

TDS respondents were somewhat likely to be aware of and cite institutional parameters that inherently bias mass media news. Concentration of ownership, editorial gatekeeping, and business objectives were all cited by TDS viewers as reasons to distrust the media and conditions that should be considered when evaluating news content, and most seemed to have put considerable thought into developing their own standards for evaluating media sources. As a result, they were quick to provide examples of bias in news coverage, and these discussions were often quite passionate.

For most TDS viewers, the news media are falling short in terms of being “governmental watchdogs.” This seemed to be where respondents saw the most significant weaknesses in news

coverage, and this lack of criticism was perceived to be a substantial problem that was addressed by TDS itself:

I can remember when, you know, Bush declared his end to the war and, so (TDS will) point out, you know, how completely ridiculous and insane that was. And then, you know, oh, the comments that (Bush) made afterwards would indicate that really wasn't an end to the war. It was really showmanship, "Da-da!" Just pointing out how stupid it is. There's all the news outlets just basically proclaiming, "The war's over," and ..

What do you think about the news media just declaring it's over, and not showing his later comments?

It makes me not trust them as sources, um and it, you know, makes me angry at the government at how they can manipulate the media (DO5).

For TDS viewers, being aware of politics and current events is an important priority.

Unlike LNTS viewers who tend to pay attention so they "don't look stupid," TDS viewers pride themselves on their political acumen. They often serve as a resource for others and typically can give detailed explanations about recent current events for those who are less well-informed.

These respondents believe it is essential to know what is going on around them at multiple levels, with a prioritization of international and national stories:

Yes, everyday. You gotta see what goes on, you know. You don't know if the world's going to end or not. Seriously, you gotta know. It's... 'cause crazy stuff goes on and you gotta be informed... you just can't be concerned about, like, pop culture or anything like that. You know, if so and so's set off a nuclear bomb in Korea, you kind of want to know. You may want to call people and tell them you love them. 'Cause you don't know, so... (DO1).

This is not to say that TDS respondents have rejected all mainstream media wholesale, however. In general, these viewers perceived that news organizations were not actively working "in cahoots" with politicians to create a false reality; rather, they seemed to believe that these organizations were falling short institutionally. Respondents generally seemed to be resigned to this media reality, however, and did not seem to hold out much hope for an improvement in news standards for mainstream media.

Local Television News

TDS viewers rarely, if ever, tune to local news. This seems to be a conscious rejection of the medium, since these respondents typically had negative perceptions of local news as a whole (as evidenced by quantitative findings). In general, the types of stories included and the way they are covered are not appealing to TDS viewers, who consider the fare too “light” and insubstantial. This is attributed to the business model employed by local news, who are in heated battles for decreasing audiences. As such, some perceive that they are willing to compromise journalistic standards for mass appeal:

Um, the local news seems to be more entertainment; you know, more flash in the pan, more “look at us,” whatever, hands up and down as opposed to actual news. It seems to be that they’re more of an entertainment, entertainment than actual news. Where, you know, you get maybe five minutes worth of news and then they start doing entertainment-type stuff... They’ll spend a minute talking to it and then they’ll go off and they’ll talk about, “Look, this weekend, we’re having a strawberry festival.” No, no, not like *entertainment* entertainment, more of human interest stories.

What don’t you like about that, that they only have about five minutes of news and the rest is ...?

It just seems like they’re downplaying it. It seems to me they’re playing to the lowest common denominator. Um, back in college, I went to school for advertising so I know television’s paid by advertising—the more viewers you got, the more you can charge for ads and stuff. So it seems like, you know, if I can just give a little bit of news, just enough to get by, and then sit there and give you a bunch of fluff stuff, you’re going to pay more attention because you’re not depressed and you can say, “Oh, this is much better”. You have higher viewers, you can charge more for advertising, make more money. It’s sometimes, that’s why it’s easier for me to go online. That way I’m not sitting there bombarded by commercials or fluff. Where I can just go, “Okay – good, good, not good, not good, not good.” But at least you know (DO1).

Most TDS respondents do not seem to tune in to local news on a regular basis; in fact, most seem to have been completely turned off by it. This was particularly true for Cleveland-area respondents, who shared LNTS viewers’ disdain for one particular local news outlet: Channel 19’s “Action News” broadcast, a channel that hired long-time Cleveland reporter Carl Monday during the course of data collection. The extreme nature of Carl Monday’s “investigative

reports” have engendered a significant internet community⁴ that is dedicated to mocking his tactics and techniques, and his reputation is such that *The Daily Show* correspondent Jason Jones did a special piece on Monday where he imitated his style and subjected him to the same treatment he inflicts on his targets. For Cleveland respondents, 19 Action News was frequently cited as an example of what turns them off about local television news and this type of salacious content exemplifies why they do not tune into their local affiliates for coverage:

(Local news is) really not on my radar, I mean, the fact that it’s called “Action News” and you know, they try to hook you in with some—I don’t know, I, I don’t take any stock in local news.

What’s wrong with “Action News”?

It’s just a marketing gimmick. Just, news shouldn’t be “action news,” you know, just like saving the celebrity and sports crap for the very end of it just to kind of lead you... I don’t know it’s just, I just think the value of it is less (DO4).

For some, local news broadcasts in the “Action News” format has greater repercussions than simply decreasing the value of local news; these respondents actually perceive that the type of news exemplified by 19 Action News was actually having a negative effect on the community:

So, do you ever watch local news?

Rarely, especially since the arrival of 19 Action News in this town because they have collectively brought everything into the gutter. It’s yellow journalism of the lowest sort... Period.

What do you mean?

They... they say things that are not true. They used paid informants to sometimes fabricate stories. And on top of it, they just play to the lowest common denominator...

And, I mean, there’s just so much that, is it really relevant? The other side of it too, is that, I mean, crime really isn’t that big of a problem in Cleveland. I mean, if you’re not involved in drugs or gangs, it’s really not going to affect you. I live in one of the worst places in the city statistically... And I’m, this is a pretty safe place. I mean, I’ve been to some places in America that people say are infinitely worse....

⁴ For example, Facebook.com has several groups dedicated to Carl Monday, and Gawker’s sports-oriented Deadspin.com nominated Monday for their “Sportsperson of the Year” for a segment in which he “busted” a young man masturbating in a public library, eventually following him to his parents’ home in suburban Cleveland. While Monday was a semi-finalist, he eventually lost to Barbaro.

So, but, you know, needless to say, people like Action News especially, but now the other channels are getting dragged into it, will blow some murder out of proportion or some robbery that resulted between acquaintances and, guess what, the general public, especially the suburbanites who don't participate in this community but control it financially, write off the city as a loss. That is one of the biggest problems here. Because, I mean, really the suburbanites who don't get a thing but abuse substances and, you know, whether it be in the Warehouse District or their suburbanites (unclear) crack in my neighborhood. Whether they do that or whether they work downtown, they're really the financial driving force around here. So you kind of gotta coddle 'em and tell them what they want to hear and reassure 'em if you want anything to get better for the average person here...

But, I mean, you can't... you can't turn on Action News or Channel 3 News at 11 and expect to take in useful information because, I mean, if you approach it that way, you're gonna get your mind poisoned... Honestly, I think, the, ah, tabloid nature of local TV news one of the reasons people walk around with their guards up. It also has created an environment where the looniest people in society, they want to be the local celebrity for fifteen minutes. They're gonna go out and do something stupid 'cause now there's an audience for them. And, I mean, some people say well it's all... it's really nothing more than, "Wow, can you believe this happened?" Well, you know what, if you're talking about it, whoever perpetrated it or the people who put forth this filler to get ratings, they win. So, they're unwitting contributors to the decline of American social consciousness (DY15).

While some LNTS viewers were turned off by the "Action News" format, TDS viewers tended to be much more vehement in their opposition. While Cleveland's 19 Action News represented the nadir of the local broadcast reputation, the criticisms it received were extended to its competition as well. For TDS viewers, local television news represented many of the worst trends in media, including sensationalism and a focus on style over substance. As such, no TDS viewers cited local television news as a primary news source, despite their substantial daily news intake.

Cable Television

When TDS viewers are watching news on television, they usually are watching cable television news channels. For most, CNN is the preferred option, offering the most neutral coverage, while MSNBC is perceived to be slightly liberal (in large part due to the high levels of awareness of Keith Olbermann within this respondent group) and Fox News is thought to be

highly conservative. While these respondents are more likely to watch cable news channels than other television sources, they do not consider them to be ideal options. For many, these channels excessively focus on the sensational and the scandalous, leaving a void in terms of actual news coverage:

I really don't watch much ...cable news kills brain cells. I mean, that whole idea of... there's just not enough news to fill 24 hours of the day. That's why, I mean, things like Natalie Holloway or what's her face out...Scott Peterson, Laci Peterson, that's who. That's where things like this become national issues because they have to be. I mean, they have to be blown out of proportion. How... there just isn't enough stuff that the average person needs to know about for there to be a 24-hour news channel (DY15).

Respondents could consistently cite examples of stories that became “hot topics” on the 24-hour cable channels, dominating coverage despite other world events that are more newsworthy by traditional standards. For example, pop star Britney Spears filed for divorce from her husband, Kevin Federline, on Election Day 2006. The news ticker running beneath election results focused on this story throughout the night. Interviews conducted in the months following the election also included references to the death of Anna Nicole Smith; coverage of her death shifted focus away from the war in Iraq and Bush's troop surge, which some TDS viewers considered inappropriate and offensive.

The 24-hour cable news channels are primarily defined by their prominent “talking heads” for TDS viewers, including Bill O'Reilly and Sean Hannity (Fox News) and Keith Olbermann (MSNBC). For some, watching these programs is like sport; they tune in to be entertained rather than for information. This is particularly true for those who tune into Fox News, since all TDS respondents perceived a conservative bias for that channel:

Sometimes I watch Fox just to see how they're trying to spin things. And I don't mean that um because of the ones that I do watch, MSNBC and CNN are liberal, although I think they are a little bit, I just think, ah, that Fox spins news in general. If I look on the internet on Yahoo or MSN or CNN International or um whatever news you look at, uh, I think Fox always tries to put a conservative spin on it (DY2).

While punditry carried value for some, other TDS respondents found opinion-based commentary to be less appealing. Because these respondents charge themselves with the responsibility of understanding and interpreting news and information, talking heads did not offer any added value:

Because when I hear the news, when I'm interested in the news, I'm more interested in knowing the actual facts that are going on. Getting the information, and then interpreting it myself. Like compared to the talking heads, all analysis, all the time. You flip on and you're not necessarily getting the facts, you're getting what one individual might be thinking about it, so you're not, what's being reported is what someone might feel as compared to what someone, as compared to what is actually occurring (DY12).

While cable news channels are considered better news sources than local news, they are still not ideal; biased coverage, argumentative pundits, and a focus on scandal and salacious stories mean TDS viewers all too often have reason to flip the channel.

Broadcast Television

Perhaps not surprisingly in light of how TDS viewers perceive and use local and cable news, broadcast network television is not particularly relevant for this audience. Very few respondents referenced network news broadcasts in any context, and those who did mentioned them primarily as examples of what they are not watching. For some, however, network news does the best job of television news outlets in terms of depth of coverage and attention to important stories:

Um, to me it seems they pay a little bit more attention to ... they pay a little bit more in depth, a little bit more time on interesting or more newsworthy sources. And then, toward the end, they may put in, like, a science report or something like that. It seems that they have it boiled down a little bit better.

What's good about that? About giving you a little more in-depth?

Um, you can start to make up your own mind. With only a minute, you start to get whoever the editor is, you start to get... (DO1).

Despite this more positive perception, TDS viewers are still not tuning in to these broadcasts.

Ultimately, these respondents overwhelmingly rely primarily on one medium for their news and information: the internet.

Internet

The Internet seems to be by far and away the primary news source for TDS viewers included in this sample. This seems to carry across age and demographic variables, with almost all TDS viewers turning to the Internet for their news and information. While the news media ordered logit regression indicates that Internet news usage does not predict viewership, the demographic portrait of this group (particularly high levels of education, income, and employment as well as the strong association with youth) means that this is the group most likely to access the Internet regularly. As such, it is not surprising that this medium plays an integral role in respondents' news repertoires.

For respondents, the Internet gives them the autonomy to determine what they want to learn about, how much information they want to acquire, and how many sources or perspectives they want to use:

And, like, just, the Internet, it tends to have, like, updates all the time. And I can, you know, I can get, I can go to it on my convenience and, like, look up any story I want and I don't have to, like, sit and watch, like, stories I'm not necessarily interested in. I can just go directly to the things I'm interested in (DY14).

This dovetails nicely with TDS viewers' approaches to politics, since both require an independence of thought and the empowerment to maintain this independence.

The freedom to use multiple sources when needed is important to most TDS viewers; as discussed above, these respondents take responsibility for ensuring they are receiving as complete a picture as possible for relevant news stories. Unlike television, the Internet is ideal for this type of investigation:

How do you keep up with what's going on with the government?

Um mostly news online predominantly. I don't watch the news on TV so ...

How come?

Um, one, I'm just not home when it's on. Um, but, I don't know, I feel like it's more unbiased when it's written and I have multiple sources online that I'll look at so I feel like I get a good cross section versus watching one newscast and getting one channel's point of view on something (DO5).

Because some TDS respondents were disillusioned with the mainstream media, they often complemented these sources with those they considered to be more democratic, including digg.com and YouTube. By giving audiences the power to determine what is "important" news (via digg.com's voting system) and sharing their own generated content and access others' (by posting on YouTube), these respondents perceived a needed shift is occurring in the news dissemination power structure. For example, one respondent discussed how supportive Fox News is of the Bush administration and the interrogation tactics that have been used on terror suspects. He cited a segment that had been broadcast on Fox News, showing a reporter being water-boarded, which he had first come across via a user-driven news aggregation website (digg.com):

Ah, after hearing about it and then seeing it on digg.com, one of the sites I use, that one of the top rated videos I think was Fox News correspondent being water-boarded so, that brought up the discussion. My roommate remembered seeing something else, something on YouTube, different water-boarding videos from news agencies and the clip from Connect (a liberal television channel founded by Al Gore) came up and we watched that (DY5).

He noted that the water-boarding clips he saw on YouTube from non-Fox News sources showed something considerably more violent and painful than Fox News's version, indicating to him that their enactment was deliberately toned down in order to support the administration's position on use of water-boarding as a legitimate interrogation tactic. Without access to these clips online, he would not have been able to draw this conclusion independently.

The Internet serves multiple purposes for TDS viewers in terms of their acquisition of news and information. This is often a “first stop” for news, with respondents checking in with favored sites to keep up with what is going on over the course of a day. These sites will typically include those associated with established and respected mainstream news outlets (including CNN.com, BBC.com, and NYTimes.com). These sites boast several advantages over their competition, including their brand recognition and the perception that they are held to higher news standards than an unknown site:

MSNBC, Fox News, Salon.com, the bigger names. The smaller names you’ll have to do more checking with I think, just because the web is so open that anyone can put anything they want on there. They can make up their own opinion, they can make up their own news if they want to. And it’s, I think, the bigger guys are more fearful of lawsuits and liable and all that. They have to worry more, legally, about making stuff up. They’ve got more riding on it, so... (DY5).

Some TDS viewers also rely on news aggregator sites like Yahoo! News, and MSN.com. These headline-based sites ensure TDS viewers are aware of major headlines and offer them the opportunity to continue investigating a story or topic if something catches their eye. These sites also have the advantage of collecting different types of information, allowing those respondents who enjoyed reading opinion to find those pieces in the same general area as they can find information-based stories:

What’s nice about Yahoo is um, you click on Yahoo and go to News and they have something called Full Coverage. And you can click on that and you can get um, like AP articles about it, you can get stuff that’s right off the wire about it, and then there’s a section called Opinions and Editorials about that topic, so you can click there and read people’s opinions about it, people that have published articles in different papers and stuff, so sometimes I try to go there to get different opinions about issues (DY4).

TDS respondents will also go to the Internet to learn more about pieces of information they may encounter over the course of a day, whether it is something about which they heard at work or in class, or a nugget they caught on the radio:

A lot of times I'll go looking for a story in particular, like if I go to a morning class and they talk about a story and I don't really know anything about it, then I'll go CNN.com and look for that story, I'll go to the (Columbus) Dispatch and look for that story. Um, but when I'm just trying to absorb news, then I'll just look at CNN.com and sort of browse the headlines. I should get into that RSS, all my colleagues and friends tell me I should get into that, but, you know I haven't yet. Because that's a good way to sort of run down today's headlines. So usually I'll just read what's on CNN or the New York Times (DY8).

In these instances, respondents will often go to their favored search engine (typically Google or Yahoo!) or a news aggregator site like digg.com and type in the appropriate search terms. During these queries, TDS viewers will rely on their time-tested skills in information discernment to ensure they are appropriately gauging and evaluating their information and sources, looking for bias and consistency.

Despite TDS viewers' use of the Internet as a primary news medium, their focus on established news outlets means blogs are not cited as regularly accessed sources. While few TDS viewers check blogs (such sites as dailykos.com), some perceive that these should not be considered credible news sources:

I don't really care for blogs personally. Um you could be a senior writer for a major, you know, political publication and a blog is still just an online, in my opinion, is still just an online diary where you get to vent and write what the heck you want. Uh, there doesn't really have to be a whole lot of justification or explanation or reason to why there are things in a blog. You can say what you want so I tend to steer clear of those (DY9).

It also seems likely that these respondents have not felt the need to access blogs since they have multiple news sources available; while blogs could offer some additional insights, most do not seem to feel the need to read them regularly.

Newspapers

It seems TDS viewers try to be newspaper readers, with several mentioning they make an effort to read the local paper on a semi-regular basis (typically twice a week). This is particularly true for local news; when TDS viewers want to know what is going on in their communities,

local papers seem to be the medium of choice. They compare favorably to local television news, since newspapers are not perceived to be as focused on scandal and negative news and also provide the depth of content that TDS respondents seek in their news sources.

Despite these benefits, TDS viewers who do read newspapers admit they do not read them as often as they might like. The convenience of online sources (including the online counterpart of their preferred papers, such as ohio.com for the Akron Beacon Journal and cleveland.com for the Cleveland Plain Dealer) means these stories can be accessed anytime, anywhere, rather than just when the paper is at hand. Quantitative findings also indicate that newspaper readership is not strongly related to viewership; notably, it is the only “highbrow” content provider that did not significantly predict viewership of TDS. This finding does not bode well for print newspapers who are trying to survive within today’s shifting media landscape; as affluent, well-educated individuals, these young viewers should be the future users of this medium. This research shows no evidence that these respondents perceive a void within their news consumption that could be filled through print media, however, and thus it is unlikely that newspapers will be incorporated into their news consumption patterns in the future.

Radio

Most TDS viewers do not cite radio as a news source, reflecting the quantitative finding that radio is not significantly related to viewership. The radio sources that were mentioned are quite different from the commercial station disc jockeys mentioned by LNTS respondents. Instead, TDS viewers cite stations that focus specifically on political conversations, such as Air America, AM talk radio stations, or National Public Radio. These choices reflect TDS viewers’ interest in accessing news sources that will provide rich content that will actively engage them mentally, allowing them to refine their existing schema via new information or new perspectives.

Interpersonal Sources

Because politics is an avocation for TDS viewers, they typically spend quite a bit of time discussing political affairs with friends, families, and—for some—colleagues. Interestingly, it seems these respondents make an effort to avoid forcing their views on others; their motivation seems to be engaging in thoughtful discourse rather than arguing partisan politics. While these respondents seek out opportunities to engage in thoughtful debate with those of opposing viewpoints, they typically try to avoid discussions that are likely to become heated arguments.

When asked if he regularly talked about politics with friends and family, one respondent replied:

I try not to because I get upset (laugh). I try not to. Ah, if, if, you know, I don't actively seek arguments because I guess a number of my family members are Republicans and I don't, and when I see them, I don't want to debate politics as to why I'm right or why they're right or wrong or whatever the case is. So, on a very limited basis, I discuss it (DO4).

Because these respondents are heavy news consumers who typically are extremely well versed in politics and current events, they rarely—if ever—rely on interpersonal sources for news and information. Instead, these discussions serve as opportunities to engage in sophisticated, intellectual debate that can be both entertaining and enlightening.

Family

TDS respondents had mixed experiences in terms of their parents and families discussing politics in their homes during their childhoods. For some, political discourse was a regular occurrence, with parents expecting their children to be active participants in these conversations. Others had more apolitical experiences growing up; while their parents may have talked about politics, this did not occur frequently and, when discussions did happen, these conversations tended to be limited to parental contributions—children were just witnesses.

Regardless of their parents' preferences and practices for in-home political conversations, the political evolution TDS viewers have typically undergone (or currently are experiencing)

means they have actively considered and determined their own political perspectives. This often means a schism between their parents' beliefs and their own, with most moving to the left of their families. This can lead to a significant amount of contention within the family, and, for some, this precludes engaging in any sort of political discussion. For others, debates are a regular occurrence:

Yeah, always over the dinner table, that's what we talk about. Even now, like with my stepdad, we go probably once a week down to Descono's and get a couple of bottles of wine and yell at each other about politics for a while (laughs) (DY10).

While these debates can seem argumentative, respondents tended to view them in a more positive light, functioning as debates, rather than cutthroat fights.

For others, however, this separation from their parents' politics created an incentive to learn enough to be able to clearly articulate their own perspectives and hold their own in political debates:

When did you start thinking about yourself as a Democrat?

I think when I turned 18 and first started to vote. And I probably was more aware of it because my father was a Republican and insisted that I was a Democrat to rebel against him. So I had to really figure out why I was a Democrat to respond to that question (laughs). I did. (DO5)

Other respondents agreed:

Where I'm at now is just more debunking the Republican... You know, I seem to be the one, within my own family, both my mother's and father's sides, the only Democrat, or at least the only one I consider to be a Democrat and I'm constantly in the lions' den if you will, when it comes to these matters. And I feel I have to know these things to defend myself and to defend my positions, just to stay educated and apprised of the issues (DO4).

This need to defend their developing political beliefs meant TDS viewers had to think through their own perspectives, gathering information from any number of sources in order to be able to defend their fledgling beliefs.

Friends

By challenging perceptions and introducing different perspectives on politics and political issues, friends can be one of the sparks that initiate a political evolution. This is particularly true for those who have moved out of their parents' homes for higher education:

I think too many, too many people just believe something because their parents believe. And I was like that for a long – you can't really help believing what your parents believe, you can't really escape their influence, probably have lived with them for 20 years, 18 years. Um, but college is really good because you have your peers, and certainly they're going to influence your views, but you're probably going to be friends with peers who have different views too, so you can sort of, you get a lot of different sides. And then you can sort of say, "Well, what do I value?" When you're not under sort of influence of an authority figure all the time, then you have a lot more freedom to think what you want, to learn, you know, to get a broader perspective on things. And I think that's what happened to me, going into college, and I think that's a good thing, and I think that's what happens to a lot of people (DY8).

TDS respondents tend to have friends who are also deeply interested in politics and current affairs and thus have a network of people with whom they can discuss issues of importance.

These friends seem typically to be of similar mindsets, with most affiliating with the same party as the respondent:

Yeah, I would say that overall the majority of my friends are more Democrat than anything. I, I, to the best of my knowledge I can only think of two or three friends that I have that are Republicans, or at least consider themselves Republican (DO4).

Discussions with friends who hold opposing viewpoints often play the same role as with families, with respondents indicating they "prepare" for these debates by "boning up" on key issues and events:

I like to just look up things that kind of are controversial between friends of mine. I guess, maybe, um the whole Kerry thing stems from, um, a friend of mine who really like hated Kerry and was like, "Oh, here we go again," you know and I was, "What the heck." You know, and I had to look it up, because I wanted to prove him wrong or find out what he was talking about (DY3).

This need to feel prepared for conversation seems to be extremely typical for TDS viewers; because they pride themselves on their political knowledge and acumen, they feel compelled to be at their best during political debates. Unlike LNTS viewers, TDS respondents will often initiate political discussions, thriving on debate as long as it does not get too heated. When asked if he ever started these conversations among his friends, one respondent admitted:

Yeah, actually I probably do. I have several friends who are fairly interested and sometimes we all agree and sometimes we don't, so (laughs) it just depends. And sometimes we have to agree that we're stopping the conversation...it gets really like invested and he really has to prove his point—really (DY9).

Because they do not want these discussions to turn into arguments, TDS viewers will occasionally turn to humor to alleviate stress. One source of this humor is “The Daily Show with Jon Stewart.”

Political discourse with friends also allows TDS respondents to engage in one of the most important roles that their political expertise allows: to act as informational interpreters or translators for those who are less informed than they are. By providing context and “breaking down” complex issues and events to easily understood and processed “information bites,” TDS viewers help others construct political frameworks and engage in the political realm. Because this role is not being fulfilled by mainstream sources, TDS viewers are meeting an essential need for those less politically informed.

Entertainment and/or Information

- **RQ₅: Where do respondents locate their program in terms of their media consumption and preferences? In other words, do they consider the program to be an entertaining news source, or an entertainment show that happens to have political content?**

For viewers, TDS is just one of many news sources utilized over the course of a day. What TDS offers that others do not, however, is an alternate perspective on the news, one that often aligns ideologically with the viewers' own personal perspectives. Because most of these

respondents' news consumption takes place during the day (when they have regular access to online sources), TDS provides an opportunity to access the information they crave as political hobbyists with humor and ease. As such, TDS serves as a "treat"—they can relax at the end of their day, without feeling like they are wasting their time and energy on mindless fodder. As discussed earlier, TDS viewers tend to prefer media content that satisfies them both intellectually and in terms of entertainment; TDS capitalizes on this by offering smart, insightful commentary that is presented in a humorous fashion.

Unlike traditional news sources, TDS calls out the ridiculousness of politics and the political system:

It's just, it's not taken as seriously, and for me it makes it more interesting, for me it makes it more human. These aren't... these people aren't infallible, you know, they aren't, they're just people like you and I, they make mistakes, they could be misled, or tricked or bought or whatever the case is. It just—I'd say it almost humanizes them (DO4).

As a program on Comedy Central, TDS has permission to point out the humor that can be found in American politics and news media. When asked to describe the humor of TDS, one respondent replied:

Um, satire. It's, I think it's funny, it takes the news, it takes certain aspects of the news uh, issues in the news and satirizes them. It shows the comedic value in them, um, relaxes the issues sometime I think, uh, we can look at, uh I think like, when issues with Iran and, or North Korea now has nuclear weapons but they, I mean this is a major international issue, it can destabilize the entire region, and so you can make a joke about it I think is pretty clever and I enjoy that (DY12).

By finding humor in issues that are otherwise treated as dire and serious, TDS offers viewers an opportunity to laugh, while still enjoying mental stimulation.

Perceptions of "The Daily Show"

At its core, TDS serves as an entertaining information source, offering viewers the opportunity to see the humor in politics and world affairs. This is an important benefit to TDS

viewers; as heavy news consumers, these respondents often seek out content that skewers politicians and brings the sometimes ridiculous nature of politics and media to light.

TDS offers interpersonal benefits as well. For some respondents, TDS's combination of news content and entertainment means it can serve as a palatable news source for those who are less interested in politics. These respondents recognize that low levels of knowledge exist among other citizens, particularly those in the younger age brackets. As such, TDS is perceived to be a potential means of catching their attention and engaging young viewers:

Yeah, I think it's funny. I think it's good because maybe the people watching it—the people are just watching it for laughs, but they're also watching it for news, then maybe if they do hear about it, or I do have a conversation with one of my friends, then ah, they would have heard about it. Maybe if they had a conversation it will spark their interest to go look up more, and get some more facts... (DY5)

Because these respondents tend to thrive on positive, constructive political debates, opportunities to expand the number of potential discussion partners is quite appealing. TDS viewers also credit the program with providing a release to defuse discussions when they get too tense (something TDS viewers tend to want to avoid):

Uh, sometimes I bring it up if we're having a discussion among friends, and I feel it's getting really, really serious. Just to throw it out there and be like "Hey, Jon Stewart downloaded a clip two nights ago and said blah, blah, blah, blah." Then everybody stops and it's just like—well that's—okay, funny, like everybody can laugh about it because like, ah, it's a means of... I think he serves to defuse a lot of situations just by existing for people. And I think comments he makes, points he bring up, defuse things... Sometimes you know we get wrapped in this conversation and we don't realize that we don't need to be tied up as we are, we're investing way too much emotionally, mentally, whatever, in this issue. And people start, you know, to come at one and another, real antagonistic, or things that we don't need to be beating each other up over, and so, I think it serves as a good way to kind of defuse a situation. And I mean, after that you can come back to that again but it gives everybody a minute—take a breath, and kind of laugh about the fact that this is going on. And be like, okay, maybe it's not as completely awful.

What's good about that?

Um, I think it's good that it's, it keeps myself and my friends on a even keel, it keeps us from, and I know, when we talk there are always very different views on everything. Um, one of my good friends from high school is now the vice president of the College Republicans but I've got another good friend and he's the president of the ACLU here

and those two would never see eye to eye on anything. And I've got other friends who fall in the middle and all different parts of the spectrum. And so, um, tension will come up sometimes, um, people take themselves too seriously. And for me I think it's good—it reminds us that what we all have these different ideas, and we're trying to hash this stuff out, we're talking about it, but sometimes emotions tend to get involved. And it just reminds everybody that hey, remember we're all friends here, we can laugh about this and get over it. Like, it doesn't have to be a world-ending kind of an issue (DY9).

For TDS respondents, this ability to step back and relax needs to happen at “macro” levels as well as within their friend groups:

You can't take everything too seriously in life. It's important to step back a little bit. And I don't think in the realm of politics you'll ever stand back.

Why do you think it's important to be able to stand back in life?

I think it's important to be... to not be too uptight about life. It's... because when I ... when you start taking yourself too seriously, then you end up in a stand-off because of incidents in which you end up fighting. You end up having political fights. You end up having a split country like we have right now—that one side is out to throw the other side—that nobody can work together. I think that it needs more of a sense of, you know, of just humility that, you know, just relax a little bit. I don't think we can have that separated... But I think, and I don't think that would correct the problem but I definitely think it would add to it. I mean, it's important to take things seriously, but it's important, also, not to take yourself too seriously. I understand when you're the President of the United States you have to, but not everybody has to (DY7).

Perhaps the most important interpersonal benefit enjoyed by TDS viewers is the reminder that others do share their political perspectives: “It makes me know I'm not alone (laughs).” This feeling of connection helps TDS viewers remember that they are not alone when they are upset by politics, politicians, and media coverage:

Because I think if a news junkie, kind of like I am, you raise questions yourself, and you're kind of watching Chris Matthews, and he doesn't ask a certain question, or when you're watching any newscaster, they kind of like you can't believe they didn't ask the person to explain themselves. And this way, and you turn on “The Daily Show,” in some ways, it feels like, you feel like you're kind of hanging out with your friends, like everyone, kind of like I can't believe President Bush just made this comment and like no one is just pointing that out or laughing about it. You know they're not taking him seriously and um, for just even, just the segments the correspondents... they're laughing that these (Daily Show) correspondents even exist. They're “in Iraq,” they're traveling around, or something, it's... Um, I think, if you're interested in current events and politics, and you can have an appreciation for a show that sort of takes on the medium (of television news) and laughing about the way they handle things (DY6).

This sense that someone is finally speaking on their behalf, calling attention to all that is ridiculous and nonsensical in American politics and news media, is highly appealing to TDS viewers. Because they are such voracious consumers of political information, these respondents were fairly likely to recognize the limitations of and inaccuracies in media coverage, including their propensity for reporting political “talking points” without criticism or questioning. As such, TDS’s focus on calling out politicians and political actors is essential:

Because I, ah, something needs to be said. I mean, there, some of the things that George Bush and the Republican party are doing, and even some of the Democrats to a degree, I mean, I detest Hillary Clinton, but, ah, as a matter of fact the entire political power structure of this country has gotten so absurd that if eight or ten years ago you said that, you know. For example, if you said the sitting President said the word “subliminal” on national television, I would have thought you were, it was a fucking joke. So, it’s like, you know, if things have gotten this preposterous, you know, someone’s got to skewer him. I mean, ten years ago how many people would have think... thought that America would invade a country that didn’t attack us? And we’d have... you’d be institutionalized for saying something like that would have happened, you know. It’s just things have gotten so preposterous. I mean, warrantless wiretapping? Who thought that would happen ten years ago? (DY15)

Respondents appreciate this satirical approach to news, since it helps them see the “lighter side” of the often negative and depressing news they encounter throughout the day:

Well, his comedic spin that he puts on it, um, he tends to find the irony in stuff as well, I think. So I guess the mass media doesn’t show the irony of the issues and it helps you see the other side of things.

What’s good about that?

It lets you make your own decision—what’s right and what’s wrong. You see both sides (DY4).

When invited to a party thrown by TDS, respondents perceived that the event would be held at Jon Stewart’s house. The guest list tended to feature a combination of politicians and scholars, with some politically-oriented comedians and actors included as well. Respondents anticipated that food and drink would be served, although they were split on whether the refreshments would be highbrow (scotch, crudités) or low (beer, chips). While most believed it

would be a relatively fun event, LNTS viewers generally were intimidated by the thought of attending. For them, discourse would be too sophisticated and intellectual to be fun; they felt they would feel stupid and ill informed and would not fit in at this type of event. TDS viewers, on the other hand, were thrilled at the opportunity to go to this party—they would rather attend this fete than any other. They perceived that conversations would be stimulating and varied and expected they would be able to engage in thoughtful conversations with other “political junkies.”

Targets

TDS tends to focus on the same types of political targets as LNTS, particularly elected officials and the Bush administration. Unlike the talk shows, however, TDS viewers perceive the program rarely, if ever, includes jokes or commentary about non-political celebrities, such as Paris Hilton or Britney Spears. This is a major point of differentiation between TDS and the talk shows, and likely contributes to the overall perception that TDS is a program explicitly and exclusively focused on politics.

Another major difference between TDS and LNTS is found in how targets are discussed. While talk shows tend to follow a traditional stand-up format with a set-up followed by a punchline, TDS is structured as a nightly news broadcast. As such, it has the time to delve more deeply into its stories:

As compared to just one joke after another, just be like okay, we’re going to go joke about Bush. Now we’re gonna make a joke about the guy in Iran. Or we’re gonna make a joke about (unclear). You know just boom boom boom boom boom boom. Here they kind of have an issue that they stick with (DY12).

This structure means TDS can deal with issues more deeply, calling attention to issues that merit concern:

And using that to sort of poke fun at things, or even in the case of The Daily Show to bring up obscure points and um, sort of, kind of, raise the question of why no one else is talking about that. And I think Jon Stewart has proved himself to being a fairly intelligent

person who's kind of willing to, when he interviews people, to ask them the tougher questions and things (DY6).

In general, TDS is also perceived to be less vicious than other political and media actors, particularly when it comes to the personal lives of politicians:

No, not necessarily. He kind of, he pokes fun at 'em, but he doesn't say that they're incompetent or some of the other things that politicians say—he's a horrible person—I think he just states the facts and makes a goofy face. And then moves on. It's not awful, I mean obviously it's a satire I guess against pol—the Republican Party or whatever, but it's not as bad as some of the other politicians.

Why isn't it as bad?

I don't know, I guess it doesn't seem like he's bashing it even though he is, so maybe that's part of his brilliance. He is just as bad as maybe the politicians are but it's in a way that makes it seem like it's not as bad. I don't know—maybe that's it (DY1).

Ideology and Bias

All TDS respondents identified Jon Stewart as a liberal, and any LNTS viewers who were familiar with TDS recognized this liberal bias as well. This liberal slant was welcomed by most respondents, who appreciated that it aligned with their own personal political perspectives.

Unlike those talk shows and traditional news sources, however, TDS is perceived to be obvious and honest in terms of these biases:

Uh, I think that the Daily Show is more obvious in its bias than any other news source that I have. I never question that they're going to mock the President and the Republicans... (DO5)

This was not seen as problematic, however, since viewers perceived that Stewart and his team made an effort to find humor from both political perspectives:

I just, I think Jon Stewart's hilarious and I like the way, I mean he gives a—he has a liberal point of view but he also tries—I feel he does try to put a spin on, like, everyone's point of view. You say one thing, even if you are liberal, he'll throw something conservative at you and tries to look at both sides but jokes about it obviously. It's a funny show (DY3).

This humorous perspective on news gives TDS permission to be more overtly partisan and biased than “traditional” news sources. This program is not held to the same normative expectations of impartiality and objectivity, and thus it is allowed to step outside of journalistic boundaries to make the jokes work. This means TDS can often hammer a point home, without having to worry about being fair and balanced. For viewers, this is actually a more honest way to approach news and information dissemination:

Um, it just seems for me, personally, that, I don’t know, it just, I would rather have it that way. It, you know, if you’re going to lie to me and make jokes, you admit that it’s a fake news show. Yes, it is. Okay. I believe. I accept it. So it seems he’s lying to me a lot less than other newscasters.

What do you mean by lying to you?

I feel biases again. I think when people deliver the news they have a story in front of them, they’ll give it one different viewpoint. There’s the new Al Jazeera news network that came online. You see that and you’re, like, that’s just a bunch of terrorists and all that, but that’s their viewpoint, so. BBC, a lot of people watch BBC News to get a different viewpoint, different correspondents, see how they view things. So, I don’t know. There’s just a different viewpoint (unclear) others news and then I watch the Daily Show and they’re like, “Oh”. What’s for me, what works and what doesn’t (DO1).

This sense that TDS is upfront about their political agenda is quite appealing to viewers, who feel like this is a more honest presentation that better equips them to think through their own position. Unlike other news sources, TDS’s talent are explicit about their political positions:

But the Daily Show is upfront with it. And they know that they’re there for entertainment. They’re not trying to pose it as something else.

So what difference does that make to you?

It means that they’re being honest to me and I care about that. I don’t like being a pawn. I like, like to do upfront with me and honest with me. So I... I know what’s happening. I know that they’re not being serious. And I know they’re trying to make me laugh above anything else (DY7).

This honesty in its biases and perspectives means viewers often claim to be less concerned about the veracity of the information presented; they understand that this is humorous, but this lack of duplicity means respondents perceived they could trust what they hear on TDS:

Um, not quite as much, but I do, but I do consider it, I do think about it. It's not like you know, if I was watching say Fox News I would assume was complete fabrication. With (The Daily Show), I know a lot of it is tongue in cheek. I don't know, it's just a sense a humor with that. So I look at it with a less critical eye.

Because he, they talk about issues that are going on currently and domestic issues and international issues too, so, he'll add his, his little spiel at the end of it and make a joke, but, um, and put on a little bias as well, but um, it's still news, what it's covering (DO4).

Again, as heavy news consumers, TDS respondents were all too aware of the hypocrisy that typically exists among traditional news outlets in terms of bias and agendas; because they perceive TDS is upfront about its political perspective (which often aligns with respondents' own ideologies), it is considered more honest than other news sources.

I can still kind of get the message of, like, what the facts of what's going on right now. And I can hear Jon Stewart make fun of it at the same time. I know he's not putting... he's not going to put one over on me because I know what's going on (DY7).

Because they are both politically sophisticated and heavy news consumers, these viewers feel confident that they have the necessary skills to assess and assign appropriate credence to content, regardless if that content comes from traditional news sources or other relevant options.

Entertainment-Information Scale

Most respondents tend to consider their TDS viewership as being equally driven by its appeal as entertainment and information sources. Unlike the talk shows, political information is explicitly important to TDS and serves as a core source of content. Most viewers could not conceive of TDS without political content, perceiving that it would lose all of its appeal. In this sense, TDS is uniquely positioned in the political media landscape:

For me, it's more towards entertainment because of the sort of information (it shows) I search for myself. But I think it also, it's also an information source, it leans more towards an information source when you look at it as cultural commentary... A show like "The Daily Show" (will) be looked back upon in media history as a show that really satirized news and politics and how influential it became... It's political satire and it's cultural satire and it has gained legitimacy and it doesn't have to necessarily revert to a lot of slapstick to keep the um, its viewers entertained (DY12).

This integration of entertainment and information works extremely well for viewers, all of whom perceive that the program has found the right balance. Most claim that any change in this balance would minimize the programs' appeal, since this is ideal.

(Entertainment and information) sort of work together and compliment each other. If "The Daily Show didn't have all this information it wouldn't be as entertaining. I think one of the reasons they're so entertaining, at least for me, is that they're opining on real stuff you know, they're not making up Ken Blackwell saying Ted Strickland got an ovation from Man Boy Love Association. That is real that makes it even funnier... Their primary goal is obviously entertaining, but I'm glad that they use real information (DY8).

"The Daily Show" as a News Source

While it is not typically a "sole" news source, TDS is absolutely considered to be an important component of TDS respondents' news repertoire. For viewers, TDS offers several benefits: it makes news interesting while still making important points (including those that are sometimes missed in mainstream news sources), uses satire to promote independent consideration of content, and features guests of legitimate political interest.

The comedic orientation of TDS combined with its focus on "real" news makes information more palatable and accessible than traditional news sources:

Um, I think it's just because it's... it's a much kind of friendlier format than the news, like, the news can be dry and, like, especially which side do you like. You want to be entertained and, like, public news tends to do that but, like, while doing that they tend to, you know, avoid some of the more dry issues. Where, like, the Daily Show, like, takes the dry issues, and, like, you know, makes them funny. They add jokes to it and sort of get you interested. It, um, engages you more than, um, other news sources.

What's good about that?

Um, I... I think, like, it takes a light-hearted but, it also, you know, it also makes, like, important points about, um, America today (DY14).

This capacity to make dry news interesting is valued by most TDS viewers, who perceive this to be an important point of differentiation from other news sources. The humorous aspects of the program provide a "hook" that engages viewers, allowing them to experience the information in an enjoyable manner:

Just 'cause it was getting the news and not a dry way. You're hearing about what happened and if it interests you, I literally would be like "Oh" and look up – the funny stuff is what will catch me, the funny and the um, the new way of presenting the news will catch my attention, and then um, I would be like "Oh, I want to hear more about that" or "I want to find what really happened" like a more newsy standpoint and I would go look it up on line or something like that (DY3).

The entertainment aspect of TDS does more than hook viewers' attention; it also helps bring comedy and lightness to a news world that is otherwise incredibly serious and depressing:

Um, I think it's, I don't know, it gives people an alternative who are very jaded by the way the world is and presents it in a way that makes it seem not quite so doom and gloom because it's part entertainment and part news. Um, that, I don't know, it's just, uh, provides another point of view and approach to the news that I think is necessary (DO5).

For viewers, this provides a welcome respite from their daily intake of "serious news." While they get pleasure from maintaining an awareness of the world and engaging with political content, the continued negativity can become wearing. As such, having these same issues and events treated with a humorous touch serves as an important release valve.

As discussed during the ideology and bias section above, TDS is held to different standards from traditional news sources. While they are perceived to do as good of a (or better) job of covering news and information than the mainstream news media, they can do this with an entertaining perspective:

I mean for a half-hour show they present probably as much news as the news shows that are showing stories about some grandma who recovered her dog who was lost for a week or something like... Where they do veer off and make fun of things that are going on in the news, other news sources tell news stories that really don't really matter that much. So I don't think you're getting any less news out of a half hour by watching this as opposed to CNN or MSNBC or what have you.

What do you think about that?

Uh, I think that's great for The Daily Show, because (Stewart) doesn't claim to be a fair and balanced journalist or anything like that, he's an entertainer, and I think he accepts that. Um, but he does still present the news. I think it's more a problem for the mainstream news that they're reporting stories... that (are) not that important to what's going on nationally or statewide (DY2).

This permission to be contrary to traditional news standards and be overt in bias is not only due to the satirical nature of the program; it is also reinforced by “The Daily Show” airing on Comedy Central. Because it is explicitly focused on humor and is on a comedy-oriented basic cable channel, TDS and Jon Stewart have permission to be more overtly “preachy,” obviously operating from one end of the ideological spectrum. If he or his program were airing on a traditional news channel, this structure might not work as well:

Could he be on CNN talking? He would get a lot of flack for it, I think, for the way he presents his material. If he was on CNN talking, I don’t think he would be there in the same light that he is on Comedy Central. CNN doesn’t warrant the show of this humor. CNN’s not there to poke fun at people, CNN’s there to tell people what’s going on. Or, not tell them how to think, but tastefully they’re telling them what to think about (DY5).

TDS does more than provide a humorous perspective; by employing satire and sarcasm, joke structure often requires viewers to stop and think. This process challenges viewers to think about and engage with the content:

I think it’s smart humor. I think ... I think you have to pay a little bit more attention to it to get the jokes, sometimes. When... and I like that.

Why do you like that?

Um, it doesn’t make me feel dumb.

What do you mean?

Well, in other news where they dummy it down. You get five minutes’ worth of news and you’re dumb. It’s... it’s they ... here it is and you’re done. I think with the jokes, a lot of times it’s humor. I think you have to think about it a little bit more. Sarcasm. I think he’s funny. It just, it makes you think about stuff and go, “Why is that funny?” Like, well, because you’re making fun of stuff that really should be happening (DO1).

For TDS viewers, its continued increase in popularity and attention from the mainstream press means that more and more people will be able to access this important perspective, being challenged to think and consider their own politics and news consumption in a manner that is both entertaining and engaging:

I think it's extremely beneficial because it's now so popular, so in the mainstream that they really do have a voice. And, it's funny, they have as much of a voice as regular news shows and news anchors do, but they're a comedy show.

What do you think about that?

I think it's incredible. I mean, I... I... I think it's some of the brightest writers in the country today are from... are comedy show writers. It takes a certain amount of intelligence to write comedy. And you gotta make... to make people laugh is not easy. And you really have to understand people to make a broad spec... a broad group of people laugh. And, there's a lot of work and a lot of hard thinking going into what they're, ah, what they write at "The Daily Show." So, it's... it's something they're working hard for; they're not making fun of politics. They are. They're making fun of politics, but they're not trying to lessen, you know, they're not trying to make it; they're not trying to dumb it down at all (DY7).

TDS's legitimacy as a news source is reinforced by its guests, who tend to come from the worlds of politics, news media, and academia, rather than only booking actors shilling their latest film. This adds credibility to TDS as a news outlet, particularly when high profile politicians (such as President Bill Clinton and Pakistan President Pervez Musharraf) sit down with Stewart for interviews:

I think it's been very—it was a great move on Comedy Central's part, because now it's not just actors promoting their movies, there's politicians, I mean John Kerry was on the Daily Show. Just the other night, I think the last show I watched Joe Biden was on. You know, it's just great to see the politicians come on there and discuss it and reach, for them they reach a whole other audience (DO4).

Stewart is also credited with bringing on guests from across the political spectrum and is often willing to ask the tough questions his talk show counterparts will not. This adds to his credibility as a legitimate journalist, despite his protestations to the contrary.

Rituals and Routines

While watching the program, TDS viewers tend to be focused completely on the program. Most report an effort to minimize multitasking during the program, since the content requires their full attention to get the jokes and appreciate its satirical nature. As a result, viewers report watching TDS from their couches; if someone is watching with them, conversation tends

to be limited to reactions to what is on the screen and reactions to jokes. While some viewers report using their DVRs to record the program, episodes are typically not saved for an extended period of time. Even those without DVRs do not typically feel pressure to catch TDS during its original airing at 11:00 p.m. Mondays through Thursdays, since the programs are rebroadcast several times over the next day and on weekends. TDS viewers do claim to try to make conscious efforts to ensure they watch all episodes, however, since they dislike missing even one installment.

Uses and Gratifications

As was the case with LNTS viewers, TDS viewers overwhelmingly turn to their program of choice in order to gratify their media needs. These needs differ greatly, however. While LNTS viewers tune to their program to be entertained, TDS viewers consider information essential to their entertainment. As such, this hybrid of news and satire provides rich and fertile content that sparks ideas and offers information while providing entertainment. While uses and gratifications addresses these needs, we again need to turn to constructionism in order to understand what meaning they assign to content.

CHAPTER 7: CONSTRUCTIONISM AND LATE NIGHT COMEDY PROGRAMS

As clearly evidenced in the previous two chapters, LNTS and TDS viewers tend to be at opposite ends of the spectrum when it comes to politics and media. What does this mean for how they can (and do) construct meaning around political information in daily conversations, however? How do viewers interact with each other, both with fellow fans of their own preferred programs and with those from others?

Construction of Meaning and Political Information

- **RQ₆: How do respondents construct meaning around the political information conveyed on these programs?**

Late Night Talk Show Viewers

As discussed earlier, LNTS viewers tend to be at the lower end of the political sophistication scale, rarely seek out news media and instead rely on a “headline” and “by-product” approach to news and information, and typically do not fully engage mentally with their late night programs of choice. Because they seem to have tuned out almost completely from the political and news systems, respondents do not seem to have the information necessary to successfully recognize, process, and integrate information about politics and current events, particularly when embedded into late night monologues and sketches. Therefore, they often miss this political content entirely. Political jokes are not considered central to the programs; while they are an important component and most would miss them if the hosts no longer addressed politicians and current events at all, they were perceived to be just one piece of overall content: “(Leno’s jokes are) almost 50-50, yeah, because he makes fun a lot about TV and actresses and stuff too, it’s not just, like, political figures” (LY4).

Even when they do hear and identify these jokes as politically-oriented, they do not always understand the reasoning behind the jokes: they do not have the necessary backstory to

process the joke and assign appropriate meaning. This does not mean they do not find these jokes to be funny, however. For many of the respondents, humor is derived from the hosts' delivery. While respondents perceived that program content could be interchangeable, they recognized distinct and salient differences among Leno, Letterman, and Conan, and viewers gravitated toward the program that best reflected their personal sensibilities and humor preferences: Leno as the mainstream "nice guy," Letterman as the grumpy, sarcastic old man, and Conan as the zany goofball willing to go to any lengths for a laugh. Because they so closely linked their laughter with the hosts' senses of humors and delivery styles, respondents were willing to laugh even when they did not "really" get the joke:

Yeah, if it's really out there, and they don't make no sense to me, then I'll laugh at it because it makes no sense, but like, it's kind of funny if I don't understand (LY11).

This was particularly evident when respondents were asked to "play back" jokes heard while watching clips of the monologues and explaining what was funny about them. Most LNTS viewers had an extremely difficult time communicating what made jokes funny, even those that caused them to laugh while viewing.

And then (Letterman) made a comment about the Bush family celebrating Halloween and they were lighting a menorah candle, and he was like, "not, not really sure what that's all about!" but you know...

Why was that funny? Why was that a joke?

You know what, I don't even know, it's just like, it's just, you know, he's making probably humor about the Bush family just saying, Bush isn't really familiar with what's going on, doesn't really know the meaning of Halloween, not really in tune, you know just, just kind of funny. I guess you just laugh, you know (LO3).

This indicates a lack of comprehension, likely related to these viewers' lack of political sophistication and news interest.

Media pundits and scholars alike have questioned the political impact of late night television comedy, wondering if the constant barrage of jokes that poke fun at and skewer

elected officials turn viewers away from politics and current events. These qualitative data do not support this proposition. Respondents recognized that political figures are frequent joke targets and could consistently identify the traits and characteristics for which they were mocked: Kerry for being stiff, formal, and out of touch with the common people; Bill Clinton for his sexual proclivities; Dick Cheney for his secrecy and ill humor; and George W. Bush for his perceived lack of intelligence and difficulties with the English language. These categorizations of joke targets were consistent across all LNTS participants, regardless of age, partisan affiliation/ political perspective, or program choice. While respondents could report these perceptions, this did not mean that they gave them any credence. Rather, they tended to interpret these positions in a way that fit with their existing perceptions of the politicians and their political parties, despite the shallowness of these frames. They were willing to laugh at people they support politically, since they perceive that this is nothing more than a joke:

'Cause of this perception that (Bush is) dumb, and like, I can't really, I'm not going to say most people know that he's not dumb, because I think some people who really think he is, but he has to be a smart guy to be the President of the United States. Um, and just I think being the President is fine, and everyone is wrong about him, so I mean when they do find something they beat it down, like the dead horse or whatever, um, but, I mean, I still find it funny even though I voted for him, huh, I don't really care, I just think it's funny (LY11).

It is important to note that LNTS viewers do not consider these jokes to be social commentary; they perceive them simply to be intended to elicit a laugh from audience members.

As mentioned earlier, LNTS respondents often found it difficult to explain the humor of the jokes, particularly those presented in the traditional “set-up/punchline” format common to monologues. It was slightly easier for respondents to recall and explicate the humor of jokes that involved video content, such as Bush tripping over the words of a speech. It is notable that not being able to explain the humor behind a joke was not problematic for most LNTS respondents; they felt that the jokes could be humorous without having to really understand the content. For

these viewers, jokes are “zingers” that do nothing more than give a quick laugh... and that is enough. Ultimately, this approach to humor seems to be a good fit with respondents’ political sophistication and news interest levels. They are looking for a laugh and being exposed to new information while in pursuit of an entertainment objective is sufficient.

“The Daily Show” Viewers

As discussed throughout this section, TDS respondents tend to be at the higher end of the political sophistication scale, are heavy and regular news media consumers, typically have a nuanced and sophisticated understanding of major issues and an in-depth understanding of new issues, and are usually fully mentally engaged with TDS while watching the program. These viewers have a multitude of tools at their disposal to process and understand information about politics and current affairs and are fully capable of integrating new information into their considered (and fluid) frames. As such, they look to TDS to provide a different perspective on political news and information and expect the program to address the political world explicitly.

Because TDS viewers are actively engaged with the program, they tend to have a very sophisticated understanding of the content. They can assign meaning to the jokes and use the jokes and stories as springboards for discussion and rumination. When viewing political content on TDS, viewers tend to infuse both their own personal perspective as well as their perceptions of the source perspective. Because they have extensive political information at their disposal, these respondents come to the table with their own frames for contextualizing and understanding the jokes and stories. They do not rely on Stewart and his team to make the joke clear, since they feel they can depend on their own knowledge and processes to contextualize the jokes.

When respondents do not specifically understand a joke, they typically have enough political information at their disposal to make an educated guess about what would be funny. For example, during one segment that was shown during the stimulus clips used during interviews

and focus groups, Hermann Goering was pasted into a shot of Congress. While some of the younger viewers were unaware of who Goerring was, they could use contextual cues to determine that he was likely a prominent Nazi. Once they had made this connection, viewers could infer what the intended joke was. Unlike LNTS viewers, these respondents had sufficiently well-constructed political frames to integrate information and understand pieces of data within broader constructs.

TDS viewers appreciate that the program helps identify and highlight political inanities that mainstream media's journalistic constructs do not allow. For the most politically sophisticated viewers, TDS serves as a critic of traditional news media and its institutional standards as well as a critic of politics and politicians. By explicitly drawing attention to talking points and other means of media manipulation, TDS helps viewers look beneath the surface. For example, one of the clips shown during research showed a series of Republican elected officials and leaders, each claiming that, if elected, Democrats would "surrender to terrorists and lower taxes." While these sound bites were originally broadcast on different networks as part of individual interviews, editing these talking points into one continuous segment gave different context:

I love it when he does that. He really just, I'm trying to think, oh changes, you know, it's the same thing. You're getting the, uh, it's just the same thing over and over again. It's just they have no other arguments. They're beating the crap out of this argument and they're trying to get it engraved in your mind. And sadly, it's, it's going to stay in the mind for, like... it's gonna, it's gonna become a stereotype for probably years to come too.

What do you think about that?

Yeah. I think that... on the Daily Show that you can see that it's just, it's lunatic. On the Daily Show... before I think you're seeing this on different news channels, and you're thinking, "Wow, they just want to raise taxes and forfeit to the terrorists." But now you're seeing that it's humor in a sense and it's, like, it's not really what they're all about (DY7).

For TDS viewers, this juxtapositioning of messages helps them deconstruct campaign messages, emphasizing the humor in politics (which can often be lost during the inundation of negative messaging during a heated campaign). One of the clips shown for TDS included footage of the Ohio gubernatorial debate between Republican Ken Blackwell and Democrat Ted Strickland. Strickland was well ahead in the polls, and his lead had expanded consistently in the weeks leading up to the election. During this debate, Blackwell intimated that Strickland was supported by the North American Man/Boy Love Association (NAMBLA). Stewart showed this portion of the debate, then followed up with a quip, “How far down in the fourth quarter do you have to be to throw the Hail NAMBLA”? For viewers, this was an excellent example of how TDS treats politics and political actors:

Uh, it was NAMBLA... (Blackwell) just made a derogatory term toward homosexuals because I think it was Strickland's... they didn't show the clip of what Strickland said, but Blackwell was upset and took a shot at Strickland by saying “Oh yeah, the last statement you made got your North American Man Lovers or something, standing up.” And made, Jon Stewart, they had the graphic that said NAMBLA (laughs).

Explain to me why that's funny.

Just 'cause it exposes how ridiculous the argument—how ridiculous that argument is. You know and just how, again, just the ridiculousness of their arguments. That's why, that's why I love it. I love seeing it stripped down for what it is.

Why do you love that?

Why do I love that... Because I think, I just became—I don't know, I don't know. I just love to see it because I like to see someone else display how I feel. You know, I like to see it articulated or least represented that way, in a humorous way because I appreciate that. I appreciate that type of sense of humor (DY4).

Clearly, TDS respondents expect to think about and engage with content presented during the program. For them, these jokes provide an opportunity to reconsider perceived political realities and mentally “play with” the data they have accumulated through their news consumption throughout the day. These jokes are not passively experienced; rather, they are actively considered within their personal political frames:

Why is (this clip) funny?

Because it kind of ... he narrowed down the message of both campaigns. Ah, the Democratic message of “We need a... it’s time for a change” and the Republican message of “(We’re) trying to protect you and the Democrats won’t do it.” And, when it comes down to those two things, you’re going to find some funny things because a lot of stuff is not going to hold true. All he’s doing is, like, pulling out blatant fallacies and arguments of people.

Are these blatant fallacies that you would notice if (TDS wasn’t) pointing them out?

I don’t think so ‘cause he isolates them. And he finds them in an environment and then to have the laugh track afterwards along with the whole audience laughing, so you know that it’s funny. Some of the stuff, yeah. Like what Blackwell said, I would have laughed at that in real life. But some of the stuff is more subtle. And you don’t realize how funny it is until you see it on the show (DY7).

Because they are highly politically sophisticated, TDS viewers can expand upon the joke content, adding context and nuance, as evidenced by this rather lengthy discussion that was sparked by TDS footage used as stimulus:

Well the first thing was um, they went to the Democrats that were just basically saying ‘vote for change, vote for change’ and that’s part of the problem I was talking about earlier, like they don’t really have a message or like a platform to show the nation what they’re going to do or what they believe in; they’re just “We’re the only option” and Jon Stewart even said that so, uh, I think it was good that he made fun of them for that because it’s one of their common flaws.

And then they brought out Luke Perry, which plays right into the Republicans’ hands because they always accuse Democrats of being Hollywood um, and they have a lot of support from celebrities that probably don’t really know anything about politics they’re just movie stars, so uh that was really stupid on their part (laughs) to even have an actor, I mean, a washed-up actor even, so that was stupid.

And then um they went to like the fear tactics that the Republican party uses, they worked pretty well in like 2004 and um, then they went to like some of the attacks on um on Strickland by Blackwell lately about um supporting the North American Man Boy Love Association (laughs).

Why are you laughing? What’s funny about that?

Uh, the Republicans at least in this past election and I don’t really remember as much from the elections or the campaigns leading up to the elections, he was using smear tactics um, but I think it’s probably common for the party that’s about to lose power to try to use smear tactics to demonize their opponent, and I think that’s what they tried to do with Strickland. I think that’s been going on all over the country. It didn’t work, obviously, if you saw the results last night.

Um, the personal attacks on people's personal lives, you know something they did long in the past, those are things that have been coming out of the Republican party to criticize their Democratic opponents, uh just to try to hold on to power and it failed, but that was their strategy for this campaign throughout much of the country it seemed like.

And then uh, the thing about Democrats raising your taxes and surrendering to terrorists, um, the Republican party did a really good job of making themselves sound strong on defense in 2004 but I think everyone kind of caught on to what they were doing and they rejected that whole effort this election. And I don't think I heard one Democrat say they were going to raise taxes, I think they were going to peel back Bush's tax cuts on capital gains and dividends which are really just beneficial to the wealthier ah people in the nation. And I think Democrats um have in a lot of cases from a lot of the one's I've heard on TV, they're going to propose a middle class tax cut, so I mean a tax cut is generally something that's supposed to be part of the Republican party's platform and here the Democrats are going to propose that, so if they're trying to, if the Democrats are trying to cut taxes, then I don't see where the Republicans are trying to push that idea on the nation, saying that you know they're going to raise them actually (DY2).

While they do understand the jokes in terms of their explicit program content, respondents also appreciated Jon Stewart's delivery, as well as that of his team. Several respondents cited Stewart's Bush impression as one of their favorite aspects of the program, while admitting that it was not actually a good impression. Rather, the humor came from Stewart's droll expression as he wiggles his tie in follow-up, winking his eye at the audience as they share a laugh at Bush's expense.

Not surprisingly, TDS viewers typically are capable of more clearly explicating and describing the humor found on the program. Unlike LNTS viewers, these respondents used specific humor-related terms (notably "satire") to describe the show:

How would you describe The Daily Show?

Um, satire. It's, I think it's funny, it takes the news, it takes certain aspects of the news uh, issues in the news and satirizes them. It shows the comedic value in them, um, relaxes the issues sometime I think, uh, we can look at, uh I think like, when issues with Iran and, or North Korea now has nuclear weapons but they, I mean this is a major international issue, it can destabilize the entire region, and so you can make a joke about it I think is pretty clever and I enjoy that.

Why is it good that they can make a joke out of it?

It's good because it relaxes people. It does not make them, it doesn't make them fearful, "Oh my God, there's nuclear weapons here on the border of China and we have 35,000

American troops in South Korea” and so on and so forth. And I think it’s, it’s good to, maybe, that the people are a little placated, um, then constantly in fear of what could happen, and also maybe in a way it does, it does, um, get the, it gets the audience a little more aware of what is going on around them. Maybe they end up just picking up a joke from it, but at the same time, maybe in the back of their conscious they’re getting a little more information as compared to just totally unaware of the events taking place around the world (DY12).

This satirical view of news and information does more than poke fun at those in power; for some viewers, it affords them the opportunity to constantly reconsider their own perceptions and perspectives. This is particularly important for the younger TDS viewers who are just embarking on their political evolution and thus often find the groups with which they are affiliated as satirical targets:

Now, for you, do you feel like it’s okay to make fun of the government and politicians?

Um, I think it’s it’s, I think it’s okay, yeah, because, um, I think, like, satire on almost any group is, I think, it’s healthy. Because, even if you watch, if you are, like, part of something and you watch something satirical about it, you can actually learn about yourself. It’s like, “Wow, like I never knew, like, these trends.” Or you may have known these trends but you would never have looked at it in this way. And I think it’s healthy for people to, like, see this... (DY14).

It seems that the use of more sophisticated humor (satire) on TDS is an excellent fit with viewers’ political belief systems. Because they recognize the complexity of the political world, these respondents appreciated humor that goes beyond the “zingers” of the late night talk shows.

While some political science research (notably Baumgartner and Morris, 2006) has indicated that TDS can increase cynicism among viewers, these data indicate that these highly informed heavy viewers tend to filter the comedy according to their existing perceptions. As such, content can be read oppositionally:

Do you ever hear new information on “The Daily Show”?

Different viewpoints, yeah.

What do you mean by different viewpoints?

I guess you’d say it’s looser, so it’s like kind of call out the ridiculousness of everything, of the reporting. You know, be it right or left, it’s just, I, it kind of cuts to the crap and

makes fun of how ridiculous some of these things are, some of the issues are, some of the people involved in can be. So I like to see that, it's not as serious.

What's good about that?

It's just, it's not taken as seriously, and for me it makes it more interesting, for me it makes it more human. These aren't these people aren't infallible, you know, they aren't, they're just people like you and I, they make mistakes, they could be misled, or tricked or bought or whatever the case is. It just – I'd say it almost humanizes them (DO4).

Because they are so politically sophisticated, viewers are not relying on Stewart or TDS to draw conclusions; rather, they consider information gleaned from the program within their established frames, taking advantage of their mental flexibility to contextualize these data in a way that makes sense for them. Baumgartner and Morris's findings were strongest with those who rarely or never watch TDS, which is a likely explanation for why the effect was strongest among that group. For heavy viewers, their own considerable political acumen allows them to integrate the opinions and perspectives presented on TDS within their own established frames, thereby independently constructing meaning around the content that is driven by their own personal schema rather than the frames utilized by the program.

Construction of Meaning and Group Dynamics

- **RQ₇: How is construction of meaning different in a group dynamic than within the depth interview format?**

Late Night Talk Show Viewers

Throughout the focus groups (both LNTS-specific and mixed), LNTS viewers somewhat frequently quoted or cited their preferred host throughout the conversations. These were typically related as anecdotes, offered to provide “color commentary” or “comedic relief” to the otherwise serious discussion. This was particularly notable for viewers of Conan and Letterman, who seemed to be more passionate about their program of choice when discussing it in a public forum. While viewers did not share these jokes or segment summaries to spark conversation, they were used to add flavor. In mixed groups, the use of quotes and anecdotes also seemed to

serve as a defense mechanism of sorts; because they could not fully participate in the substantive discussions, this provided an opportunity for LNTS viewers to share their voice and, in some ways, negate the perceived stigma of their lack of information. These citations were noticeably more visible in smaller groups conducted in the second phase of research as well as groups in which LNTS viewers were dominant.

When introduced to content that went beyond “zingers,” these respondents were more successful at utilizing information to initiate conversation. For example, a clip was shown of a regular segment on Letterman called “Great Moments in Presidential Speeches.” This bit opens with footage of two of the most recognizable and heralded Presidential quotations in American history: Franklin Delano Roosevelt saying, “The only thing we have to fear, is fear itself,” and John F. Kennedy declaring, “Ask not what your country can do for you, but what you can do for your country.” The footage then shifts to President Bush, stumbling through a potential joke in his speech. This clip was much more effective in helping respondents articulate their personal feelings toward Bush, inspiring conversations about the standards to which a President should be held and whether or not it was appropriate to show this type of footage. While these conversations did tend to end quickly, they were more sophisticated than what was engendered by one-liners alone.

This was also the case when LNTS viewers were shown content from TDS. Because these clips often contained both examples of what was said by the politicians as well as humorous analysis by Stewart and his team of “correspondents,” LNTS respondents could utilize these pieces to create a more sophisticated understanding of the content. The lengthier nature of the segments also meant that they were often given enough data to understand the broader implications of the jokes, although the more subtle or nuanced interpretations were lost. These discussions were still limited to content that was included in the program, since viewers did not

have the internal resources from which to draw to further conversations or build upon discussion points rooted in the content.

“The Daily Show” Viewers

During focus group conversations, TDS viewers continued to display high levels of information integration. They could explicate jokes and add context, whether they were the political satire of TDS or the “zingers” found in LNTS monologues. Because they had sufficient knowledge on their own, respondents did not seem to need the added benefits of video-based content or lengthy jokes. Rather, they would assign meaning to the one-liners of talk show hosts and tie them into broader conversations. Regardless of the program type, TDS viewers used jokes as springboards for conversation, particularly in groups that only consisted of TDS viewers. These conversations tended to be high-level discussions of both current news stories and issues of concerns, characterized by detail and nuance.

It is notable that TDS respondents, while typically experts in their own rights, were open to the contributions of others in the groups while constructing meaning around political content. This was particularly the case in TDS-only groups, when all participants tended to be at the same level of political sophistication and interest. Within these conversations, TDS respondents tended to be comfortable voicing their own opinions and sharing their perspectives, while incorporating relevant information and opinions from others in the group. These discussions provided evidence that these respondents could work together to more fully explicate and “unpack” humorous content in addition to their abilities to do so as individuals.

While all participants knew that TDS was the “common factor” they shared going into the groups, the program was not cited too often. This is likely due to their own personal political expertise; because they are drawing on their own resources, individual citations for sources are

not necessary. When references to TDS were made, they tended to be incorporated for comic effect, rather than to further the discussions.

Variance in Conversations

- **RQ₈: How do conversations vary between *The Daily Show* audiences and those of late night talk shows?**

LNTS Groups

When participating in group discussions about politics and current events, LNTS viewers tended to tentatively join in, unsure of their own knowledge and awareness. During sections of the group conversations that were explicitly focused on politics, conversations were stilted and uncomfortable, with respondents looking to each other to ensure that they were not misstating facts or giving easily-argued-against opinions. Once they realized that others in the group shared their dearth of information, respondents were more likely to share their personal opinions and joke about their lack of knowledge. Because these viewers fear “looking dumb,” this reassurance that others were in the same boat was comforting.

In keeping with their focus on entertainment, LNTS viewers tended to emphasize stories and events that were related to popular culture (i.e., “Pop Princess” Britney Spears’ separation from Kevin Federline) or sports (such as football playoffs). Conversations about these topics were animated and enthusiastic, with LNTS respondents sharing their own information. Notably, even those who were less informed about one of these non-political topics were much more willing to ask questions and openly express a lack of knowledge than they were during the politically-focused conversations. This could be related to their perception that they “should” know more about politics and current events; because they are aware that they fall short of the normative standards, viewers are highly sensitized to their lack of knowledge and interest.

TDS Groups

In exclusive TDS viewer groups, conversations tended to be fast-paced and inventive, with respondents taking turns participating. Very little stimulus was required to inspire conversation, and respondents often talked over each other to share information and insights. Because this group thrives on healthy discourse, participants ensured that all were comfortable with the conversations. Respondents were quite respectful of each other, and would acknowledge differences of opinion without creating tension. Instead, respondents focused on sharing information and insights.

These conversations were notable for the lack of direction required from the moderator. In fact, my role often was reduced to timekeeper, ensuring that conversations were managed to cover all necessary content within the allotted time. These conversations tended to follow creative paths, with respondents building off each other and “riffing” on favored political topics. It is important to note that almost all TDS participants and the friends they brought to the “buddy groups” tended to embrace a liberal perspective; while they might not be officially affiliated with the Democratic Party, most were united in their opposition to Bush and his administration. Thus, conversations tended to center on points of agreement, with disagreements perceived to be minor in relation to their overarching commonalities.

Mixed Groups

Conversations with mixed groups tended to be rather awkward for all respondents; because these two groups tend to have very different interests, it was often difficult to find common ground. During discussions that specifically focused on politics and current events, LNTS viewers tended to be able to offer a headline at best; they might be aware that something had happened but were too uncertain of the details to offer explication. Instead, they would look to TDS viewers for explanation and confirmation, accepting their information as accurate. They

recognized that they did not have the expertise to state their opinions confidently, particularly when other participants were clearly more informed (in this case, TDS viewers played that role). In these instances, LNTS viewers clearly took a passive role in the conversations, looking to those they perceived as more informed to add substance to the conversation.

During the focus groups, respondents were asked to call out stories or events that they had heard of in the preceding weeks. As political junkies and news aficionados, TDS viewers tended to focus on stories and events that were political in nature. LNTS viewers, on the other hand, were much more likely to stare blankly or to mention topics that related to popular culture, celebrity gossip, and sports. During conversations that centered on these non-political topics, LNTS respondents were active participants and occasionally leaders. While most TDS viewers were at least somewhat aware of the stories mentioned (and some were quite well-informed on these topics), there was more parity in these discussions than those that focused on political issues or current events. LNTS respondents were somewhat likely to guide conversations toward these non-political topics, since they wanted to participate in the focus group discussion, yet perceived that they could not compete with TDS viewers on the political front.

While LNTS viewers were quite likely to relate jokes from their program of choice during LNTS-viewer only groups, this decreased in mixed groups. When TDS viewers were perceived to outnumber LNTS respondents, the talk show audience seemed to feel too uncomfortable to relate these one-liners; they seemed to feel as if they already were being judged and found inadequate by the more knowledgeable TDS viewers, and thus they were convinced that their humorous asides would be dismissed. Since a primary motivation for acquiring even headline-based knowledge of current events is to “not look stupid” to their peers and the general public, LNTS respondents tended to “shut down” and opt out of the politically oriented conversations in TDS-dominated situations.

While TDS viewers quickly recognized that their political acumen and knowledge about current events was at a higher level than their LNTS counterparts, these respondents made concerted efforts to incorporate LNTS viewers into their political conversations as much as possible. They would provide context for conversations, providing depth to the headlines of which LNTS viewers were aware. While this balance typically succeeded in terms of generating positive conversations, the combination of the most sophisticated TDS viewers with the least sophisticated LNTS viewers was not at all successful. In these instances, TDS respondents had difficult time masking their disdain, particularly when LNTS viewers would share political information that was either factually incorrect or ideologically opposed to the TDS viewer. When the TDS respondents would challenge the LNTS viewers, the talk show fans could rarely back up their opinions. Both participants would become visibly frustrated, and these discussions tended to end abruptly and it was difficult to get either party to participate in later conversations.

When LNTS respondents outnumbered TDS viewers, conversations tended to be less political and less sophisticated. After attempting to initiate one or two conversations about politics, TDS viewers would eventually “give up” and let LNTS viewers direct conversational flow, which often led to conversations about popular celebrities, music, or television programs. Because many of these viewers are also interested in these areas, they would continue to participate in these conversations. Notably, they did not attempt to “steer” these discussions; rather, they would take a secondary role in the conversation, joining in when appropriate but not introducing new data or offering their own opinions unless prompted. This is likely due to their preferences for engaging in civil discussions; sensitive to the reactions of others in the group as well as the conversational dynamics at play, TDS respondents were quite willing to let their LNTS counterparts hold their own on topics where they had more expertise.

Political Sophistication and Group Discussions

- **RQ₉: How are the reported differences in political sophistication manifested during group discussions?**

As evidenced above, group conversations only highlighted the differences between LNTS and TDS viewers in terms of their political sophistication. Because they tend to be on the lower-to moderate-end of the political sophistication scale, LNTS viewers knew less factual information and had limited internal political resources from which to draw. Their lack of information and interest became abundantly clear over the course of the focus group conversations, since these respondents could not engage at the same level as TDS viewers on any topics related to politics or current affairs. LNTS respondents evidenced a lack of political frames, and thus had difficulty recalling data or assigning meaning to joke through context or inference. These viewers could not add additional information or context to political discussions, and thus tended to either avoid those conversations or attempt to change the topic toward areas of their own personal expertise (such as sports or popular culture).

While LNTS viewers may laugh at the jokes, this was not necessarily an indicator that they understood the message (joke) as it was intended by the sender (late night talk show host). They could appreciate the jokes without understanding what was actually being said, since the humor was often derived from the hosts' delivery or their own expectations for program-specific humor. This was furthered by their laughter during jokes that were played during focus group conversations; if others in the group laughed, they would often join in, regardless of their interpretation of what was funny or why. These respondents resisted when asked to read into or interpret jokes, indicating they were content with their unexamined appreciation of the content.

TDS respondents, on the other hand, typically were located in the upper right quadrant of the political evolution matrix, boasting a vast amount of political information from which to

draw during political conversations. They had well-established political frames that were used to understand and contextualize jokes and political content, and they were fully capable of using their own political acumen to assign meaning and derive humor. Because they could easily assign meaning to the jokes, these viewers would add value to TDS content in two ways: first, they would utilize their own expertise in adding nuance to the jokes, and second, they could use the content as a springboard for further conversation. Because they were passionate about politics and enjoyed political conversations, TDS viewers would embrace opportunities to discuss current events with other “political junkies” who were as well-informed as they were. As such, these viewers took advantage of the opportunity presented by focus groups to engage in high-level political discourse.

TDS viewers tended to take advantage of their own personal political sophistication when interpreting and understanding the political content introduced by TDS and other late night programs. While the in-depth “news” format of TDS was most conducive to this process (and best fit their own humor preferences), these respondents could also use the stand-up format of the talk shows to engender conversation. Again, their political knowledge and sophisticated understanding of political events and current news stories gave respondents a pool from which they could draw to promote conversations, allowing them to flow easily from one topic to another. Discussions therefore tended to be fluid and iterative, with respondents considering data provided by other participants and using those contributions to inform their own contributions. Without their high levels of political sophistication, it is unlikely that conversations would have been as detailed or as creative as they were. This group was not satisfied with taking jokes at face value; rather, they looked for meaning within the content.

Summary: Construction of Meaning

In sum, the ways in which viewers construct meaning around content seems to be directly related to their own political sophistication and news media usage. Because they tend to have low-to-moderate levels of political sophistication and a “headline” approach to news, LNTS viewers often do not have the tools or resources needed to interpret jokes or assign meaning. As such, they will often take jokes at face value, laughing at the host’s delivery or along with the studio audience without necessarily knowing what the joke was actually about. For these viewers, jokes are intended as nothing more than humor; they are certainly not read as political statements and hosts are not perceived to have political agendas, nor are they widely perceived as ideologically biased. As such, LNTS viewers do not tend to assign political meaning to these jokes and do not engage with them any deeper than as a passing amusement.

For TDS viewers, moderate-to-high levels of political sophistication (characterized by a personal political evolution) and heavy news media usage means that they are equipped to fully understand jokes and political content. These viewers do not take jokes at face value, but instead read into them to understand both what the sender intended as well as how the joke can fit within their own personal political frameworks. For this reason, TDS respondents prefer the humor of their program of choice; the satirical nature of in-depth pieces provides more fodder for their own analysis than the one-liners for which the talk show hosts are known. Because TDS is perceived to be explicitly political, its content is perceived as having a liberal bias. Viewers appreciate the honesty of this ideological perspective, however; since they have detected bias from almost all news sources that are ostensibly objective, TDS’s explicit biases are considered refreshing. Viewers perceive that they can then consider this bias while engaging with content, helping them contextualize data within their own personal perspectives.

CHAPTER 8: DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Contextualizing Findings

Literature

The emergent nature of this field of research means that much of the work that has been done thus far is notable for the inconsistencies in findings. This is attributable in large part to widely varying operationalizations of the target audiences, with studies conducted as recently as 2004 including a breadth of programs ranging from “Oprah” and “Entertainment Tonight” to late night talk shows. More recent literature has increasingly fine-tuned these variables, with most scholars from 2005 focusing either exclusively on late night comedy audiences as a whole or parsing apart late night talk shows and “The Daily Show.” Because this research agenda has been evolving over the past few years, a considerable amount of attention has been paid to describing these audiences in terms of their demographic profiles and political perspectives (party affiliation, voting behavior, etc.). Findings beyond these descriptions have been mixed, however, in large part due to the discrepancies in operationalizing audiences.

The lack of theoretical guidance and application in previous late night comedy research is notable and, more importantly, problematic. Very little research has tapped into existing mass communication theories, opting instead to look to psychology (cognitive processing) or political science (low information rationality) to contextualize findings. While these theoretical approaches do provide some interesting angles from which to explore the political effects of late night comedy, application has been inconsistent at best and, perhaps more importantly, limited in terms of analysis. Rather than utilizing theoretical approaches to understand how audiences are affected by programming, most researchers have instead looked for guidance in understanding why respondents tune into these programs. When considering potential effects, whether in terms

of political knowledge or participation, researchers looked away from theories and instead interpreted data without concern for overarching theoretical implications.

Methodology

In addition to the inconsistencies in defining audiences and the dearth of theoretical perspectives, previous research has also been limited by the almost exclusive use of quantitative research methodologies. In fact, not one study that includes the use of qualitative techniques has been published in a major political science or mass communication journal. While surveys are an essential tool for understanding audiences and allow researchers to extrapolate findings to a broader population, the use of these instruments as sole sources of information can be misleading since they inherently utilize broad measures that cannot allow for individual interpretation of question wording or response scales. As such, using qualitative techniques to complement quantitative surveys provides essential insights that can be used to condition and inform interpretations, adding nuance and sophistication to analysis. This recognition and prioritization of epistemological concerns is absolutely essential to a robust body of literature, and thus was sorely missed within the late night comedy corpus prior to this research.

One of the most important findings of this research study is that viewers of late night talk shows operationalize key terms and concepts quite differently from TDS viewers and, more problematically, social science researchers. For example, a young LNTS viewer's perception of what it means to "closely follow" a story is determined in relation to how closely he follows any story; his frame of reference is limited to what media content he chooses to engage at any given point in time. Within this context, "closely following" a story can mean a headline catching his eye, skimming the story, and then—at best—staying on the look out for additional stories that may come to his attention. A TDS viewer's perception of "closely follow" is likely to be quite different. As a heavy news consumer, a TDS viewer has exceedingly high standards of what it

means to closely follow a story, and her definition is closer to what social scientists and media researchers intend when including response scales on surveys. For a TDS viewer, “closely following” a story can mean spending hours online in active investigation, searching for varying interpretations and angles on the same topic, exploring multiple viewpoints, and selecting content from a variety of media. These differences in interpretation became abundantly clear during qualitative interviews and focus groups and were notable for both their consistency among each audience and the tremendous schism between the two respondent pools.

This research study clearly provides evidence that it is essential to deploy mixed methodologies in political communication research. Utilizing both quantitative and qualitative techniques in tandem means limitations can be accounted for and strengths capitalized upon, with the regression analyses providing context for the qualitative data. Likewise, qualitative findings offer depth and nuance to survey results, allowing for sophisticated interpretation and understanding of data that a focus on statistics alone cannot provide. This call for a mixed methodological approach is core to constructionism.

Constructionism

This research study was designed to understand one overarching question: what are the political effects of late night television comedy? To answer this, I turned to a rich theory that has thus far been underutilized in mass communication: constructionism. Rather than looking for effects on a passive audience, this theoretical approach adds value by emphasizing the role audiences play while engaging with media content. Rather than perceiving audiences to be passive receptors or assuming that all media content is interpreted identically by all viewers, listeners, or readers, constructionism gives voice to audience members themselves. The onus is on researchers to uncover how diverse audiences assign meaning to content and how these pieces of information are examined through and integrated into audiences’ existing schema or frames.

In other words, constructionism emphasizes the ways audience members think about information, rather than merely exploring their exposure to data or their ability to correctly answer survey questions.

As introduced in the theoretical overview presented in Chapter 2, constructionism is characterized by seven principles:

The audience actively interprets content. Audiences do not passively accept information presented or conferred via media sources; rather, some level of personal assessment and interpretation occurs. This does not mean that all content is interpreted; one of the active choices made by audience members is the decision to “opt out” from information processing, selecting to expend mental energy only on content that meets the individual’s personal criteria. In other words, audiences actively choose which content merits their attention and then utilize their existing schema to assign meaning to that content and, if necessary, integrate data into appropriate frameworks.

A conversation occurs between audience and content. Again, constructionism focuses on the responsibility audiences have for assigning meaning to content. Therefore, this relationship is not one-sided; media do not present frames that are then mindlessly engaged by viewers. Rather, audience members have their own frames and schema, individually defined and refined over time, which are utilized to process data and assign meaning.

Established media conventions (such as historical, structural, and technological characteristics of media institutions) impact this conversation. Audiences do not experience all media content identically; when assigning meaning, audiences take into account their personal perceptions of media sources and technologies. Savvier audience members have sophisticated understandings of the institutional biases that exist within specific media outlets; while others do

not have this same level of understanding, their own personal perceptions of media and content providers do affect their relationship to media content.

All content is not created equal and, in fact, content has its own specific character. This tenet is one that most explicitly delineates constructionism from other audience-focused theoretical approaches. Rather than assuming that audiences interpret joke content in the same manner in which they process traditional news content, constructionism emphasizes the importance of understanding content on its own terms (rather than as interchangeable).

Interpretation is non-evaluative and thus does not cast judgment. One of the greatest risks faced by researchers is pejoratively reading data. Because we have established normative standards to which citizens have traditionally been held, it is remarkably easy to dismiss those who do not “live up” to our expectations as politically irrelevant or intellectually inferior. In the constructionist tradition, however, it is essential to appreciate these data on their own terms, incorporating them into existing interpretations and standards without assigning judgment to the worth of respondents.

What people think is both broader and deeper than what conventional “public opinion” polls quantify. As we clearly saw within the qualitative findings, audiences and citizens do not interpret pre-defined questions and responses identically; in fact, there is often a tremendous amount of variance between meanings ascribed by individuals. While these public opinion polls are an integral component of research, social scientists are ill-served by depending on them as independent modes of inquiry. In addition to the missed opportunities to understand what questions are being answered within surveys (or how respondents are interpreting response options), the methodological requirements of surveys mean these instruments act as “gatekeepers”: writers determine which issues and people merit inclusion and thus make broad claims about knowledge and participation based on narrowly defined parameters that often

reflect their own experiences and biases without a sufficient understanding of how their respondent pool thinks about the subjects at hand.

A combination of multiple methodologies allows for the breadth and generalizability of quantitative methods while including the depth and flexibility of qualitative techniques. As the previous two principles elucidate, both qualitative and quantitative research methodologies have strengths as well as challenges. While researchers historically have adopted one “camp” and singularly focused on either “soft” (qualitative) or “hard” (quantitative) methodologies, this approach must be eliminated in order to produce findings of the highest possible caliber. By utilizing a multimethodological design that allows both qualitative and quantitative techniques to work in tandem, researchers are much better equipped to understand audiences and their relationships to politics and media.

As these seven principles reiterate, constructionism—and this study—emphasizes the conversation that occurs among audiences, content, and media. It is not enough to simply interpret survey results (as research on the political effects of late night television comedy has done up to this point); while the initial quantitative work provided an essential platform from which to base a research agenda, these mono-methodological approaches can no longer be considered sufficient. Rather, researchers are obligated to give voice to audiences, allowing and encouraging them to present their side of the story. That is why this research study is a significant (and much needed) step within the late night comedy body of work. By utilizing qualitative and quantitative techniques in tandem and making a concerted effort to understand audiences and on their own terms—particularly how they construct meaning around specific content and those data inform their overall schema—we can more accurately and deeply identify the political effects of late night television comedy.

Discussion

Considering findings within the extant literature, methodology, and constructionism uncovers an important paradigm for understanding how citizens engage with politics and news media: political evolution. While this construct has not been identified in previous research, it provides a useful and efficient means of understanding how highly informed citizens contrast with their low-information counterparts in terms of two key dimensions: the previously explored political sophistication, and the newly defined independence of thought. When considered in tandem, these variables create a new model of understanding citizens in terms of their political evolution.

Late Night Comedy Audiences and Political Evolution

The overarching question guiding this research study is the political effects of late night comedy, using political engagement and news media usage to inform data collection and analysis. First evidenced in the quantitative analysis, the deep schism between LNTS and TDS viewers was not only reinforced but widened when the focus was placed specifically on heavy viewers in specific age groups (18-25 years old, 26-40 years old). Political science research has consistently shown that citizens tend to become more aware of and tuned into politics and current events as they age, and this was certainly reflected among these respondents. While political science research has addressed how voters differ at varying periods in their lives, this research has tended to focus on specific life periods, such as young adults or major life events. These variables do not fully explicate the differences in political engagement found among these respondents, however. While an age effect was certainly at play, the extreme variation among audiences cannot be explained by demographic or socioeconomic differences. One specific concept does provide a useful lens through which to examine these differences, however: political evolution.

Undergoing a political evolution is more substantial than the natural growth or refinement of political perspectives that can be attributed to the effects of aging or experiencing life milestones, and the data collected during this research point to a phenomenon that is considerably different from what has been analyzed in the past. Simply stated, political evolution is an individual's active personal journey to political understanding. It is characterized by a conscious effort to collect data, process information, and develop sophisticated political frameworks that are used to construct meaning around politics and current events. During the evolutionary period, frameworks or schema are regularly created, challenged, and contested, leading to a fluidity of thought and complexity of understanding that shapes a highly sophisticated, thoughtful assessment of the political world and one's personal positions within that universe.

Political evolution is informed by two separate variables: political sophistication and independence of thought. These variables and this matrix are derived from the research findings, identified through the synthesized analysis of quantitative and qualitative results, as well as the effort to understand how audiences construct meaning around program content and within their broader political schema.

Political Sophistication

Data indicate that late night television comedy viewers represent a variety of positions on a political sophistication scale, ranging from those with extremely low to those with extremely high levels of political sophistication. Those with *extremely low* levels of political sophistication are characterized by their complete lack of attention to almost anything that happens outside of their immediate circumstances. They take an "ostrich-like" approach to life, burying their heads in the proverbial sand as they continue to live their lives day to day. Rather than seeking out news and information, they prefer to live in an insular world, focusing on their own pasts,

presents, and futures. That said, these respondents do tend to have an interest in seeking out information about topics in which they are interested, such as sports or popular culture (music, movies, celebrity gossip, etc.), but tend to tune out political information in general:

Uh, I guess I'm more like, uh, media- or sports-oriented than I am politics, you know? When he like brings up something, like, political, I listen but I'd rather, you know, I'm kind of drifting at the same time (LY13).

These “area interests” tend to be rather narrow, and do not expand to include political news or current events. When these viewers are presented with political information, they do not construct meaning around the new data; rather, they either dismiss it (as evidenced in the quote above) or accept it superficially, without engaging in complex thought processes to contextualize new learnings. This is attributable in part to the limited political frameworks they maintain; in other words, they are not equipped to engage with political information in a complex manner.

Someone with a *moderate* level of political sophistication and interest, on the other hand, is generally aware of what is happening in the world, although they are by no means experts (and do not claim to be). They are aware of major headlines and are at least somewhat attuned to current events, but this information is often gleaned through sources that are not typically considered to be traditional “hard news” sources (such as morning shows and entertainment radio programs, such as a local morning show). They do have some political frameworks in place, but they tend to be isolated from each other; they do not easily draw connections between existing schema and have a difficult time contextualizing or assigning meaning to information that does not fit within their existing frameworks. This rigidity makes constructing meaning difficult; while they can process some information, their understanding of new information is inherently limited to their extant schema. New frameworks are created only when necessary, and most data that do not fit within existing ones tend to be ignored or quickly dismissed.

Finally, those with *extremely high* levels of political sophistication and interest have sophisticated and informed opinions on complex issues. They typically engage with news media throughout the day, having specific and ritualized news consumption routines. For those on this end of the spectrum, politics and current events are often a hobby and a passion; they keep close watch on the world around them, and they feel a need to stay informed. Their political frameworks are highly developed and extremely fluid, with connections and associations easily drawn between new and extant data. There is a modicum of maintenance required to maintain these schema, and thus viewers at this end of the spectrum are constantly refreshing their frameworks by infusing new data (often including opinions and information that are contrary to their personal positions). This is not to say that their political perspectives are irresolute or ambiguous; these respondents have a clear position on most issues and typically are committed to an ideological perspective. They are open to other perspectives that challenge these positions, however, since these differing opinions provide an opportunity to intellectually engage with topics that are of great interest.

Differences among the two targeted audiences in terms of their locations on the political sophistication scale quickly emerged during data collection. These differences in political sophistication are not surprising in light of the quantitative findings presented in the previous chapter, where we saw clear differentiation between LNTS and TDS viewers on political engagement measures.

As a whole, “heavy” viewers of late night talk shows (defined as those who tune in to the programs three to four times a week or more) tend to evidence low levels of political information, knowledge, awareness, or interest. These respondents are generally “tuned out” from news media, and generally will only take heed of a story if it is introduced to them (e.g., “coming across” a headline while checking email or flipping through channels, hearing about an

event during classes or at work, and so forth). Very rarely do stories about politics or current events break through to be considered relevant by this group; most freely admit that they are ill informed and often will use this lack of information as justification for not participating in the political process.

Heavy viewers of “The Daily Show” (TDS), however, are typically at the other end of the spectrum. They can easily be described as political junkies, voraciously consuming politically relevant news and translating this information into thoughtful opinions and fodder for discussions. TDS viewers tend frequently to seek out news and information, having ritualized news “intervals” regularly scheduled throughout their days. They pride themselves on being aware and up-to-date on current events and will take the lead in conversations about politics and current affairs. All is not necessarily rosy with this group, however; their high levels of political awareness mean that they are also all too familiar with political scandals and pitfalls. Therefore, members of this group often evidence high levels of cynicism and deliberate disengagement (rather than apathy, as is the case with LNTS viewers).

Independence of Thought

While political sophistication can be understood as something inherent to an individual, independence of thought contrasts viewers with their families and friends. The independence of thought variable is indicative of a respondent’s construction of thoughtful, considered political frameworks where they he or she has cogently and actively re-considered his or her political perspectives and “broken away” from the values espoused by parents and loved ones. As discussed above, political science research traditionally examined this dynamic through the lens of empirically verifiable measures: party identification, ideology, and voting behavior. As a component of political communication, however, the independence of thought variable focuses not on the end result, but on the process that is undergone. This is characterized by actively

exploring other perspectives, consciously internally challenging the norms of others (particularly parents and significant others), and deliberately making choices that reflect one's own perspective, regardless of how this position aligns with those held by others.

Those with *extremely low* independence of thought typically espouse verbatim the views of others in their lives. When asked to justify or explain, they are at a loss: this is not something they have thought through, and thus they are unable to provide any evidence or reasoning to support their positions. These respondents oftentimes cannot explicate the differences between Democrats and Republicans or liberals and conservatives. This question takes these respondents by surprise, since they never had thought through what these terms meant or been asked to do so in the past.

For viewers with *moderate* independence of thought, some consideration had been given to their own personal political perspective. They are often driven to support a party by one specific issue, such as abortion, and typically cite either maintaining the same party position as their parents or adjusting based on their peer group or significant others. These respondents rarely think about party platforms beyond this one issue position, but are at least aware of what the party stands for in general. When asked to differentiate between liberals and conservatives, explanations tend to center on basic heuristic definitions: liberals want to change things, while conservatives want to maintain the status quo. They also cite religious differences to explicate the differences between the ideological perspectives, with conservatives cornering the “God market” for these respondents. Notably, those with moderate independence of thought use the same definitions and explanations for party and ideology and are unable to comprehend or articulate the differences between these two variables.

Finally, those with *extremely high* independence of thought have completely reconsidered their own political perspective. These respondents have likely entertained party options outside

of the two mainstream parties in the United States, in large part because their complex political perspectives mean they often do not wholly align with any one platform. While they may have ultimately settled on similar political perspectives to those held by their parents and friends, they came to these realizations on their own terms. Parties and ideologies are separate entities for these respondents, and they can provide lengthy, intricate explanations that incorporate historical context as well as the current political climate.

This conceptualization of the impact of deliberately and consciously separating oneself from the political positions of parents and friends has not yet been studied within political science, but I suggest it will provide a fruitful and rich perspective on understanding how active and thoughtful citizens consider their political worlds.

Political Evolution Matrix

By understanding how viewers are located on these two axes, we can better explicate differences in political engagement and assess the political effects of late night television comedy. When considered in conjunction with each other, these axes create a political evolution matrix. This matrix allows us to understand the relationship between political evolution and late night comedy viewership. By locating respondents for each program within quadrants on this matrix, we can identify patterns among viewers that will illuminate political evolution, political engagement, and late night viewership.

Upper Right: $I_{high}S_{high}$. Citizens located in the upper right quadrant evidence high levels of both independence of thought and political sophistication. They are well-informed about politics and current affairs, and have created sophisticated frameworks for processing and understanding new political information. These schema are fluid and flexible, and these citizens appreciate opportunities to “challenge” their frameworks through contesting or contrary perspectives.

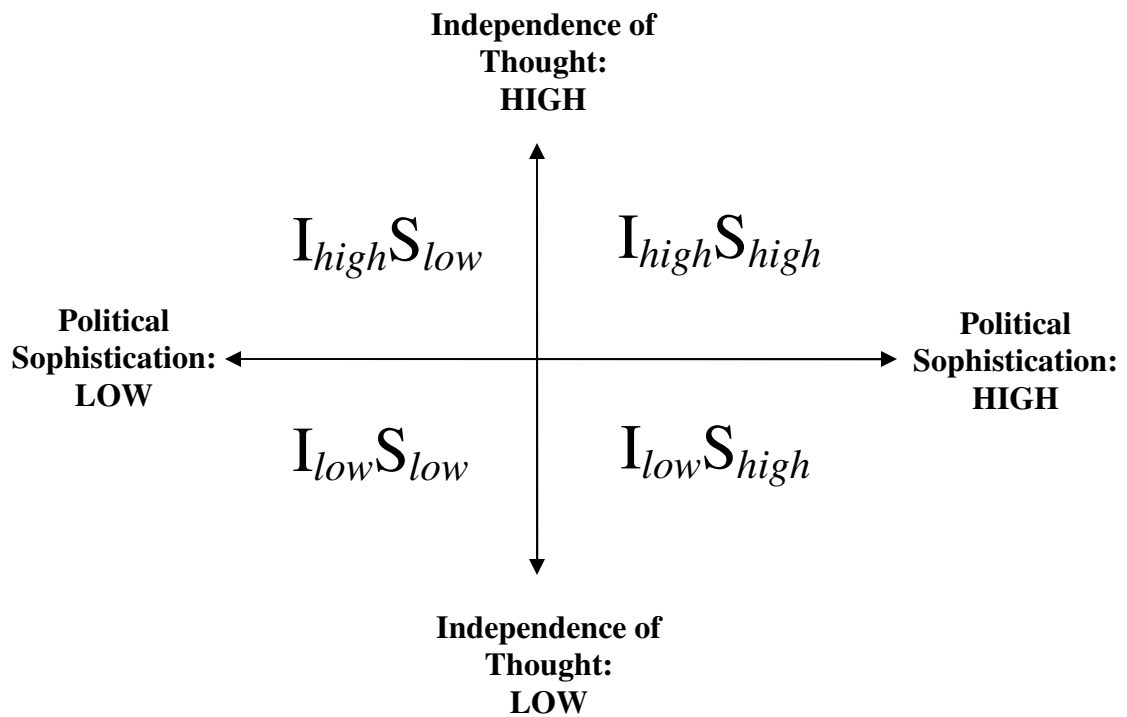


Figure 8.1. The political evolution matrix

Lower Right: $I_{low}S_{high}$. While these respondents have high levels of political sophistication and rather well-constructed frameworks, their lower levels of independence of thought mean that they are less likely to seek out or welcome adversarial perspectives. This dearth of debate means their arguments are often less well-constructed and their abilities to fluidly integrate new information are somewhat less developed than those in the upper right quadrant.

Lower Left: $I_{low}S_{low}$. These citizens rarely think or talk about politics. They have few political perspectives, and the vast bulk of what they do know comes directly from the values espoused by parents or peers. This group is remarkable for their almost total lack of involvement in the political world; they are disinterested in politics, and rarely engage on any level deeper than basic awareness.

Upper Left: $I_{high}S_{low}$. The rarest of the four quadrants, those with high levels of independence and low levels of political sophistication tend to be “single issue” voters who have

selected their perspective in order to be opposed to someone else. For example, a college-aged woman who grew up in a strict Baptist home goes to college and, in an active rejection of her parents' ideology, becomes pro-choice. This is not a thoughtful or considered decision; rather, this re-alignment is based solely on what she is not (i.e., like her mom and dad).

Each of these quadrant definitions describes an extreme archetypal representation, and most citizens are more neutrally defined. By understanding where respondents are located by quadrant and within the matrix overall, however, we can better explore how political evolution is related to late night television comedy viewership and, more importantly, the ways in which citizens engage with politics and news media. This matrix should not be mistaken for a quantitatively-based graph of viewers' levels of political sophistication or independence of thought; rather, this political evolution matrix serves as a visual reference to depict the overall placement of viewers and reflect patterns in behaviors and responses.

Late Night Talk Show (LNTS) Viewers and the Political Evolution Matrix

LNTS viewers are concentrated in the lower right ($I_{low}S_{low}$) quadrant of the political evolution matrix, typically falling to the lower ends of the spectrum for both political sophistication and independence of thought, as we see in Figure 8.2. Viewers were located on this model based on their overall political experiences and positions, including their responses to various political- and media-related questions. This matrix emphasizes the lack of political engagement evidenced by LNTS viewers. While there is some evidence of an age effect at play for political sophistication, this is not the case for independence of thought. Most of these respondents have not put significant thought into creating their own political schema or challenging those around them; in fact, few indicate they have expended effort into understanding the political world or attempting to become savvy audiences for political information. Concentration in the lower right quadrant of the political evolution matrix indicates

that these respondents have exceedingly low levels of engagement in terms of politics and political affairs.

In general, LNTS viewers do not provide any evidence of independently constructing these types of thoughtful, considered political belief systems where they have cogently and actively reconsidered their political perspectives and “broken away” from the values espoused by their parents. Most report that their party identification mirrors their parents’, even when they acknowledge significant differences in issue positions on such “hot button” topics as abortion and immigration. When asked for the reasoning behind their political perspectives (whether in terms of party identification, issue positions, or candidate choice), responses were often hesitant and abbreviated, indicating that the first time they had ever thought about it was during their interview.

Party identification itself tends to be limited to major parties: these respondents were Democrats, Republicans, or nothing, and most could not give a solid explanation for why they chose their affiliation. In fact, most found it extremely difficult to clearly articulate the differences between the two major parties. For some, this was something that had never been explained, and thus they have no context for understanding parties and their issue platforms:

If you gave me an issue and you said, you know, there’s probably two stances you could take on this issue, which one would you relate to each (party), I probably really would have (no idea). I don’t know if that was just a family thing, but I don’t think that’s something you go over in school either. But, I guess I feel like I should have been more exposed to it. I don’t feel like that was ever white and black (explanations) that you ever touched on. I guess it might be something that people just assumed that you were very familiar with and all along nobody ever really helped me out with it (LY3).

Others had a broad sense of the parties, identifying Democrats as “liberal” and Republicans as “conservative,” but could not explicate what these terms meant:

I mean, I’m not that, I’m definitely a Bush fan, but (he) definitely screwed up, but um, I think liberals, they’re just very more, you know, they don’t want restrict anyone of anything, they kinda just want people to do what they want and be free. And they got

straight about some things, but other ones, not that conservatives want to control people, but you know, I don't know, I don't really know, (if) I've ever really thought about how to describe the differences between to someone who didn't know (LY2).

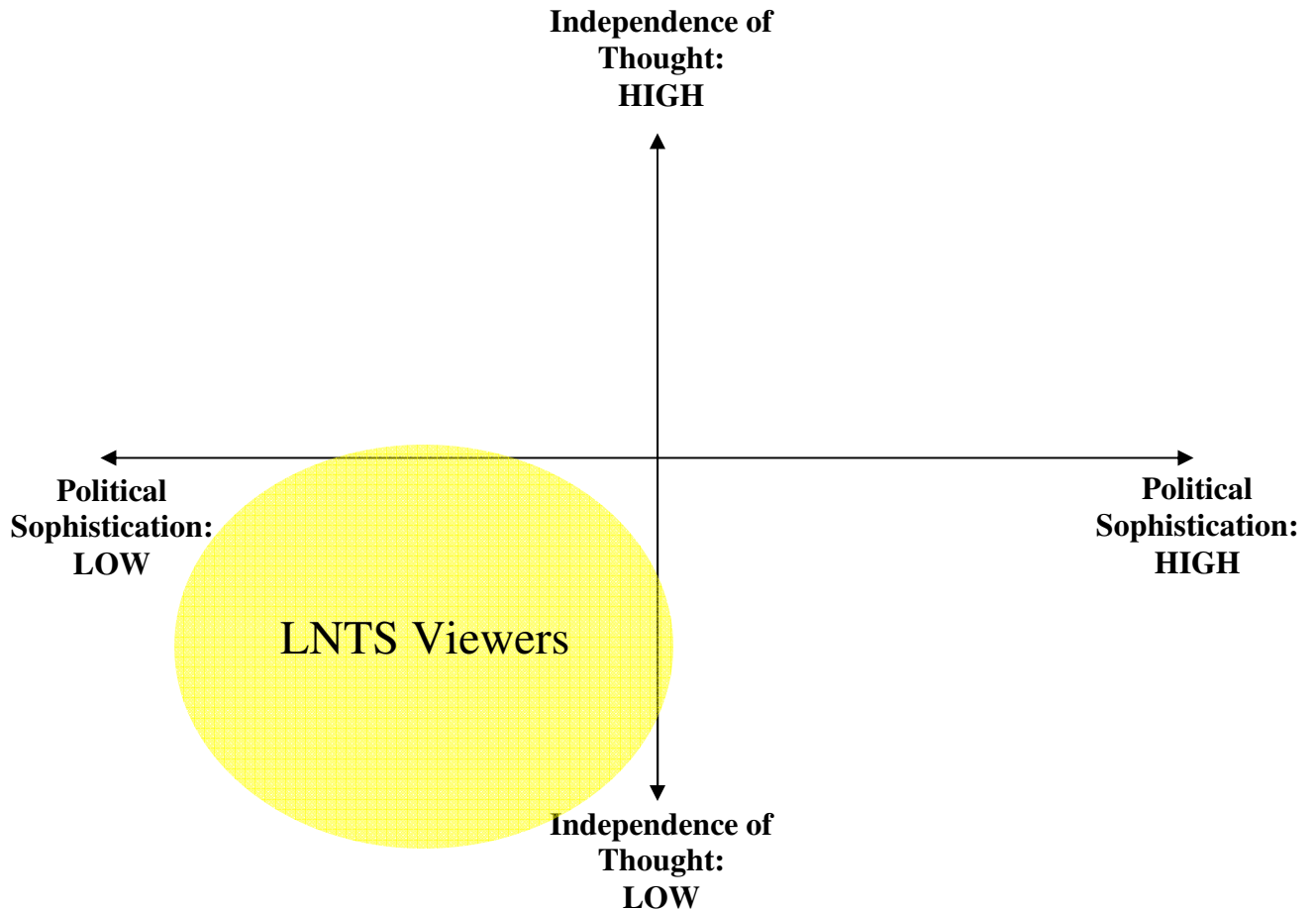


Figure 8.2. LNTS viewers and the political evolution matrix

The Daily Show Audiences and Political Evolution

Most TDS viewers have undergone significant political evolutions and thus are clustered in the upper right quadrant ($I_{high}S_{high}$) of the political evolution matrix as evidenced by Figure 8.3. As this figure shows, politics is a way of life for TDS viewers, most of whom report spending considerable amounts of time each day keeping tabs on national and international events and actively considering the effects of these situations. While there is some variance

among these viewers, TDS respondents were generally concentrated at the high end of both the political sophistication and political independence axes, and are thus clustered in the upper right quadrant of the political evolution matrix. For this group, respondents who would be located lowest on the political sophistication scale are moderately sophisticated, and these respondents were typically younger viewers (18 years old) who were just embarking on the independence of thought process that characterizes TDS viewers.

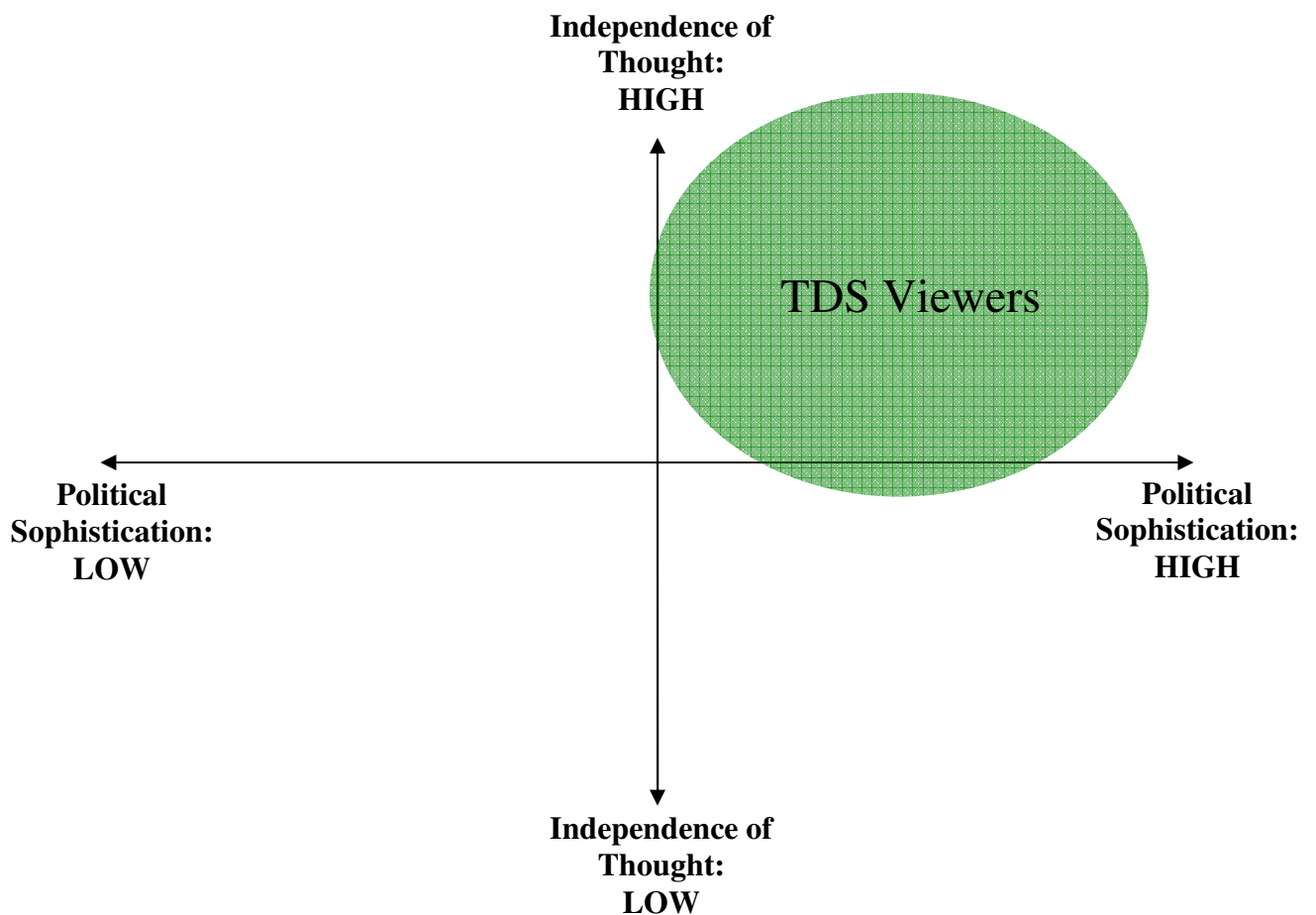


Figure 8.3. TDS viewers and the political evolution matrix

Unlike LNTS respondents, these viewers have actively reconsidered and broken away from their parents' politics. This does not happen by accident; rather, this process is thoughtful and prioritized. Respondents cited varying "triggers" that initiated this political evolution,

including legal benchmarks (turning 18, so legal to vote), events that forced their attention (including the war in Iraq and perceptions of vote fraud in 2000 and 2004), or influential individuals who challenged their thinking (such as high school teachers and college friends or roommates):

I have a roommate, I guess that falls under peers, that came into college as a very staunch Libertarian and who was an economics major. And talking to him that sort of, see, he's right on these things, I can't really beat him in an argument on these things, so maybe I should look into that. I read some books just because I was curious; economic issues is where I, I made the biggest switch (DY8).

Some could not pinpoint the reasoning behind their evolutions, indicating that they had always held an interest in politics and, as they grew older, that interest took root and continued to develop. Ultimately, however, TDS viewers had undergone a seemingly extensive thought process that had resulted in a well-constructed and well-conceived political belief system. Interestingly, TDS viewers at the highest end of the independence of thought axis recognize the importance of this process:

People sometimes just vote because their parents vote a certain way, because, you know, they don't know... "My parents are Democrats or whatever, my parents are Republicans, I'm going to vote Republican, whatever." They don't know, they don't actually have their own set of, like, facts and beliefs. I think that you should be like, "Okay, this person stands for ... you know, this. And I agree with them, but I don't agree with them, so I'm going to vote for them because I do agree with them." I'll have a mixed ballot if I feel one person will do a better job than another person (DY3).

As mentioned above, there is an age effect at play within this group. The youngest TDS viewers interviewed during this data collection (two 18-year-olds and two 19-year-olds) were at varying stages of this process. Interestingly, one of the respondents articulated what he felt going through this process:

I have my stances on certain things, but ah, I don't know I really believe in less government, I don't think the government should be part of everything, um, um, I don't know. Inflation is kind of getting to me, you know gas prices stuff like that, stereotypical

teenage thing, I want more money (laughs), but um, but then that kind of contradicts me saying that well I don't want government part of my life, so I, I don't know, maybe I still need to straighten out my views a little bit. You know I'm kind of in the process of learning. I just got interested in politics recently, last, the middle of my senior year of high school, so... (DY1).

Because he is in the early stage of this process, this respondent seemed to approach political learning as if he were in training: he was on the lookout for experts and sources he could trust and was open to exploring different paths in order to find the one that was the best fit for him.

This openness to exploration is a hallmark of TDS viewers' political evolution. While the majority of these respondents explicitly identified themselves with one of the major parties (and most of those individuals were Democrats), a significant number had either opted out of or considered options outside of the two-party system. Their sophisticated and wide-ranging understanding of relevant issues and depth of knowledge regarding party structures (and their foibles) meant that they sought out alternative options. For some, this meant the Libertarian Party, cited by several as an option they had either considered or embraced. Others had decided to reject the party system entirely, trusting their own wealth of information and understanding of complex issues to make the appropriate decision when voting. In fact, almost half of TDS respondents chose not to align themselves with any party, instead considering themselves Independents. For these respondents, no one political party or candidate can meet all of their needs; because their own political perspectives are incredibly nuanced, they want to be able to consider all options in each situation to find what most closely aligns. While they admitted that this candidate or party was typically the Democrats, these respondents wanted to keep their options open.

As discussed in the qualitative findings chapter, the highly sophisticated and independent nature of this audience means a program like "The Daily Show" is ideally suited to their media needs. By deconstructing the news of the day and injecting otherwise dry information with a

healthy dose of satire, TDS provides its audiences with an opportunity to “play” with news and information that is not provided by other media outlets. The program is inherently and fundamentally about politics for intellectuals, as evidenced by the regular inclusion of political and academic guests (rather than relying strictly on Hollywood mainstays, as late night talk shows do). This essential infusion of political content is reminiscent of an earlier “spoof” news cast, the “Weekend Update” on “Saturday Night Live.” Within both of these programs, audiences with political appetites are treated to witty and sophisticated takes on the political world at large. TDS ups the ante from its SNL progenitor, however. While “Weekend Update” often relies on one-liner jokes (similar in format to the stand-up monologues featured on LNTS programs), TDS generally takes the time and effort to create packages and stories around specific content. This greater attention to exploring and exploding the political world offers increased gratification to its “political junkie” audiences, allowing them to more fully engage with content that they find both interesting and entertaining.

Political Evolution

Because constructionism turns the spotlight on the processes and frameworks utilized by audiences to assign meaning to media content (in this instance, politically-oriented comedy), a key component of understanding the political effects of late night television comedy is exploring the schema audiences use to contextualize content. One of the most important discoveries of this research is the tremendous importance of political evolution, understood as the intersection of political sophistication and independence of thought. While this area has not been investigated within existing research, political evolution is the single best concept for understanding how audiences engage with and assign meaning to political content. A respondent’s location within this model gives clear direction for understanding how the role politics and media play within

their lives and provides an exciting opportunity for exploring how media messages can be used to promote political understanding:

As discussed within the qualitative data chapter, TDS audience members tend to be in the upper right quadrant ($I_{high}S_{high}$), characterized by politically engaged, thoughtful citizens who are heavy (and thoughtful) news media consumers who are highly politically evolved across both metrics (political sophistication and independence of thought). Audience members in this quadrant are political junkies, craving constant news updates and thus turning to a variety of media to satiate their needs. They also have highly sophisticated and well-developed political schema in place, products of an extended period of high levels of attention to news and current events. These frameworks are utilized to assign meaning to new data and media content, and these citizens are remarkable for their ability to draw correlations between various issues and concerns (a hallmark of political sophistication). For viewers in this quadrant, TDS offers a tone and perspective that is highly resonant. Their immersion in news media means they are all too familiar with the flaws of politicians and the political world, both in terms of specific scandals and the “dirty politics” that are part and parcel of the American system. By lampooning and satirizing the more ridiculous elements of the political world (including media coverage of these people and events), TDS helps take the sting out of this reality for viewers. It is important to note that, while TDS may accelerate or promote the political evolution process, these types of citizens are not “created” through TDS viewership; rather, individuals who already have some personal interest in politics and thoughtfully have engaged in some type of political evolution are attracted to the program for both the entertainment and informational benefits it provides.

LNTS viewers, on the other hand, primarily are located in the lower left quadrant ($I_{low}S_{low}$) and are notable for their lack of political evolution. Unlike those in the quadrant described above, these citizens tend to be ill-informed and disengaged from politics and political

affairs. They rarely deliberately seek out news and instead utilize Baum's "by-product" model: the information comes almost accidentally, whether through headlines on the screen while signing into their Yahoo! email accounts or via jokes told during late night monologues. Because they are not particularly interested in current affairs, these audiences get little personal satisfaction from just knowing information; their main incentive to pay any attention at all is to "not look stupid" during politically-oriented conversations that may be held amongst their peers or families. While these viewers recognize that they do not achieve the normative standard for political knowledge and they "should" know more, they are generally quite content to continue with this standard. Much of their resistance to political engagement and news media is the lack of frames in place to process and assign meaning to political content. Unlike their TDS counterparts, LNTS viewers have poorly developed political schema and are thus ill-equipped to understand content about politics and current affairs. As such, when presented with content in the form of a late night joke, viewers will often either refrain from attempting to contextualize the joke within any broader framework or will assign superficial, unsophisticated explanations (as was the case with "Hillary Clinton's pantsuit" jokes from Letterman).

Some variance in political sophistication existed within the LNTS population. The age effect was noticeable, with older respondents tending to be better informed than younger. In addition, Letterman viewers were notable for their extremes: when looking at the political sophistication scale, both the highest and the lowest LNTS viewers were Letterman aficionados, an effect that was not replicated within either the Leno or Conan audiences. This provides some support for Young and Tisinger's contention that some differences exist between late night talk show audiences, although these discrepancies are minimal when considered in relation to TDS viewers.

This conceptualization of political evolution marks a new frontier for political communication research. While rooted in the traditions of oft-studied variables (such as the impact of family and friends and political participation), this concept is revolutionary in that it incorporates how these factors can be considered as contributors to an overall political perspective. Political evolution is a process defined by its product: the creation and maintenance of fluid, sophisticated frameworks that are constantly iterated with the introduction of new information. Those who are highly politically evolved have a tremendous amount of political acumen, capable of seeing the connections between seemingly disparate issues and stories. When they encounter new content, these individuals simultaneously employ a two-part process: engaging existing schema to process and understand this new information and concurrently reshaping those same frameworks in light of these new data. Those who are politically evolved represent the apex of the American normative citizen, boasting extraordinarily high levels of information and political sophistication and frequently engaging in political discourse in order to sharpen their own arguments and hone their understanding of political events.

Challenging Normative Ideals of Citizenship

While these highly politically evolved citizens have long been heralded by political scientists and communications scholars as our “normative ideal,” this research raises an important question: is this a fair standard to which to hold all citizens? One of the most defining characteristics of this audience is their passion for politics and current events. They do not engage with politics due to a sense of obligation or duty; being a “good citizen” is not the motivator. Rather, these individuals intrinsically are passionate about politics and awareness of politics and current events is a hobby or avocation. For these audiences, politics is comparable to football, with an election equated to the Super Bowl. Just as a football fanatic will spend the fall and winter avidly following his team’s fate, diligently studying current statistics while looking to

past performance for indications of what might happen under given circumstances, a highly evolved political aficionado will spend hours poring over data for vote trends and projections. In both of these examples, individuals are driven by a personal passion, attaining relevant benefits that provide internal satisfaction.

When considered in this light, it is unreasonable to expect all citizens to be this highly invested in the political process. We would never expect the average American to be able to rattle off the name of the Cleveland Browns' offensive coordinator or even the quarterback of the Tampa Bay Buccaneers, let alone relate sophisticated analyses of the offensive strategies of the Indianapolis Colts when playing certain defensive alignments. Why, then, do we expect the average American to be able to name the Secretary of State or Defense Secretary? Why do we expect that those individual pieces of information will be salient and sufficiently relevant to occupy precious mental space that could otherwise be spent on information that is related to a personal passion? While this comparison certainly is hyperbolic, the underlying point is important: as long as politics and campaigns are treated by news media as "strategic game(s)" (Patterson 1994, 56), citizens are likely to increasingly to think of it as such, whether or not they make a conscious comparison.

The obvious argument against this analogy is that politics and politicians have a real, tangible impact on daily life, and it is the responsibility of citizens to take an active interest in the political system. While this argument carries weight within a normative political structure, the reality of the typical American life is quite different. As quite clearly evidenced by the LNTS viewers, for some Americans, politics is not considered the least bit relevant. They do not see the connection between their lives and the government's actions and tend to have tuned out politics almost entirely. For these individuals, politics are the equivalent of football for the non-fans: not only do they not see the point in paying attention all of the time, when they do try to tune in, they

are overwhelmed by the abundance of information. The complexities of the American political system, both institutional (structure of the government, balloting issues, etc.) and situational (pertinent candidates and issues in any given election), are perceived to be unmanageable and unwieldy. They do not have the necessary political schema in place to make sense of or to organize the information to which they are exposed, and thus are further pushed away from the process. Even when they want to keep tabs on what is broadly going on in the political world, the costs of becoming politically sophisticated citizens far outweigh the perceived benefits. Because they do not associate any personal benefits with political awareness or involvement (whether tangible or inherent), the only incentive for participating is a sense of civic responsibility. Unfortunately, this often is not sufficiently motivating, and thus these citizens continue to be pushed further and further away from the political process. Politics and current events continue to be off their radars, perceived to be irrelevant for younger audiences and a low priority for older. These citizens have a vague notion that they should be paying attention but are only amenable to ways that require a minimum of effort: they will vote if it is convenient, will look at headlines if they are apparent, and will engage with content if it is presented in an appealing, easily digestible manner.

While this disengagement from American politics is widely lamented, there are some who argue that this lack of information and interest is not considered by all to be a negative trend. As Schudson (2000) elucidates, the ideal of an “informed citizen” is a fairly recent concept, achieving prominence during the Progressive Era to counter the influence of political parties, and a better standard for citizenship might be one that focuses on monitoring the political world. As discussed earlier, Popkin persuasively argues the merits of low-information rationality, wherein voters use heuristics to bypass the need for acquiring large amounts of data to make a decision. Both this historical context and Popkin’s emphasis on voters’ rationality emphasize that

this lack of information does not necessarily sound a death knell for democracy; it is quite possible for democracy to survive without a populace comprised of well-informed, voting citizens.

It is within this last parameter that late night talk shows come into play for these audiences. They are not watching late night monologues in order to gain information and, while some may claim to learn from these jokes, their interpretation of “learn” is more akin to exposure than the actual processing and retention of new information. These audiences do not put effort into understanding the jokes or assigning meaning to political content; these jokes are just one component of the monologues, on par with cracks about Britney Spears’ lack of undergarments and Paris Hilton’s time in jail. Because their reasons for tuning in to talk shows are almost exclusively for entertainment and relaxation, these audiences see no problem with the juxtapositioning of political content with celebutante news. Their unsophisticated political frameworks means these audiences do not assign political meaning to these jokes and do not link them to broader stories; at best, viewers will read content in a way that fits within their limited schema; at worst, they will not understand the content but can still laugh at the delivery, and then let it pass.

While monologue jokes may be referenced at a later date within a political conversation, even under those circumstances they are not processed at a more sophisticated level than “it’s funny” (as evidenced by respondents’ inability to explain what is funny about any given joke). In fact, respondents do not provide any evidence of allowing these jokes to impact their political frames (as unsophisticated and ill-considered as they may be). Audiences can identify easily the stereotypes Leno, Letterman, and Conan utilize for mocking key political leaders, such as George W. Bush’s inarticulateness and propensity for malapropisms. Despite the constant barrage of jokes about Bush that fit within this theme, respondents tend to be fairly sympathetic

in their interpretations. For most, this was nothing more than evidence of Bush's humanity, and it made him more appealing to those who were already inclined to support a Republican president.

This is a new take on how audiences are influenced by late night monologue jokes. Scholars have been so worried about the negativity of content—the constant mockery, the consistent themes, and the unfettered abuse—that we have, until now, failed to recognize that audiences will process and understand jokes in manners other than how they were intended (if they are processed and understood at all). This is an incredibly important finding for this research and forces a shift in how we think about and research the political effects of late night talk shows.

The desirability of “normative citizenship” is called into question by TDS viewers as well. While these audiences represent the “best of the best” in terms of political acumen and attention, there are some ramifications to their diligence. Unlike LNTS viewers, TDS audiences and others in their quadrant effectively and efficiently process political messages and assign meaning to content. As discussed above, these political junkies are voracious news consumers, constantly checking in with various news sources in order to remain abreast of current affairs. Unfortunately, this means that these viewers are often exposed to the “man behind the curtain” and are constantly dealing with further evidence of what is wrong with the political system. A continuous barrage of stories about corrupt politicians and a broken political system has driven some of these citizens away from the political process. They have consciously opted out, rejecting a system that they see as irrevocably broken and fraudulent. While these audience members continue to participate in terms of engaging in active processing and interpersonal discourse, they do not take advantage of the opportunities for civic participation that we most frequently look to as measures of engagement, including voting. These citizens have been turned off by the dark underbelly of the American political system, and—while they continue to

maintain exceptionally high levels of political knowledge and news media usage—they no longer feel compelled to take part in the process in a traditional sense. While this is certainly not the case for all TDS viewers, these sentiments were strong enough to generate some concern. While the end result—a lack of engagement with the political process—is similar, these two groups represent extremely different concerns. The former is completely tuned out from the political process and is not equipped to process and assign meaning to political content presented in anything more complex than a soundbite; the latter is turned off by the corruption and deceit that is a constant factor in the political content with which they engage.

The ideal normative citizen celebrated in American political science research is clearly an aspirational vision that is almost unachievable for most. This research clearly shows that those who do meet the stringent criteria set for active citizenship do so based on their own personal passion for politics rather than a sense of civic obligation. By holding all Americans to this standard, we are placing unfair and unreachable demands on the average citizen. Most do not have appropriately developed frameworks in place to make sense of the information available in the mainstream media and are not inclined to put in the time and effort that are required to embark on a political evolution. To return to our football analogy, asking Americans who have not created the necessary frameworks to create meaning around political content is like asking someone who has never watched a football game to explain the offsides rule: not only are they ill prepared to talk about why this rule is important, they probably do not even know what the term means. When this basic level of information is not readily available, citizens have no way of making sense of more sophisticated information. As such, they simply opt to tune out instead. For others, their love of the game means they can not only explain the offsides rule, but they can provide articulate and thoughtful arguments for and against it, tapping into both historical knowledge and theoretical implications. Their constant scrutiny of football as an industry,

however, means they are disillusioned by allegations of spousal abuse, violent crimes, and the constant arrests of Cincinnati Bengals. While they still are passionate about the game, they are disheartened and disappointed.

What has led to these levels of disaffiliation and disdain? Why are American citizens so tuned out of and turned off from the political process? One potential culprit has been identified in this research: mainstream media coverage of political affairs.

Holding Media Responsible

While it is easy to criticize LNTS viewers for their lack of knowledge and the turned-off TDS viewers for their decision to opt out, much of the responsibility for this reality can be traced to mainstream media. The football analogy used to discuss passion for politics is apropos, with news outlets treating politics like a football game. Much of the focus is on horse-race coverage, emphasizing campaign strategy and maneuvering at the expense of issue positions and candidate qualifications. Reporters emphasize the personalities and personal lives of candidates and their families, seeking out scandals in order to gain viewers and move papers. How can we blame Americans for rejecting politics in a system where pundits and politicians from both sides of the political spectrum constantly attack and berate each other, with media professionals hiding behind the protective veil of “objectivity”? Examples of this type of political discourse as extreme sport can be easily identified, with perpetrators ranging from Ann Coulter and Bill O’Reilly on the left to Michael Moore and Al Sharpton on the right. This problem is endemic to a media system that exists to generate ratings and revenue. In order to attract viewers, outlets ranging from the cable news channels to local news affiliates increasingly focus on the spectacular and the spectacle. The results have not been kind for democratic discourse; as Patterson writes, “News coverage has become a barrier between the candidates and the voters rather than a bridge connecting them” (25).

When media sources do not rely on advertising dollars to exist, they are more likely to embrace the types of stories and coverage that focus on issues and policies. Prominent examples include programming on the Public Broadcasting Service (PBS) and National Public Radio (NPR), both of which have been credited with providing consistently strong public affairs coverage that does not pander to prurient or salacious interests and content. While this caliber of news does exist and is readily available, the depth of information presented in these types of programs is not always appealing to an audience who has been trained to expect little more than soundbites. This type of content also is not accessible to the many Americans who are not particularly politically sophisticated or independently-minded, the two axes of our political evolution matrix. Their lack of political acumen means long-form or in-depth news stories can be intimidating and impenetrable; without the necessary frames in place for understanding content, these viewers simply tune out.

Both LNTS and TDS respondents reacted negatively to their perception of angry, accusatory politics becoming predominant in mainstream news media, citing such examples as Carl Monday and local news “yellow journalism” as well as cable news channels that constantly broadcast talking heads screaming at each other. For these viewers, news outlets are all sending the same message: there is no need to pay attention to this process because it is little more than a spectacle. There is nothing in this type of coverage that will entice or excite LNTS viewers who might get interested in politics, and this standard has clearly undermined perceptions of the political process for some TDS viewers as well. This research reinforces Patterson’s claim that “In claiming the game has overtaken substance, bad news overshadows good, controversies outrank policy matters, news images prevail over issues of leadership, and news attention is distributed unfairly...” (212), and the American electorate has noticed. As such, I contend that the mainstream media must take some responsibility for Americans tuning out and turning off,

with their focus on the negative, emphasis on scandal, dearth of context, and the reduction of discourse to pithy soundbites. These new media conventions are not helping Americans to engage in the political process; in fact, it makes it extremely difficult for anyone to get excited about the political system at all. This sentiment was articulated by Jon Stewart during a heated exchange on CNN's "Crossfire" with Tucker Carlson and Paul Begala. Stewart accused the pair and their colleagues of having a negative impact on the American democratic process: "And I wanted to -- I felt that that wasn't fair and I should come here and tell you that I don't -- it's not so much that it's bad, as it's hurting America... Stop, stop, stop, stop hurting America" (CNN, October 15, 2004).

While TDS has been criticized for its cynical tone, this research actually indicates viewers do not hold the program responsible for their own disillusionment with politics and political affairs. As demonstrated in the qualitative findings chapter, respondents looked to TDS not to be a resource for new information, but for a different angle on the news they have already heard or read over the course of the day. This angle—one that deliberately and consciously illuminates the artful spin and questionable conjecture that often define news coverage in the United States—provides a release valve for audiences' frustrations with both politics and media. Thus, for these viewers, TDS often is perceived to be more respectable and reliable than most of the mainstream news outlets, notably Fox News. During interviews, TDS respondents frequently cited this channel as the archetypal example of what is wrong with mainstream media in terms of coverage, including slanted journalists and guests, biased content, and a slippery interpretation of what is legitimate news.

While they do not turn to TDS as a sole (or even primary) news source, it is an essential component of their daily news menu for respondents. The program is respected for being honest and upfront about its agenda and deliberate in its tone. Unlike mainstream news media, TDS

does not hide behind ostensible “journalistic standards” to abdicate responsibility for holding politicians accountable for what they say and do. Jon Stewart and his team are afforded respect because they do not pretend to be objective, but instead call out both mainstream media and politicians for their spin, manipulations, and half-truths. For example, President Bush gave a speech about the importance of American-made goods for a strong economy. He visited a factory, and the stage was carefully set to reinforce his message: boxes were stacked behind him and in front of the podium, with some clearly stamped “Made in America.” After commenting on the content of the speech, Stewart made a startling revelation: the boxes behind Bush were actually a painted flat, and the boxes in front had tape covering their actual stamp, “Made in China.” One frequent device of calling attention to the abundance of spin in the American political environment employed by Stewart and his team is cutting together “talking points” from a variety of party leaders and enthusiasts. By showing how constructed these messages are, Stewart explodes the perception that these statements are in any way organic or natural. Unlike mainstream media news sources that often mindlessly parrot the party line as presented by these politicians, TDS consciously calls attention to how news conventions can be manipulated.

While TDS does not “break” news in the traditional news sense, they are serving an essential role for viewers: watchdog for the watchdogs. TDS critiques the mainstream news media, journalistic conventions, and the political world with biting humor that is both smart and insightful. By challenging the status quo, TDS feeds a political junkie’s news cravings in a way that others cannot (or will not).

Next Steps

This research points to the importance of continuing to develop a qualitative research agenda in regard to the political effects of late night television comedy. The strengths of qualitative research—depth and nuance—are essential components of any rich literature review.

This is not to say that quantitative research is no longer needed; in fact, it is exceedingly important that instruments are developed—grounded in qualitative findings and insights—that can continue to investigate these effects in ways that are more sensitive to the specific content contained within these programs. All future research should separate late night talk shows and “The Daily Show” since there is little commonality between the traditional talk shows and TDS. Future LNTS research should also be designed to further parse the differences between each of the prominent talk shows, since it is likely that some differences will emerge.

Much research needs to be done on political evolution. While this study identified the concept and begins to explicate the components of political evolution, a more robust examination that goes outside of late night television comedy audiences is in order. This concept opens up an exciting new avenue for explicating and understanding the differences among citizens and could prove to be a fruitful means of analysis. Because this is a new model for explaining differences among citizens, political evolution provides an opportunity to explore how the frameworks employed by citizens to engage with political information relate to and inform news media usage and political behavior.

Further research also needs to be done on potential subconscious effects of late night comedy content, particularly among LNTS audiences. While respondents did not evidence or identify notable effects, it is possible that the constant barrage of jokes can have an impact on how these respondents perceive politics and political actors. An experiment that is designed to uncover these possible effects would be a useful addition to the body of literature.

In terms of TDS viewers, an important next step is further exploring how “The Daily Show” fits within their news media landscape. This research points to some of the benefits of watching the program, including an alternate perspective and a sense of connection to others. These benefits may vary in salience during non-election periods and this needs to be understood.

Conclusions

As this research clearly indicates, the ideal standard to which we hold citizens is unfair and, frankly, unachievable for most. Most Americans do not have the necessary personal passion for politics that is required to reach this standard, and thus we are constantly criticizing a majority of the population for not meeting our arbitrary ideals. Therefore, it is essential to reconsider what we expect from citizens in terms of both participation and awareness. Rather than expecting all Americans to invest considerable time, attention, and energy into understanding the political process and remaining up-to-date on current affairs, we need to recognize the realities in which these individuals exist. Most citizens do not have the frameworks in place to process political information and create sophisticated meaning around content, and a soundbite-driven media only exacerbates this situation. Until media coverage begins to provide sufficient contextualization, shifts away from an emphasis on scandal and salaciousness, and attempts to re-engage citizens in a rich, thoughtful manner, citizens like those of late night talk shows are unlikely to join in the political process.

This research has unequivocally established that late night talk shows and “The Daily Show” should not be treated as interchangeable or even comparable. Their humor, structure, and content are widely divergent, and—more importantly for our purposes—audiences engage these programs quite differently. Late night talk shows are tuned into purely for entertainment, with political content perceived to be on par with jokes about celebrities. While audiences may be exposed to new information via these programs, they are not learning in the sense traditionally understood by researchers. Rather, these shows play the same role as headlines: reassuring audiences that they will know if something significant has happened and allowing them to “check in” on the political system without making any effort. “The Daily Show,” on the other hand, is entertaining in large part because of its informative content. While audiences are not

looking to the program for new stories, they do trust it to provide an alternative perspective that can be likened to a breath of fresh air. By lampooning political content and journalistic conventions, “The Daily Show” provides its audiences with a much-needed release valve from the frustrations that often build during their daily news consumption.

Ultimately, these findings point to the importance of political evolution in terms of creating frameworks for political understanding. Because LNTS viewers typically have not undergone political evolutions, they have not established sophisticated frameworks for understanding and contextualizing new information. As such, they are not equipped to construct meaning around bites of data, such as those contained in monologue jokes. The opposite is true for most TDS viewers, who actively create and maintain political schema via political evolution. These frames allow them to take information and create their own meaning around it, integrating when appropriate into their extant schema in a process that is fluid and iterative. It is important to keep in mind, however, that this political evolution is the result of personal interest, and thus cannot be expected of those who have no internal incentive to engage with this content area.

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APPENDIX A DESCRIPTION OF QUANTITATIVE VARIABLES

All data used in the quantitative portion of this study come from the Pew Center for People and the Press's 2006 Biennial Media Consumption dataset.

DEPENDENT VARIABLES

Late Night Talk Show Viewership

"Now I'd like to know how often you watch or listen to certain TV and radio programs. For each that I read, tell me if you watch or listen to it regularly, sometimes, hardly ever, or never. (First), how often do you... *watch TV shows such as David Letterman and Jay Leno.*"

"The Daily Show" Viewership

"Now I'd like to ask you about some other television and radio programs. For each that I read, tell me if you watch or listen to it regularly, sometimes, hardly ever, or never. (First) how often do you... *watch "The Daily Show" with Jon Stewart.*"

INDEPENDENT VARIABLES: DEMOGRAPHIC AND SOCIOGRAPHIC

Age

Measured as chronological number of years since birth through the question "What is your age?"; discrete numbers utilized for 18 (the youngest age permitted for this survey) through 96, with 97 and older coded as 97.

Education

"What is the last grade or class you completed in school?"; responses range from "none, or grade 1-8" through "post-graduate training or professional schooling after college (e.g., toward a master's Degree (sic) or Ph.D.; law or medical school).

Race

First, respondents were asked, "Are you, yourself, of Hispanic origin or descent, such as Mexican, Puerto Rican, Cuban, or some other Spanish background?" A follow-up question was then asked to gauge race: What is your race? Are you white, black, Asian, or some other? Responses to both questions were recoded as a series of dichotomous variables, including Hispanic, black, white, Asian, and other; respondents were coded as either belonging to a race or not.

Income

"Last year, that is in 2005, what was your total family income from all sources, before taxes? Just stop me when I get to the right category." Response options began at "less than \$10,000" and ended at "\$150,000 or more."

Sex

Respondents were not asked to identify their sex (interviewer assigned a code); measured as a dichotomous variable (male/female).

INDEPENDENT VARIABLES: POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT

Political Knowledge

Three separate questions were used to assess knowledge; responses were recoded as dichotomous variables (know/did not know). Questions were randomized and introduced with the following statement: “Next I would like to ask you about some things that have been in the news. Not everyone will have heard about them...”

- “Do you happen to know which political party has a majority in the U.S. House of Representatives?” (Correct: Republicans)
- “Can you tell me the name of the current Secretary of State?” (Correct: Condeleezza Rice)
- “Can you tell me the name of the president of Russia? (Correct: Vladimir Putin)

A knowledge index variable was created as well, summing the total number of correct responses for each respondent.

Political Interest

First, political interest is measured by how closely respondents follow certain news stories: “Now, I will read a list of some stories covered by news organizations this past month. As I read each item, tell me if you happen to follow this news story very closely, fairly closely, not too closely, or not at all closely?”

- “News about the current situation in Iraq.”
- “News about candidates and election campaigns in your state and district.”
- “The high price of gasoline these days.”
- “Iran’s nuclear research program” (asked May 2-21 only).
- “Reports that the National Security Agency has been collecting telephone records of millions of American citizens” (asked May 2-21 only).

Second, political interest is measured by interest in types of news: “Now, I’m going to read you a list of different types of news. Please tell me how closely you follow this type of news either in the newspaper, on television, radio, or the Internet...” Responses range from not at all closely to very closely. Of the fourteen types of news included in the survey, eight are used here (divided into three categories):

- Hard news
 - International news
 - News about Washington D.C.
- Soft news
 - Sports
 - Entertainment
 - Culture and the arts
- Local news
 - Local government
 - Community
 - Crime

Political Preferences

First, party identification is ascertained: “In politics TODAY, do you consider yourself to be a Republican, Democrat, or Independent?” Respondents with no preference, prefer another party, or do not know are excluded from analysis. Those who respond “Independent” are asked a follow-up question: “As of today do you lean more to the Republican Party or more to the Democratic Party?” Responses to these two questions are recoded into a five-point scale.

Second, ideological preferences are gauged on a five-point scale: “In general, would you describe your political views as...*very conservative, conservative, moderate, liberal, or very liberal?*”

Political Participation

Respondents’ presidential vote is used as a measure of political participation. First, respondents are asked, “In the 2004 presidential election between George W. Bush and John Kerry, did things come up that kept you from voting, or did you happen to vote?” If respondents indicate they voted, they are asked a follow-up question, “Did you vote for Bush, Kerry, or someone else?” These responses are recoded into dichotomous variables for Bush and Kerry.

Participation is also measured through a question on vote frequency: “How often would you say you vote... *always, nearly always, part of the time, or seldom?*”

INDEPENDENT VARIABLES: MEDIA

General Media Variables

Four questions are used to understand how people watch news:

- “Here are a few statements about the news. For each, please tell me if you completely agree with it, mostly agree with it, mostly disagree with it, or completely disagree with it... *I find that I often watch the news with my remote control in hand, flipping to other channels when I’m not interested in the topic.*”
- “How much do you enjoy keeping up with the news: a lot, some, not much, or not at all?”
- “Are you more the kind of person who watches or listens to the news at regular times, or are you the kind of person who checks in on the news from time to time?”
- “Which comes closer to describing your view of the news media... *all the news media are pretty much the same to me or there are a few news sources I trust more than others.*”

Usage of News Media

Media usage is measured as a dichotomous variable by medium:

- “Do you happen to read any daily newspaper or newspapers regularly, or not?”
- “Do you happen to watch any TV news programs regularly, or not?”
- “Do you listen to the news on the radio regularly, or not?”

Two additional variables are asked about only on Form 2:

- “Do you get news on the Internet regularly, or not?”
- “Do you read any news magazines regularly, or not?”

Usage of News Programs

Two batteries of questions are used:

- “Now I’d like to know how often you watch or listen to certain TV and radio programs. For each that I read, tell me if you watch or listen to it regularly, sometimes, hardly ever, or never. (First), how often do you...”
 - Television news
 - *Watch the national nightly network news on CBS, ABC, or NBC? This is different from local news shows about the area where you live.*
 - *Watch cable news channels such as CNN, MSNBC, or the Fox News CABLE (sic) Channel*
 - *Watch news magazine shows such as “60 Minutes,” “20/20,” and “Dateline”*
 - *Watch Sunday morning news shows such as “Meet the Press,” “This Week,” or “Face the Nation”*
 - Local news
 - *Watch the local news about your viewing area which (sic) usually comes on before or after the national news in the evening and again later at night*
 - Public news
 - *Watch C-SPAN*
 - *Listen to National Public Radio (NPR)*
 - *Watch the “NewsHour with Jim Lehrer”*
 - Soft news
 - *Watch the Weather Channel*
 - *Watch Sports News (sic) on ESPN*
 - *Watch TV shows such as “Entertainment Tonight” or “Access Hollywood”*
 - *Watch the “Today Show,” “Good Morning America,” or “The Early Show”*

Programs included in the second battery of questions were collapsed into the same categories as the channels and programs listed above where appropriate:

- “Now I’d like to ask you about some other television and radio programs. For each that I read, tell me if you watch or listen to it regularly, sometimes, hardly ever, or never. (First) how often do you...”
 - Television news
 - *Watch “Larry King Live”*
 - *Watch “The O’Reilly Factor” with Bill O’Reilly*
 - Radio news
 - *Listen to Rush Limbaugh’s radio show*
 - *Listen to religious radio shows such as “Focus on the Family”*

Usage of Publications

Publications were organized into categories:

- “Now I’d like to know how often you read certain types of publications. As I read each, tell me if you read them regularly, sometimes, hardly ever, or never. (First,) how often do you read...
 - Highbrow
 - *News magazines such as Time, U.S. News, or Newsweek*
 - *Business magazines such as Fortune and Forbes*
 - *Magazines such as The Atlantic, Harpers, or The New Yorker*
 - *Political magazines such as The Weekly Standard or The New Republic*
 - Entertainment
 - *The National Enquirer, The Sun or Star Magazine*
 - *Personality magazines such as People*
 - Newspapers
 - *A daily newspaper*
 - *Local weekly community newspapers*
 - Online publications (Form 2 only)
 - *Internet news websites such as Google News, AOL News, or Yahoo News*
 - *Network TV news websites such as CNN.com, ABCnews.com, or MSNBC.com*
 - *The websites of major national newspapers such as USA Today.com, New York Times.com, or the Wall Street Journal online*
 - *The internet websites of local newspapers in your area*
 - *The internet websites of local TV stations in your area*
 - *Other kinds of online news magazine and opinion sites such as Slate.com or the National Review online*
 - *Online blogs where people discuss events in the news*

**APPENDIX B:
CROSTABULATIONS**

LNTS Crosstabulations

Pew Center's Biennial Media Consumption Dataset (June 2006): Row Percentages

	Frequency of Watching Late Night Talk Shows			
	Regularly	Sometimes	Hardly Ever	Never
DEMOGRAPHICS				
Gender				
Male	12.99% (182)	20.13% (282)	18.34% (257)	48.54% (680)
Female	10.47% (188)	20.00% (359)	16.60% (298)	52.92% (950)
Education				
None or grades 1-8	8.77% (5)	26.32% (15)	14.04% (8)	50.88% (29)
High school incomplete	13.59% (25)	20.11% (37)	7.07% (13)	59.24% (109)
HS graduate (12, GED)	11.66% (110)	19.41% (183)	15.59% (147)	53.34% (503)
Technical or trade school	11.22% (11)	21.43% (21)	18.37% (18)	48.98% (48)
Some college	12.52% (101)	18.96% (153)	17.84% (144)	50.68% (409)
College graduate	12.21% (84)	21.37% (147)	20.49% (141)	45.93% (316)
Post-grad or Professional	7.69% (30)	20.51% (80)	20.77% (81)	51.03% (199)

Household Income

Less than \$10,000	16.13% (25)	15.48% (24)	13.55% (21)	54.84% (85)
\$10,000 to \$19,999	10.55% (27)	19.53% (50)	14.06% (36)	55.86% (143)
\$20,000 to \$29,999	12.85% (41)	22.57% (72)	15.05% (48)	49.53% (158)
\$30,000 to \$39,999	12.42% (37)	21.14% (63)	16.78% (50)	49.66% (148)
\$40,000 to \$49,999	10.42% (30)	17.36% (50)	19.10% (55)	53.13% (153)
\$50,000 to \$74,999	11.06% (53)	20.04% (96)	19.21% (92)	49.69% (248)
\$75,000 to \$99,999	13.84% (49)	19.77% (70)	22.60% (80)	43.79% (155)
\$100,000 to \$149,999	11.45% (30)	20.99% (55)	20.99% (55)	46.56% (122)
\$150,000 or more	11.96% (25)	19.62% (41)	23.44% (49)	44.98% (94)

Race

White	11.48% (297)	19.79% (512)	17.36% (449)	51.37% (1,329)
Black	11.24% (39)	20.17% (70)	17.87% (62)	50.72% (176)
Hispanic	13.79% (24)	21.84% (38)	16.09% (28)	48.28% (84)
Asian	11.11% (6)	25.93% (14)	16.67% (9)	46.30% (25)
Other	15.03% (23)	19.61% (30)	16.99% (26)	48.37% (74)

Employment

Not employed	12.67% (160)	19.48% (246)	14.01% (177)	53.84% (680)
Part-time	13.46% (49)	21.70% (79)	17.03% (62)	47.80% (174)
Full-time	10.16% (156)	20.33% (312)	20.33% (312)	49.19% (755)

Frequency of Watching Late Night Talk Shows

	Regularly	Sometimes	Hardly Ever	Never
POLITICAL PARTICIPATION				
Registered to Vote				
Not registered	10.00% (51)	19.61% (100)	14.12% (72)	56.27% (287)
Registered	11.77% (313)	20.16% (536)	18.13% (482)	49.94% (1,328)
Voted in 2004 Pres. Election				
Did not vote	9.98% (64)	22.15% (142)	14.04% (90)	53.82% (345)
Voted	11.92% (300)	19.63% (494)	18.36% (462)	50.08% (1,260)
Presidential Vote in 2004				
Bush	10.16% (123)	17.84% (216)	19.32% (234)	52.68% (638)
Kerry	14.40% (141)	21.45% (210)	17.47% (171)	46.68% (457)
Other	14.05% (17)	19.01% (23)	17.36% (21)	49.59% (60)
How Often Vote in Elections				
Never (volunteered)	9.60% (19)	22.22% (44)	11.62% (23)	56.57% (112)
Seldom	8.59% (22)	21.48% (55)	16.02% (41)	53.91% (138)
Part of the time	11.36% (31)	24.91% (68)	15.75% (43)	47.99% (131)
Nearly always	11.23% (83)	19.76% (146)	21.79% (161)	47.23% (349)
Always	12.49% (210)	19.08% (321)	16.65% (280)	51.78% (811)

Party Identification

Strong Republican	9.47% (91)	19.98% (192)	19.77% (190)	50.78% (488)
Lean Republican	9.06% (23)	22.05% (56)	18.11% (46)	50.79% (129)
Independent	10.07% (30)	16.11% (48)	14.09% (42)	59.73% (178)
Lean Democrat	12.18% (43)	21.53% (76)	18.98% (67)	47.31% (167)
Democrat	15.49% (160)	20.18% (215)	16.46% (170)	47.24% (488)

Ideology

Strong conservative	9.84% (18)	17.49% (32)	12.57% (23)	60.11% (110)
Moderate conservative	10.17% (103)	20.63% (209)	19.25% (195)	49.95% (506)
Moderate	12.37% (140)	21.73% (246)	17.23% (195)	48.67% (551)
Moderate liberal	14.72% (68)	19.26% (89)	16.88% (78)	49.13% (227)
Liberal	11.11% (17)	19.61% (30)	21.57% (33)	47.71% (73)

Frequency of Watching Late Night Talk Shows

	Regularly	Sometimes	Hardly Ever	Never
POLITICAL INTEREST				
How Closely Followed: Situation in Iraq				
Not at all closely	4.17% (5)	7.50% (9)	12.50% (15)	75.83% (91)
Not too closely	7.92% (21)	18.11% (48)	12.45% (33)	61.51% (163)
Fairly closely	11.14% (79)	18.05% (128)	19.61% (139)	51.20% (363)
Very closely	13.48% (122)	22.43% (203)	18.34% (166)	45.75% (414)
How Closely Followed: Candidates and Campaigns in State and District				
Not at all closely	7.90% (32)	15.06% (61)	12.59% (51)	64.44% (261)
Not too closely	7.48% (44)	21.09% (124)	19.39% (114)	52.04% (306)
Fairly closely	12.29% (73)	20.54% (122)	20.88% (124)	46.30% (275)
Very closely	19.56% (80)	19.32% (79)	15.16% (62)	45.97% (188)
How Closely Followed: High Price of Gasoline				
Not at all closely	7.23% (6)	12.05% (10)	6.02% (5)	74.70% (62)
Not too closely	5.88% (9)	11.76% (18)	19.61% (30)	62.75% (96)
Fairly closely	8.78% (41)	17.56% (82)	20.77% (97)	52.89% (247)
Very closely	13.41% (173)	21.40% (276)	16.90% (218)	48.29% (623)

How Closely Followed: Iran's Nuclear Research Program (asked May 2-21 Only)

Not at all closely	4.71% (13)	14.13% (39)	15.58% (43)	65.58% (181)
Not too closely	9.15% (30)	20.73% (68)	16.16% (53)	53.96% (177)
Fairly closely	14.56% (68)	22.06% (103)	20.56% (96)	42.83% (200)
Very closely	13.27% (56)	19.43% (82)	15.64% (66)	51.66% (218)

How Closely Followed: NSA Collecting Telephone Records (asked May 2-21 Only)

Not at all closely	8.20% (10)	10.66 (13)	16.39% (20)	64.75% (79)
Not too closely	7.74% (13)	22.62% (38)	16.07% (27)	53.57% (90)
Fairly closely	13.87% (33)	20.59% (49)	16.81% (40)	48.74% (116)
Very closely	14.53% (42)	19.38% (56)	18.34% (53)	47.75% (138)

Frequency of Watching Late Night Talk Shows

	Regularly	Sometimes	Hardly Ever	Never
TYPES OF NEWS				
How Closely Follow: International News				
Not at all closely	7.69% (25)	13.85% (45)	14.15% (46)	64.31% (209)
Not too closely	12.74% (46)	18.01% (65)	16.90% (61)	52.35% (189)
Fairly closely	11.16% (107)	21.90% (210)	18.67% (179)	48.28% (463)
Very closely	14.08% (50)	19.15% (68)	18.31% (65)	48.45% (172)
How Closely Follow: News about Politics and Events in Washington, D.C.				
Not at all closely	6.71% (19)	10.95% (31)	14.84% (42)	67.49% (191)
Not too closely	6.75% (27)	16.25% (65)	21.00% (84)	56.00% (224)
Fairly closely	13.98% (130)	22.47% (209)	17.53% (163)	46.02% (428)
Very closely	13.25% (51)	21.56% (83)	16.62% (64)	48.57% (187)
How Closely Follow: News about Local Government				
Not at all closely	10.53% (32)	14.14% (43)	10.53% (32)	64.80% (197)
Not too closely	8.44% (27)	18.13% (58)	19.38% (62)	54.06% (173)
Fairly closely	9.91% (93)	21.54% (202)	20.36% (191)	48.19% (452)
Very closely	17.27% (76)	19.55% (86)	15.23% (67)	47.95% (211)

How Closely Follow: News about People/Events in Community

Not at all closely	8.97% (20)	14.35% (32)	15.25% (34)	61.43% (137)
Not too closely	8.47% (25)	18.64% (55)	21.36% (63)	51.53% (152)
Fairly closely	9.84% (91)	21.08% (195)	17.84% (165)	51.24% (474)
Very closely	16.46% (91)	19.17% (106)	16.46% (91)	47.92% (265)

How Closely Follow: News about Sports

Not at all closely	8.27% (55)	15.64% (104)	13.68% (91)	62.41% (415)
Not too closely	10.58% (42)	19.90% (79)	22.17% (88)	47.36% (188)
Fairly closely	12.88% (67)	21.54% (112)	19.81% (103)	45.77% (238)
Very closely	15.40% (65)	22.27% (94)	16.82% (71)	45.50% (192)

How Closely Follow: News about Entertainment

Not at all closely	8.19% (37)	11.50% (52)	13.94% (63)	66.37% (300)
Not too closely	8.32% (50)	17.97% (108)	20.47% (123)	53.24% (320)
Fairly closely	13.98% (103)	23.88% (176)	17.91% (132)	44.23% (326)
Very closely	18.57% (39)	25.24% (53)	16.67% (35)	39.52% (83)

How Closely Follow: News about Arts/Culture

Not at all closely	9.80% (60)	16.01% (98)	13.24% (81)	60.95% (373)
Not too closely	11.07% (58)	20.04% (105)	22.14% (116)	46.76% (245)
Fairly closely	11.80% (80)	20.80% (141)	18.58% (126)	48.82% (331)
Very closely	16.39% (30)	24.04% (44)	15.85% (29)	43.72% (80)

How Closely Follow: News about Crime

Not at all closely	8.22% (18)	12.79% (28)	11.42% (25)	67.58% (148)
Not too closely	8.07% (26)	18.32% (59)	20.81% (67)	52.80% (170)
Fairly closely	11.58% (104)	20.82% (187)	17.71% (159)	49.89% (448)
Very closely	14.18% (79)	20.65% (115)	18.31% (102)	46.86% (261)

Frequency of Watching Late Night Talk Shows

	Regularly	Sometimes	Hardly Ever	Never
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CROSSVIEWERSHIP

Frequency of Watching “The Daily Show with Jon Stewart”

Never	9.42% (210)	16.51% (368)	15.61% (348)	58.46% (1,303)
Hardly Ever	13.10% (44)	23.21% (78)	30.65% (103)	33.04% (111)
Sometimes	15.74% (68)	34.95% (151)	16.90% (73)	32.41% (140)
Regularly	25.27% (47)	22.04% (41)	15.05% (28)	37.63% (70)

Frequency of Watching Late Night Talk Shows

	Regularly	Sometimes	Hardly Ever	Never
POLITICAL KNOWLEDGE				
Which Party has a Majority in the House of Representatives				
Incorrect/Did not know	9.38% (59)	16.38% (103)	16.38% (103)	57.87% (364)
Correct answer	12.35% (170)	20.77% (286)	18.16% (250)	48.73% (671)
The Name of the Current Secretary of State				
Incorrect/Did not know	10.38% (110)	18.58% (197)	16.60% (176)	54.43% (577)
Correct answer	12.58% (119)	20.30% (192)	18.71% (177)	48.41% (458)
The Name of the President of Russia				
Incorrect/Did not know	10.56% (135)	19.01% (243)	17.53% (224)	52.90% (676)
Correct answer	12.91% (94)	20.05% (146)	17.72% (129)	49.31% (359)
Number Answered Correctly				
Answered 0 correctly	11.08% (184)	19.82% (329)	16.63% (276)	52.47% (871)
Answered 1 correctly	9.89% (56)	19.79% (112)	18.55% (105)	51.77% (293)
Answered 2 correctly	14.82% (63)	20.71% (88)	16.71% (71)	47.76% (203)
Answered 3 correctly	12.29% (67)	20.55% (112)	18.90% (103)	48.26% (263)

TDS Crosstabulations

Pew Center's Biennial Media Consumption Dataset (June 2006): Row Percentages

	Frequency of Watching "The Daily Show"			
	Regularly	Sometimes	Hardly Ever	Never
DEMOGRAPHICS				
Gender				
Male	8.14% (114)	14.79% (207)	11.64% (163)	65.43% (916)
Female	4.09% (73)	12.59% (225)	9.74% (174)	73.59% (1,315)
Education				
None or grades 1-8	0.00% (0)	12.50% (7)	8.93% (5)	78.57% (44)
High school incomplete	7.10% (13)	11.48% (21)	6.01% (11)	75.41% (138)
HS graduate (12, GED)	4.25% (40)	13.06% (123)	9.34% (88)	73.35% (691)
Technical or trade school	4.08% (4)	12.24% (12)	8.16% (8)	75.51% (74)
Some college	5.10% (41)	12.94% (104)	13.18% (106)	68.78% (553)
College graduate	7.43% (51)	14.43% (99)	11.95% (82)	66.18% (454)
Post-grad or Professional	9.23% (36)	16.92% (66)	9.49% (37)	64.36% (251)

Household Income

Less than \$10,000	6.49% (10)	12.34% (19)	6.49% (10)	74.68% (115)
\$10,000 to \$19,999	2.73% (7)	16.80% (43)	8.59% (22)	71.88% (184)
\$20,000 to \$29,999	4.14% (13)	11.46% (36)	10.19% (32)	74.20% (233)
\$30,000 to \$39,999	5.03% (15)	13.42% (40)	8.05% (24)	73.49% (219)
\$40,000 to \$49,999	5.56% (16)	14.24% (41)	12.50% (36)	67.71% (195)
\$50,000 to \$74,999	8.98% (43)	11.27% (54)	14.20% (68)	65.55% (314)
\$75,000 to \$99,999	5.08% (18)	15.82% (56)	11.30% (40)	67.80% (240)
\$100,000 to \$149,999	9.13% (24)	14.45% (38)	14.83% (39)	61.60% (162)
\$150,000 or more	7.18% (15)	17.22% (36)	13.88% (29)	61.72% (129)

Race

White	5.81% (150)	13.06% (337)	10.19% (263)	70.94% (1,831)
Black	4.93% (17)	15.07% (52)	12.46% (43)	67.54% (233)
Hispanic	8.57% (15)	14.86% (26)	16.00% (28)	60.57% (106)
Asian	3.70% (2)	16.67% (9)	9.26% (5)	70.37% (38)
Other	9.21% (14)	15.79% (24)	13.16% (20)	61.84% (94)

Employment

Not employed	4.93% (62)	11.54% (145)	9.07% (114)	74.46% (936)
Part-time	7.99% (29)	15.43% (56)	7.16% (26)	69.42% (252)
Full-time	6.06% (93)	14.86% (228)	12.58% (193)	66.49% (1,020)

Frequency of Watching "The Daily Show"

	Regularly	Sometimes	Hardly Ever	Never
POLITICAL PARTICIPATION				
Registered to Vote				
Not registered	8.27% (42)	13.19% (67)	10.04% (51)	68.50% (348)
Registered	5.39% (143)	13.64% (362)	10.78% (286)	70.18% (1,862)
Voted in 2004 Pres. Election				
Did not vote	7.36% (47)	15.18% (97)	9.08% (58)	68.39% (437)
Voted	5.42% (136)	13.23% (332)	10.96% (275)	70.40% (1,767)
Presidential Vote in 2004				
Bush	2.07% (25)	9.61% (116)	9.78% (118)	78.54% (948)
Kerry	9.93% (97)	18.22% (178)	12.69% (124)	59.16% (578)
Other	4.13% (5)	15.70% (19)	9.92% (12)	70.25% (85)
How Often Vote in Elections				
Never (volunteered)	7.11% (14)	12.69% (25)	8.12% (16)	72.08% (142)
Seldom	7.45% (19)	13.73% (35)	9.02% (23)	69.80% (178)
Part of the time	6.59% (18)	15.75% (43)	8.79% (24)	68.86% (188)
Nearly always	7.07% (52)	14.54% (107)	12.50% (92)	65.90% (485)
Always	4.82% (81)	12.81% (215)	10.66% (179)	71.71% (1,204)

Party Identification

Strong Republican	2.19% (21)	8.86% (85)	9.59% (92)	79.35% (761)
Lean Republican	2.37% (6)	14.62% (37)	12.65% (32)	70.36% (178)
Independent	8.72% (26)	10.40% (31)	8.39% (25)	72.48% (216)
Lean Democrat	7.93% (28)	20.68% (73)	13.31% (47)	58.07% (205)
Democrat	9.61% (99)	16.41% (169)	11.17% (115)	62.82% (647)

Ideology

Strong conservative	2.19% (4)	9.29% (17)	9.29% (17)	79.23% (145)
Moderate conservative	2.87% (29)	10.58% (107)	10.68% (108)	75.87% (767)
Moderate	5.51% (62)	14.84% (167)	11.82% (133)	67.82% (763)
Moderate liberal	11.47% (53)	19.70% (91)	12.12% (56)	56.71% (262)
Liberal	17.53% (27)	20.78% (32)	6.49% (10)	55.19% (85)

Frequency of Watching “The Daily Show”

	Regularly	Sometimes	Hardly Ever	Never
POLITICAL INTEREST				
How Closely Followed: Situation in Iraq				
Not at all closely	0.00% (0)	8.40% (10)	3.36% (4)	88.24% (105)
Not too closely	3.03% (8)	9.09% (24)	8.33% (22)	79.55% (210)
Fairly closely	4.94% (35)	13.12% (93)	10.72% (76)	71.23% (505)
Very closely	7.75% (70)	15.06% (136)	12.29% (111)	64.89% (586)
How Closely Followed: Candidates and Campaigns in State and District				
Not at all closely	5.20% (21)	10.89% (44)	7.18% (29)	76.73% (310)
Not too closely	3.40% (20)	13.24% (78)	11.21% (66)	72.16% (425)
Fairly closely	6.96% (41)	13.24% (78)	12.22% (72)	67.57% (398)
Very closely	7.58% (31)	15.65% (64)	11.74% (48)	65.04% (266)
How Closely Followed: High Price of Gasoline				
Not at all closely	4.76% (4)	10.71% (9)	1.19% (1)	83.33% (70)
Not too closely	5.26% (8)	9.21% (14)	8.55% (13)	76.97% (117)
Fairly closely	5.16% (24)	13.55% (63)	9.03% (42)	72.26% (336)
Very closely	5.98% (77)	13.74% (177)	12.11% (156)	68.17% (878)

How Closely Followed: Iran's Nuclear Research Program (asked May 2-21 Only)

Not at all closely	2.93% (8)	11.36% (31)	5.49% (15)	80.22% (219)
Not too closely	5.18% (17)	11.59% (38)	10.37% (34)	72.87% (239)
Fairly closely	6.64% (31)	16.49% (77)	12.85% (60)	64.03% (299)
Very closely	7.11% (30)	15.64% (66)	12.56% (53)	64.69% (273)

How Closely Followed: NSA Collecting Telephone Records (asked May 2-21 Only)

Not at all closely	1.65% (2)	13.22% (16)	7.44% (9)	77.69% (94)
Not too closely	2.37% (4)	13.61% (23)	13.61% (23)	70.41% (119)
Fairly closely	5.02% (12)	14.23% (34)	7.53% (18)	73.22% (175)
Very closely	10.76% (31)	16.67% (48)	13.89% (40)	58.68% (557)

Frequency of Watching “The Daily Show”

	Regularly	Sometimes	Hardly Ever	Never
TYPES OF NEWS				
How Closely Follow: International News				
Not at all closely	2.78% (9)	9.26% (30)	4.01% (13)	83.95% (272)
Not too closely	3.32% (12)	15.51% (56)	13.02% (47)	68.14% (246)
Fairly closely	5.34% (51)	13.72% (131)	12.15% (116)	68.80% (657)
Very closely	11.52% (41)	13.20% (47)	10.96% (39)	64.33% (229)
How Closely Follow: News about Politics and Events in Washington, D.C.				
Not at all closely	2.48% (7)	8.16% (23)	4.96% (14)	84.40% (238)
Not too closely	3.02% (12)	12.06% (48)	11.56% (46)	73.37% (292)
Fairly closely	5.08% (47)	14.04% (130)	12.10% (112)	68.79% (637)
Very closely	11.66% (45)	16.06% (62)	10.88% (42)	61.40% (237)
How Closely Follow: News about Local Government				
Not at all closely	4.61% (14)	9.87% (30)	3.29% (10)	82.24% (250)
Not too closely	5.00% (16)	15.00% (48)	13.75% (44)	66.25% (212)
Fairly closely	5.36% (50)	12.65% (118)	12.11% (113)	69.88% (652)
Very closely	7.52% (33)	15.49% (68)	10.71% (47)	66.29% (291)

How Closely Follow: News about People/Events in Community

Not at all closely	3.60% (8)	10.81% (24)	4.50% (10)	81.08% (180)
Not too closely	7.77% (23)	12.50% (37)	11.82% (35)	67.91% (201)
Fairly closely	5.53% (51)	14.41% (133)	11.16% (103)	68.91% (636)
Very closely	5.62% (31)	12.68% (70)	11.96% (66)	69.75% (385)

How Closely Follow: News about Sports

Not at all closely	4.83% (32)	11.46% (76)	7.39% (49)	76.32% (506)
Not too closely	5.04% (20)	12.09% (48)	10.83% (43)	72.04% (286)
Fairly closely	5.63% (29)	14.76% (76)	13.59% (70)	66.02% (340)
Very closely	7.33% (31)	15.13% (64)	12.29% (52)	65.25% (276)

How Closely Follow: News about Entertainment

Not at all closely	4.66% (21)	9.31% (42)	6.21% (28)	79.82% (360)
Not too closely	6.01% (36)	10.02% (60)	10.35% (62)	73.62% (441)
Fairly closely	5.84% (43)	15.90% (117)	11.96% (88)	66.30% (488)
Very closely	5.71% (12)	21.43% (45)	17.62% (37)	55.24% (116)

How Closely Follow: News about Arts/Culture

Not at all closely	2.61% (16)	10.13% (62)	6.05% (37)	81.21% (497)
Not too closely	4.40% (23)	13.58% (71)	13.19% (69)	68.83% (360)
Fairly closely	7.85% (53)	13.93% (94)	12.74% (86)	65.48% (442)
Very closely	10.93% (20)	20.22% (37)	12.02% (22)	56.83% (104)

How Closely Follow: News about Crime

Not at all closely	5.07% (11)	9.22% (20)	3.23% (7)	82.49% (179)
Not too closely	7.14% (23)	16.15% (52)	8.70% (28)	68.01% (219)
Fairly closely	5.69% (51)	12.37% (111)	11.59% (104)	70.35% (631)
Very closely	5.05% (28)	14.59% (81)	13.51% (75)	66.85% (371)

Frequency of Watching “The Daily Show”

	Regularly	Sometimes	Hardly Ever	Never
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CROSSVIEWERSHIP

Frequency of Watching Late Night Talk Shows

Never	4.31% (70)	8.62% (140)	6.83% (111)	80.23% (1,303)
Hardly Ever	5.07% (28)	13.22% (73)	18.66% (103)	63.04% (348)
Sometimes	6.43% (41)	23.67% (151)	12.23% (78)	57.68% (368)
Regularly	12.74% (47)	18.43% (68)	11.92% (44)	56.91% (210)

Frequency of Watching Late Night Talk Shows

	Regularly	Sometimes	Hardly Ever	Never
POLITICAL KNOWLEDGE				
Which Party has a Majority in the House of Representatives				
Incorrect/Did not know	3.18% (20)	11.76% (74)	10.02% (63)	75.04% (472)
Correct answer	6.78% (93)	13.85% (190)	11.08% (152)	68.29% (937)
The Name of the Current Secretary of State				
Incorrect/Did not know	3.60% (38)	12.41% (131)	10.70% (113)	73.30% (774)
Correct answer	7.94% (75)	14.07% (133)	10.79% (102)	67.20% (635)
The Name of the President of Russia				
Incorrect/Did not know	3.84% (49)	12.94% (165)	10.82% (138)	72.39% (923)
Correct answer	8.82% (64)	13.64% (99)	10.61% (77)	66.94% (486)
Number Answered Correctly				
Answered 0 correctly	5.32% (88)	13.84% (299)	10.03% (166)	70.82% (1,172)
Answered 1 correctly	3.36% (19)	12.21% (69)	11.86% (67)	72.57% (410)
Answered 2 correctly	6.38% (27)	11.58% (49)	11.35% (48)	70.69% (298)
Answered 3 correctly	9.74% (53)	15.63% (85)	10.29% (56)	64.34% (350)

APPENDIX C INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Depth Interviews

40 conducted in total

Estimated length: 1 hour

- I. Welcome and intro (5 minutes)**
 - a. Explain objectives
 - b. Sign release

- II. Political knowledge and awareness/behavior (15 minutes)**
 - a. Political knowledge
 - i. Issues
 - ii. Candidates
 - iii. Sense of efficacy/trust in government versus cynicism
 1. Actors
 2. Organizations
 3. Government overall
 - b. Political behavior
 - i. Voted in election
 - ii. Participated in campaign
 - iii. Involved with issue group/organization
 - iv. Discussed with friends/family/colleagues
 - v. Other modes of participation identified by respondent

- III. News media usage and preferences (10 minutes)**
 - a. Where exposed to political information
 - b. What channels/programs/media
 - i. When use each
 - ii. Why these are on their list
 - iii. How same/different
 - c. Types of stories particularly associated with one channel/program/medium than others
 - i. Probe for type of story versus type of show
 - d. When want to learn about a specific topic, where to go
 - i. What triggers interest
 - ii. What keeps interest
 - e. Exercise: give example of a topic of interest, and describe how/where you first heard about it, what happened next, what you have learned, resources used, etc.
 - f. Trust in media
 - i. How trust varies
 - ii. How come

IV. Late night programs [specific to their preferred program] (10 minutes)

- a. How long watching
- b. Why tuned in
- c. Perceptions of show
 - i. Perceptions of other late night shows
 - ii. How same/different than others
- d. Why they watch
 - i. Entertain versus inform
- e. What they think they get out of it
- f. How political perceptions, knowledge, and behavior have changed since viewership
- g. Role of peer group in watching

V. Constructing meaning (20 minutes)

- a. Watch clips from preferred program
- b. Describe clip (play it back to me)
 - i. Humor “as you see it”
 - ii. Explain what’s funny
 - iii. What do they mean
- c. How same/different than what mainstream news says about this topic/issue
 - i. Content
 - ii. Tonal
 - iii. Probe: credibility of sources
- d. Appeal as audience member
 - i. Information source
 - ii. Entertainment source

VI. Conclusion

- a. Confirm details for friend/buddy
- b. Release with instructions for focus group

APPENDIX D FOCUS GROUP PROTOCOL

Friendship Focus Groups

8 conducted in total (n = 6-8 per group)

Estimated length: 2 hours

- I. Welcome and intro (5 minutes)**
 - a. Explain objectives
 - b. Participants introduce themselves
 - c. Releases will be signed prior to group

- II. Political interest (10 minutes)**
 - a. List stories/topics that have been of interest
 - i. Where learn about them
 - ii. How triggered
 1. Media
 2. Interpersonal discussion
 - iii. What happened next
 - b. Group discussion on one of the issues
 - i. What do you know about this
 - ii. Observe conversational dynamics
 - iii. Probe for references

- III. Exploring the media landscape (25 minutes)**
 - a. List of news media sources—put on index cards
 - i. Television (programs and channels)
 - ii. Print
 - iii. Internet
 - iv. Radio
 - b. Card sort
 - i. Participants categorize sources in any way that makes sense to them
 1. Instructed that they cannot organize by medium or genre
 2. Possible cue: “think about why you watch them”
 - ii. Discuss each category
 1. How define
 2. When use
 3. Why
 4. Strengths/weaknesses
 5. Contrast to each other
 - c. Qualitative perceptual map
 - i. Using criteria uncovered in III.b.ii, map programs/genres against each other
 1. Four poles: entertainment/information, other pole TBD depending on discussion with respondents

- IV. Understanding late night television programs (30 minutes)**

- a. Projective party exercise (using hosts as proxies)
 - i. Hosts of programs are holding dinner parties—describe
 - 1. Who invite and why
 - 2. Where held
 - 3. Dress/act
 - 4. Food
 - 5. Tone
 - 6. What talk about
 - 7. Would we be invited
 - a. How feel walking up
 - b. How feel entering
 - c. How we would act
 - d. How would host treat us
 - e. How would we feel about leaving
 - 8. How would we describe to people afterwards
 - a. Benefits
 - 9. Which is preferred party and why
- b. Viewing habits
 - i. How often watch
 - ii. Describe typical viewing experience
 - 1. Where
 - 2. When (time-shifting or “live”)
 - 3. With whom
 - 4. Rituals and routines
 - iii. When tune in and why
- c. What happens next
 - i. Talk about with others
 - ii. When
 - iii. How

V. Interpersonal conversations (20 minutes)

- a. Parameters discussions about politics/issues
 - i. Frequency
 - ii. With whom
 - 1. Same group/rotates
 - 2. Why these people
 - a. “Selection” process
 - b. Differentiate by topic
 - c. Common media
 - d. Common perspective/political philosophies
 - 3. Context
 - a. Where
 - b. What triggers
- b. (Referring back to list of media stories): Discuss one that’s been a hot topic of late
 - i. Most important things to know
 - 1. What everyone should know
 - 2. What most people should know

3. What informed people should know
4. Where friends fall in on this spectrum
- ii. How issue is handled on [show]
 1. Heard anything
 2. If so, what—give examples
 3. Did you see it or hear about it
 4. Have you repeated/discussed (probe for discussion with buddy/friend)
 - a. Tell me about this conversation
 - i. Who initiates
 - ii. How it comes up
 - b. Probe: content as trigger for conversation and/or used as evidence/discussion point

VI. Constructing meaning (30 minutes)

- a. Show clip from primary show
 - i. “Play back” content
 - ii. Explore what this means to you
 1. What else you need to know
 2. New info or old
 3. Where else learn about this
 4. Where else hear about this
 5. Credibility of information
- b. How used in discussion
 - i. Walk me through a scenario
 - ii. Use buddy/friend
- c. Show clip on same topic from two other shows
 - i. Repeat process, probing for differences from primary show
 - ii. Strengths/weaknesses of each
 - iii. To whom would content appeal
 1. How come
 2. How different than primary show

**APPENDIX E
LIST OF RESPONDENT CODES**

Code	Age	Sex	Program
DY1	19	M	TDS
DY2	22	M	TDS
DY3	22	F	TDS
DY4	23	M	TDS
DY5	21	M	TDS
DY6	20	F	TDS
DY7	21	M	TDS
DY8	20	M	TDS
DY9	20	M	TDS
DY10	22	M	TDS
DY11	18	F	TDS
DY12	21	M	TDS
DY13	19	M	TDS
DY14	18	M	TDS
DY15	21	M	TDS
DO1	34	M	TDS
DO2	26	F	TDS
DO3	37	M	TDS
DO4	29	M	TDS
DO5	34	F	TDS
DO6	45	M	TDS
LY1	21	F	Leno/Conan
LY2	21	F	Conan
LY3	21	F	Letterman/Leno
LY4	19	F	Leno
LY5	21	F	Conan
LY6	23	M	Conan
LY7	22	F	Conan
LY8	21	M	Conan
LY9	21	M	Letterman
LY10	21	M	Conan
LY11	20	M	Letterman
LY12	19	F	Leno/Conan
LY13	22	M	Leno
LY14	22	M	Conan
LY15	22	M	Letterman/Conan
LO1	39	M	Leno
LO2	30	M	Leno
LO3	29	F	Letterman
LO4	29	M	Conan
LO5	36	M	Letterman

APPENDIX F CONSENT FORMS

Interviewee Consent Form:

“But Seriously, Folks: Understanding the Political Effects of Late Night Comedy”

For research conducted in Athens, Ohio and Cleveland, Ohio

Principal Investigator: Dr. David Kurpius (225-578-1948)
Monday through Friday from 9:00 a.m.-4:00 p.m. CST

Co-Investigator: Danielle Sarver (216-394-7481)
Monday through Friday from 9:00 a.m.-4:00 p.m. EST

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this research study! This study is designed to understand how people like you understand and use mass media for political information. Through this investigation, the researchers hope to gain insights into the role late night comedy programs play for you in terms of political knowledge and perceptions. All participants in this research study are 18-24 years old and are heavy viewers of late night television programs (with “heavy” defined as 3-4 times per week). A maximum of 40 individuals will be interviewed, with a maximum of 80 respondents participating in the focus groups.

During this research, you will be asked a series of questions about media and politics. Your answers will be kept confidential, unless release is legally compelled. At no time will any of your responses be attributed to you as an individual. Participation has no known risk for physical, psychological, or social harm. In order to ensure that there is minimal risk, trained researchers will conduct all interviews and moderate all focus groups.

Participation in this study is voluntary, and you may change your mind and withdraw from the study at any time without penalty or loss of any benefit. Upon completion of both portions of this research (interview and attending the focus group with your pre-selected friend), you will receive \$40 and your name will be entered to win an iPod Nano. The drawing for the iPod Nano will be conducted on November 22, 2006 and the item will be shipped out on that date.

If you would like to withdraw from this research, please notify Danielle Sarver at 216-394-7481 as soon as possible. If you do not complete both phases of this research project or your behavior presents a risk to other participants (i.e., belligerent or unruly behavior during focus group, intoxication, or any other behaviors deemed inappropriate by the investigators), you will be removed from this study without compensation.

“This study has been discussed with me and all my questions have been answered. I may direct additional questions regarding study specifics to the investigators. If I have questions about subjects’ rights or other concerns, I can contact Robert C. Mathews, Chairman, LSU Institutional Review Board, (225) 578-8692. I agree to participate in the study described above and acknowledge the researchers’ obligation to provide me with a copy of the consent form if signed by me.”

Friend Consent Form (Focus Group Only):

“But Seriously, Folks: Understanding the Political Effects of Late Night Comedy”

For research conducted in Athens, Ohio and Cleveland, Ohio

Principal Investigator: Dr. David Kurpius (225-578-1948)
Monday through Friday from 9:00 a.m.-4:00 p.m. CST

Co-Investigator: Danielle Sarver (216-394-7481)
Monday through Friday from 9:00 a.m.-4:00 p.m. EST

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this research study! This study is designed to understand how people like you understand and use mass media for political information. Through this investigation, the researchers hope to gain insights into the role late night comedy programs play for you in terms of political knowledge and perceptions. All participants in this research study are 18-24 years old and are heavy viewers of late night television programs (with “heavy” defined as 3-4 times per week). A maximum of 40 individuals will be interviewed, with a maximum of 80 respondents participating in the focus groups.

During this research, you will be asked a series of questions about media and politics. Your answers will be kept confidential, unless release is legally compelled. At no time will any of your responses be attributed to you as an individual. Participation has no known risk for physical, psychological, or social harm. In order to ensure that there is minimal risk, trained researchers will conduct all interviews and moderate all focus groups.

Participation in this study is voluntary, and you may change your mind and withdraw from the study at any time without penalty or loss of any benefit. Upon completion of this focus group, you will receive \$20 and your name will be entered to win an iPod Nano. The drawing for the iPod Nano will be conducted on November 22, 2006 and the item will be shipped out on that date.

If you would like to withdraw from this research, please notify Danielle Sarver at 216-394-7481 as soon as possible. If you do not complete this focus group or your behavior presents a risk to other participants (i.e., belligerent or unruly behavior during focus group, intoxication, or any other behaviors deemed inappropriate by the investigators), you will be removed from this study without compensation.

“This study has been discussed with me and all my questions have been answered. I may direct additional questions regarding study specifics to the investigators. If I have questions about subjects’ rights or other concerns, I can contact Robert C. Mathews, Chairman, LSU Institutional Review Board, (225) 578-8692. I agree to participate in the study described above and acknowledge the researchers’ obligation to provide me with a copy of the consent form if signed by me.”

Signature

Date

VITA

Danielle Sarver is an assistant professor in the School of Journalism and Mass Communication at Kent State University, teaching primarily within the advertising sequence. In addition to this position, Danielle is the founder and principle of Sarver Research, a Cleveland-based market research firm that has conducted research for such clients as Cuyahoga Community College, Corporate College, the Cleveland Leadership Center, and Classical Marketing (Chicago).

Prior to returning to northeastern Ohio, Danielle served as senior research manager for Insight Research Group in New York City. While at Insight, Danielle specialized in uncovering consumer insights in order to inform advertising campaigns, product design, and brand strategies for numerous prominent brands from a variety of industries, including television (HGTV, MTV Networks), retail (Payless ShoeSource, Gap, Old Navy, Dots), non-profits (Brand Israel, American Museum of Natural History), and consumer packaged goods (Kellogg's Special K, NutriGrain). During the 2004 Democratic primary season, Danielle was Director of Election Research at Edison Media Research.

Danielle earned her master's degree in international mass communication and a bachelor's degree in media studies, both from the School of Telecommunications at Ohio University.