The Correspondent, the Comic, and the Combatant: The Consequences of Host Style in Political Talk Shows

Emily K. Vraga[1], Stephanie Edgerly[2], Leticia Bode[2], D. Jasun Carr[2], Mitchell Bard[2], Courtney N. Johnson[3], Young Mie Kim[2], and Dhavan V. Shah[2]

Abstract

Tailored within the increasingly competitive news environment, political talk shows have adopted a range of styles, heralding a rise in "combatant" and "comic" hosts to complement the conventional "correspondent." Using an experimental design to rule out self-selection biases, this study isolates the impact of host style on media judgments. In comparison to the other styles, the correspondent host increases perceptions of informational value, enhances host and program credibility, and reduces erosion of media trust, while a comic host mitigates some of the negative impact compared to a combatant host. Implications for media accountability and democratic functioning are discussed.

Keywords

media credibility, journalistic norms, political talk shows, political communication

The way Americans get their news is changing. With the growth in news outlets that make it easier to watch "what you want, when you want," news producers compete in an increasingly cluttered media environment. This competition, coupled with the drive

[1]George Washington University, Washington, DC, USA
[2]University of Wisconsin–Madison, Madison, WI, USA
[3]University of Washington, Seattle, WA, USA

Corresponding Author:
Emily K. Vraga, George Washington University, School of Media and Public Affairs, 805 21st Street NW, Suite 423, Washington, DC 20052
Email: ekvraga@gwu.edu

to cut costs, has increased the prominence of particular news formats. Among the most popular are political talk shows[1]—that is, exchanges among pundits prompted by questions from a host—which have the dual benefits of engaging the audience while being cheap to produce. However, these shows are not uniformly structured: their hosts often adopt differing styles to question their guests and moderate the discussion of controversial issues. This study explores how features of these talk shows, and especially the posture adopted by the host, influence audience evaluations of the press.

While prior research focused on "guests" of talk shows (e.g., their civility),[2] little work has investigated how host style influences audiences' evaluations of these shows and the media.[3] Given the rise of talk show formats and the corresponding changes in how Americans receive news,[4] it is increasingly important to assess the implications of such programming for confidence in news. Furthermore, political talk show hosts have become some of the most salient news figures among the American public,[5] making differences in their approach to covering the news particularly relevant to understanding credibility.

Such inquiries become even more urgent and normatively consequential in light of the dramatic decline in levels of confidence in television news observed in Gallup polling over the past two decades in the United States (i.e., 46% of the public indicated they had a "great deal" or "quite a lot" of confidence in TV news in 1993, whereas only 22% indicated so in 2010). Given that media accountability is often evaluated in terms of media credibility from audiences' lenses, declining confidence poses a pivotal question regarding media accountability in the new landscape of political media.

This study examines the effects on media accountability of three host styles prominent in the contemporary media environment. Some political hosts conform to the conventional, dispassionate high-modern model of journalism, mediating between debate participants and questioning them in a restrained manner, a style we label "the correspondent" (epitomized by programs like *Face the Nation*). Others opt for a humorous approach, using comedy as a vehicle to discuss serious issues, a style we label "the comic" (exemplified by a range of programs, from the comic media critiquing of Jon Stewart on *The Daily Show*, to the satire of *The Colbert Report*, to the politics-based humor of *Real Time with Bill Maher*). Still others adopt an aggressive mode of challenging their guests to elicit information, which we describe as "the combatant" (typified by nonpartisan hosts like David Gregory on *Meet the Press* and partisan hosts like those on *The O'Reilly Factor* and *Hardball*). And while this study is based in the U.S. context, American news formats have been exported to countries around the world.[6]

This study employs an experimental design with a professionally produced political talk show varying three host styles—the correspondent, the comic, and the combatant. By examining the effects of host style on audiences' perceptions of media credibility and program evaluations, this study builds on research examining how audience choice influences the effects of news programming viewership. Previous research has suggested that audience motivations and their choice of news content can influence perceptions of credibility and trust as well as future consumption habits.[7] However,

these studies are limited in that they focus only on individuals' preferences for such formats and selection biases in media choices. Given this, past research has failed to isolate the effects of media styles and therefore can only speculate about how different media formats affect the consequences of this consumption. Using an experimental manipulation of host style allows us to analyze precisely the impact of the shifts in style and provide an understanding of the mechanisms causing differing effects by talk show styles. Furthermore, we explore these questions among a targeted emerging audience for political media: college-educated youth.

Media Credibility as a Situational Judgment

Because of news media's power, popularity, and potential for shaping citizens' relationships with democratic institutions, media accountability is important to understand.[8] From the audience's perspective, media accountability is often understood in terms of credibility. Considering that television remains the dominant source for news and the substantial declines in confidence in this mode of encountering public affairs information, this medium deserves special attention. And specifically, understanding credibility judgments regarding political talk shows—a popular format that presents information via discussion and debate—warrants a closer look. For decades, scholars have worried about a decline in the credibility of news outlets,[9] but these concerns merit renewed investigation in an evolving media environment.

Credibility can be examined from a variety of viewpoints: the credibility of a source of information, of a message, or of a medium.[10] When considering the news media, credibility emerges as a multidimensional concept, encompassing norms of fairness, completeness, accuracy, bias, trustworthiness, and balance.[11] Taken together, these dimensions contribute to an understanding of what it means to find the news media "believable."

Past research has found that perceptions of media credibility depend on contextual and situational cues. For television news in particular, judgments of credibility are moved by production and display features—camera angles, cuts, and overall packaging—and newscaster-specific features—facial gestures, vocal inflection, showmanship, and personality.[12] Furthermore, the hosts of televised news programs often brand the show,[13] making their actions consequential for program and media perceptions. Thus, television news represents a rich content in which we can explore the nuances of news presentation and credibility judgments.[14] Drawing on the literature, this study considers how host styles influence audiences' assessments of credibility.

Of course, audience characteristics also influence perceptions of credibility. Younger audiences, particularly college students, for example, tend to rate TV news more highly than their older counterparts.[15] As media channels target these emerging news consumers, understanding their differing perceptions of credibility becomes vital.

Credibility is a particularly important aspect of journalism to consider, given that it directly affects the way people perceive and respond to media messages. For example, high credibility sources are seen as more persuasive than sources of lower credibility,

and thus are more likely to sway attitudes.[16] Because the media continue to serve as an important source of information for the average citizen,[17] assessments of journalist and media credibility remain meaningful.

But credibility is not the only factor determining audience response to media messages. As talk shows increasingly fuse elements of entertainment and information into their programs to capture attention, understanding audience evaluations along these dimensions is important. In his work on uses and gratifications, Rubin found the motivations of informativeness and entertainment to explain consumption of television programming.[18] It stands to reason that if these forces motivate media consumption, individuals will evaluate content along similar dimensions.

Furthermore, studies have demonstrated that choices about content and style influence these perceptions. For example, Mutz and Reeves found incivility heightened the entertainment value of mediated political discussion, while its informational value remained unchanged.[19] Therefore, when talk show hosts alter their style, we expect assessments of program informational and entertainment value will also change. These evaluations offer a crucial step in explaining why programs with these characteristics are popular among television audiences.

Host Style and Talk Show Performance

Hosts play an important role in political talk shows. Moderators "organize" and "rule" discussion spaces and therefore act as gatekeepers of information or promoters of high-quality information exchange.[20] Hosts operating under the deliberative framework are trained to acknowledge minority opinions, offer background information, ask for clarifications, and keep discussion moving.[21] Moderators are expected to perform these functions while also "encouraging an atmosphere of mutual respect."[22]

Host as Correspondent

Journalists hosting mediated discussions in the news have been given the responsibility of encouraging public debate while acting as a "fair-minded moderator."[23] A host adopting this style ensures that guests are allotted equal "face time," clarifies guests' positions, and moves the discussion forward. Characteristic of "high-modern" journalism,[24] the conventional host as correspondent strives to illuminate the debate through reiteration of positions. In recent years, the advent of cable news has caused program hosts to become more prominent. During the 2008 election, the talk show format dominated prime-time cable news,[25] and as a result, the correspondent–host may have been replaced by more sensational styles of facilitating discussions.[26]

Host as Comic

In light of these changes, a substantial body of work has emerged examining the effects of political humor and satire on perceptions of media credibility and governmental

trust.[27] Comedic political programs may be appealing in part because of humor's impact in reducing hostility by distracting and redirecting people,[28] allowing hosts to ask pointed questions while maintaining a less-charged atmosphere.

Humor not only can diffuse hostility, but also may boost credibility—especially self-effacing humor.[29] Humor puts viewers in a good mood that extends to the messenger, especially when the message is dull.[30] However, some scholars see detrimental effects of entertainment-oriented political media, arguing *The Daily Show* negatively affects trust and media ratings among young people because it mocks news media.[31] It is possible that a diet heavy in political humor and satire leads to increased cynicism toward news media as a whole, if not the program or the host.

Of course, *The Daily Show* offers only one approach to using humor to discuss politics. Shows like *The Colbert Report* use satire to critique political punditry, while Bill Maher in his HBO program, *Real Time*, uses politics as a setting for conventional comedy routines (like his "New Rules" segment). As the use of comedy becomes more widespread, and programs like *The Daily Show*, *The Colbert Report*, and *Real Time* continue to garner substantial audiences, comedy increasingly represents a legitimate approach to discussing news.

Host as Combatant

However, changes in media content and style are not limited to the emergence of humorous hosts. Another approach to hosting is to embrace conflict as a way to moderate debates, and aggressive interviews have long held a significant position in news programming. Though some have characterized this journalistic approach as barbaric and combative,[32] others see aggressive interviewing as a check against the powerful,[33] a role that dispassionate correspondents,[34] or entertaining comics,[35] may not adequately fulfill.

However, the host as combatant also reflects a broader shift, in which structural, economic, and audience conditions have eroded boundaries between news and entertainment.[36] Consistent with this, researchers have reported a movement away from traditional interviewing practices toward more combative forms of engagement with guests.[37] As a result, scholars such as Clayman and his colleagues have argued that static models of journalism are inadequate to capture the current state of journalistic practice, which has seen the rise of more aggressive assertions by hosts in talk show formats.[38] While scholars have begun to consider the impact of *incivility* on perceptions of credibility, they have not yet considered the role of **aggression** that typifies the changing media environment.[39]

Hypotheses and Research Questions

This study tests a series of hypotheses examining the effects of host style on ratings of the credibility and value of a political talk show. While older audiences may have become habituated to and thus react most favorably when seeing a host as correspondent

upholding the traditional tenets of dispassionate engagement, peacekeeping, turn tak-ing, and unbiased questioning,[40] we are unsure if these expectations apply to younger audiences less familiar with this high-modern role for journalists. As they have been socialized into a more competitive and diverse media environment, their expectations for and response to differing host styles remain unclear. Therefore, we examine,

> **RQ1:** Does a host as correspondent alter perceptions of (a) host credibility, (b) program credibility, (c) general media trust, and (d) program information value compared to the host as comic and host as combatant?

However, media explorations of alternative deliveries of news, especially the increased blending of entertainment and news,[41] should decrease the perceived enter-tainment value of a dispassionate and controlled delivery on the part of the host, especially compared to a comic or a combatant designed to be entertaining.

> **H1:** A host as correspondent will reduce program entertainment value as com-pared to the host as comic and host as combatant.

Turning to a comparison of the different approaches adopted by political talk shows to address the contention that dispassionate hosts are seen as less entertaining, we compare the effects of a humorous host to an aggressive host. Although some research has suggested that viewing political humor shows like *The Daily Show* lowers trust in the media,[42] the ability of humor to attenuate hostility,[43] heighten the appeal of the host,[44] and boost message credibility suggests that a host as comic should enhance perceptions of host, program, and media credibility compared to a host as combatant.[45]

> **H2:** A host as comic will enhance (a) host credibility, (b) program credibility, and (c) general media trust, compared to a host as combatant.

That said, while humor should compare favorably to aggression for ratings of cred-ibility, effects on perceptions of the *value* of media content are less clear. A comic may be more likeable, but it is not clear whether the informational value of the program is boosted as a result—and aggression has long been seen as an effective mechanism for journalists to pursue the truth in interviews.[46] Similarly, although humor is by its very nature amusing, aggression is also often entertaining.[47] Thus, we ask,

> **RQ2:** Does the host as comic alter perceptions of (a) program informational value and (b) program entertainment value compared to a host as combatant?

Method

The data in this study were collected over a two-week period during February 2010 using an experiment embedded in a web-based survey. Respondents were undergraduate students enrolled at a large midwestern university who received extra credit for their participation. A total of 477 (61.4% female, mean age = 19.49 years) respondents were randomly assigned to the six conditions. All respondents viewed a simulated political talk show, with a host questioning two guests (experts) about their positions on the issue of governmental policies of cap and trade and related strategies to address global warming. Cap and trade was selected for its low salience—only 23% of the public knew it concerned environmental policy in the months prior to the study,[48] limiting contamination from preexisting opinions. The script was designed to mirror television programming: the host opened with a short introduction of each guest and a summary of the topic, questioned the guests on their stances, moderated the discussion in an ideologically neutral manner, and closed the segment with a transition to a commercial break—all of which were maintained across conditions, as were all facts.

To produce the stimuli, three professional actors were hired to fill the roles of a neutral host and two topic experts, with each role played by the same actor across conditions. A television studio with a green screen was used to tape the mock program, allowing the creation of stimuli in line with modern "talking-head" programming, with the host placed within a studio environment and the two guests appearing via video transmissions from remote locations. A professional director and experienced video editor assisted in the production of the scripts and assembly of the stimulus materials, maintaining quality, realism, and professional standards.

The experiment used a between-subjects design with three conditions,[49] adjusting the approach adopted by the host (correspondent, comic, or combatant). The correspondent focused on asking questions of his guests to promote a high-quality exchange, in the style of *Meet the Press* or *Face the Nation*. While this dispassionate-style host probed for additional information and offered clarification of the guests' positions, he did not critique the guests' responses (i.e., "So, I think you're saying corporations can be a key part of the solution"). In contrast, the comic used humor but remained pointed in his questioning of the guests. The comic is not based on any one television news comic or style, but is meant as an amalgam of these approaches. He provided self-referential asides, offered quips about the guests' positions or their rationale, and undercut their remarks with jokes (e.g., "So, the folks that got us into this mess are supposed to get us out of it? Okay . . . like that could fail."). Meanwhile, the combatant asked pointed questions designed to elicit more information or to question guest claims. This aggressive style in the mode of Chris Matthews or Bill O'Reilly (but eschewing a partisan bias) critiqued the guests' positions (i.e., "So, you want these corporations you call incompetent to help solve the problem."). Throughout

the manipulations of host style, we precisely altered only the style of the debate, without changing any of the information provided. In this manner, we isolate the impact of the focal variables. All facts remained constant, and the run time for the different conditions was roughly equivalent, ranging from 3 minutes and 44 seconds to 4 minutes and 27 seconds.[50]

Measures

Host credibility. To test how perceptions of the host changed depending on experimental condition, respondents rated their level of agreement on an eleven-point scale for a series of statements about the host, including his credibility, fairness, reasonableness, open-mindedness, professionalism, and truth-seeking intentions, which were averaged to create an index (Cronbach's alpha = .94, $M = 4.91$, $SD = 2.20$).

Program credibility. To test perceptions of the credibility of the political talk show, we averaged a battery of six items, with respondents rating program bias, accuracy, completeness, fairness, trustworthiness, and balance on an eleven-point scale (Cronbach's alpha = .88, $M = 4.93$, $SD = 1.83$).[51]

Change in media trust. To measure whether exposure to the video shifted respondents' perceptions of trust in the media, individuals rated their agreement with a series of three statements in both the pretest and the posttest. Using an eleven-point scale, respondents reported their agreement with statements that the media provide accurate and trustworthy information and deal fairly with all sides. These items were combined, and the pretest ratings of media trust were regressed on the posttest measures to create a single measure of change in media trust (Cronbach's alpha = .66 [pre] and .63 [post], mean interitem correlation = .40 [pre], .37 [post], $M = -0.05$, $SD = 1.03$). The pretest measure was included for control purposes so that change in media trust could be gauged among the respondents.[52]

Program entertainment value. Respondents were asked to rate agreement with a series of four statements using an eleven-point scale, adapted from Mutz and Reeves.[53] Items reflecting whether respondents found the program entertaining, exciting, dull and boring (reversed), or slow paced (reversed) were averaged to create an index (Cronbach's alpha = .74, $M = 3.72$, $SD = 1.85$).

Program informational value. An informational value battery was also adapted from Mutz and Reeves.[54] Respondents rated their agreement with four statements concerning their perceptions of informativeness and learning from the program, which were combined to create an index (Cronbach's alpha = .77, $M = 4.08$, $SD = 1.97$).

Ideology. To control for the political ideology of respondents, we included two items to tap into ideological leaning in terms of social and economic issues. Respondents reported their positions on a seven-point scale from 0 (*very liberal*) to 6 (*very conservative*). Items were averaged to create an index (inter-item correlation = .52, $p < .001$, $M = 3.45$, $SD = 1.39$).

Table 1. Results for Host Style

	ANOVA *F* value	Partial η^2	Host as correspondent	Host as comic	Host as combatant
Manipulation Checks					
Host aggression	32.478***	.123	2.384[a]	3.520[b]	4.504[c]
Host likeability	20.738***	.081	5.245[a]	4.538[b]	3.595[c]
Hypothesis testing					
Host credibility	91.463***	.280	6.030[a]	5.481[b]	3.325[c]
Program credibility	13.877***	.056	5.457[a]	5.011[b]	4.382[c]
Change in general media trust	6.102**	.025	0.081[a]	0.058[a]	−0.279[b]
Program informational value	4.880**	.020	4.506[a]	3.959[b]	3.834[b]
Program entertainment value	2.065	.009	3.729[ab]	3.515[a]	3.927[b]

Note: Different superscripts indicate that the marginal means are significantly different at *p* < .05. All analyses control for conservative ideology and guest civility.
**p < .01. ***p < .001.

Results

Before testing our hypotheses, we examined whether exposure to the competing host styles produced differences in perceptions. We used two-way ANCOVAs controlling for political ideology and a second experimental manipulation of guest civility to limit the possibility our results are driven by differences in perceptions produced by the topic of the show.[55] Respondents rated host aggression with a single item, measured on an eleven-point scale. The ANCOVA is significant, and the contrast tests are consistent with our expectations (see Table 1 for significance levels and means). Significant differences arise among the three conditions, with the combatant rated as the most aggressive (*M* = 4.50), followed by the comic (*M* = 3.52) and then by the correspondent (*M* = 2.38). To validate these results, we used a single-item indicator of host likeability. The ANCOVA is significant and the contrast tests show the expected pattern, with the correspondent being rated the most likeable, followed by the comic and then the combatant.

Hypothesis Testing

Turning to our central hypotheses and research questions, we examined the influence of shifts in the host's role: **RQ1a–RQ1d** explored whether differences in host credibility, story credibility, general media trust, and program informational value arose between the host as correspondent compared to the host as combatant or the host as comic, while **H1** predicted that a correspondent would perform least well in terms of program entertainment value. Meanwhile, in comparing the combatant and the come-

dic host, we expected that the comic would perform better in terms of host credibility, story credibility, and general media trust than the combatant (**H2a–H2c**), but we were unsure as to which would be seen as more informative and entertaining (**RQ2a–RQ2b**).

We began by examining perceptions of credibility. We found that host style has a significant main effect on ratings of host credibility. The contrast tests demonstrated that the host as correspondent was seen as significantly more credible ($M = 6.03$) than the host as comic ($M = 5.48$) and the host as combatant ($M = 3.33$), while the comic significantly outperformed the combatant. These results were replicated for program credibility: a significant main effect of host style emerged, with the correspondent producing significantly higher ratings of program credibility ($M = 5.46$) than the comic ($M = 5.01$) and the combatant ($M = 4.38$), while the difference between the comic and combatant was again significant.

Finally, the pattern was similar for the effects of host style on change in general media trust,[56] with a significant omnibus test. Although there was not a significant improvement in general media trust between those who saw the correspondent ($M = 0.08$) versus the comic ($M = 0.06$), both the correspondent and the comic significantly differed from the combatant, who produced markedly lower levels of general media trust ($M = -0.28$).

Beyond credibility, we argued it is important to understand how valuable people perceive the program to be, both for information and for entertainment. Our results were more mixed. In response to **RQ1d**, the omnibus test of host style was significant and the contrast tests demonstrated that a correspondent produced higher ratings of program informational value ($M = 4.51$) than a comic ($M = 3.95$) or a combatant ($M = 3.83$), but the difference between the combatant and the comic remained insignificant. Furthermore, we found no support for **H1**, nor could we answer **RQ1b** about program entertainment value. The omnibus test was insignificant, suggesting host style did not impact ratings of entertainment value. Thus, we found that the correspondent influenced perceptions of the program's informational value, but not its entertainment value, compared to the comic and the combatant, who did not differ on either indicator.

Additional Analyses

To extend these findings and limit alternative explanations, we conducted additional analyses—and these analyses provide further support for the previously observed patterns. Individuals reported that they paid equal attention to the program, regardless of host style. The omnibus test for a single item asking respondents to report their agreement with the statement "This program held my attention" was insignificant ($F = 1.637$, *ns*), as were the contrast tests. Moreover, audiences who saw the correspondent reported the highest intentions to watch the program in the future. We found a significant main effect varying by host style ($F = 8.182$, $p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .034$), for agreement with the statement "I would watch this program again." The contrast tests indicate that the correspondent ($M = 2.84$) produced significantly higher scores

compared to both the comic ($M = 1.92$) and the combatant ($M = 1.93$), with no significant difference between the combatant and the comic. These results provide additional evidence that a host as correspondent did not decrease individuals' attention to or enjoyment of the program.

Discussion

The rise of political talk shows on cable news channels has altered the ways in which citizens encounter public affairs information. This research indicated that the approach adopted by hosts of these shows—whether dispassionate, humorous, or aggressive—has important implications for how individuals evaluate the program, its host, and the news media in general.

Although there are likely other factors that contribute to the sharp drop in perceptions of media credibility,[57] we contend that a shift in format, from dispassionate to more humorous and hostile styles, makes a significant contribution. As the adoption of these new formats continues to spread, it becomes increasingly important to assess the normative value of such programs in relation to media accountability because individuals' media diet and news processing are often shaped by perceptions of credibility.[58] Furthermore, it remains critical to examine these perceptions among a targeted group: emerging news media consumers. Citizens rely on the news media for information they can use in democratic decision making, which is problematic if they cannot trust news providers or avoid consuming their fare altogether.

The findings of this study indicate that the move away from the dispassionate correspondent in favor of the witty comic or aggressive combatant may undermine credibility. Among the three host styles, the correspondent performed the best for audiences' perception of credibility. Not only was the correspondent–host himself seen as the most credible, viewers also rated the program as more credible and showed no decline in media trust, especially when compared with a host as combatant. Furthermore, the correspondent affected perceptions of the value of watching the program. Audiences found the program hosted by the correspondent more informational but not less entertaining than a program with a comedic or combative host.

It is worth noting that the host as correspondent in this study followed a deliberative ideal: managing a sometimes-contentious debate, ensuring that the guests each had opportunities to speak, maintaining neutrality, and seeking the truth.[59] The results suggest that even young audiences have developed their expectations about the host's role in accordance with this ideal, which they apply when judging media performance. It seems political talk shows sustain perceptions of media credibility when hosts remain dispassionate in advancing the debate between their partisan guests.

On the other hand, the host as combatant, which was modeled after the adversarial media style featured on Fox News and MSNBC, consistently lowered perceptions of media credibility. Furthermore, the combatant failed to portray the program as more informational and entertaining in comparison with other styles. Although the adversarial model might be the best strategic choice for ensuring the perception of

independence, journalistic expertise, and professionalism,[60] this aggressive style does not conform to audiences' standards of "accountable media." Perhaps, as Bennett argues,[61] the ideal of aggressive, watchdog media has gone too far. Conversely, it may be possible that it is not the act of aggression itself but rather the degree and the substance of the adversarial tone and tactics that affect trust.[62]

However, it is important to note that we distinguished between aggression (pointed questioning of guest *positions*) and incivility (derogation of the guests as *individuals*). It is possible that within the real-world media environment, the relationship between an aggressive host and an uncivil tone is more closely interwoven. Indeed, in an era of partisan media and selective exposure, this mingling of different tones, styles, and positions is increasingly prevalent.[63] Future research should continue to examine how audiences understand and interpret stylistic choices—especially depending on who adopts that style: whether they be journalists, politicians, or pundits[64]—and to disentangle the relationship among incivility, aggression, and humor.

Interestingly, the host as comic appeared to attenuate some of the negative effects of the combatant's aggressive style on media credibility. As with the correspondent, the comic inhibited the decline in general media trust when compared to the combatant and, despite the use of pointed jokes at the guests' expense, maintained higher credibility ratings for the host and the show when compared to a combatant. Our analyses suggest this increased credibility—at least compared to a combatant—may have occurred in two ways: through increasing the likeability of the host or by distracting from the host's aggression.[65] However, the comic did not outperform the correspondent on any indicator and did significantly worse in boosting perceptions of the credibility and the informational value of the program. The findings suggest that while a humorous approach mitigates some of the negative effects aroused by an aggressive style of questioning, it may not live up to the audiences' standard for a political talk show host.

Altogether, this study represents an important step in understanding the roles hosts play in the changing media environment. But while we strove to create realistic experimental manipulations, we are still limited by the constraints of an experiment. The attention given to our stimulus by our respondents was probably greater than that of the average political news consumer. Moreover, in everyday life people are exposed repeatedly to the same hosts, building an overall reputation that may be different from what is reflected in our single-exposure study. While our study speaks to the roots of audience perceptions of new hosts and programs, important in determining program success and reputation, more research into ratings of established programs is needed.

Furthermore, while social desirability often plays a role in unnatural settings, it should not differ systematically by experimental condition. External validity remains a concern, but this experiment mimics televised political discussion shows on the air today, mitigating this issue. Ultimately, our experimental approach allowed us to isolate the impact of alterations in host style, providing a more precise understanding of how aggression and humor function in political media—which may help explain differences in media effects based on media selection.[66]

In addition, we chose to examine the impact of host style among a particular audience: college students who have grown up in the postbroadcast media environment. We believe this group is important to study because they represent an important target demographic and the future of news audiences, but we are uncertain whether these patterns will be replicated among adults, who trust the media less but consume more media content.[67] While we might expect adults more habituated to high-modern journalistic style to also favor the correspondent's approach, future research should examine the implications of host style among an adult sample.

The widespread presence of political talk shows has important implications for media accountability worldwide. Our findings are not limited to the U.S. context, although they are typified by it. The propensity toward sensationalism, entertainment, and conflict does not seem to live up to emerging audiences' standards for media. The growing adoption of "engaging" hosts—either inquisitive and aggressive or self-effacing and humorous—may have important long-term costs for media institutions, lowering media credibility while offering few gains in informational and entertainment value.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

Funding

Notes

1. "The State of the News Media" (2009), http://stateofthemedia.org/2009/.
2. Diana C. Mutz and Byron Reeves, "The New Videomalaise: Effects of Televised Incivility on Political Trust," *American Political Science Review* 99 (February 2005): 1–15.
3. See Tae Hyun Baek, Jooyoung Kim, and Hugh J. Martin, "Dimensions of News Media Brand Personality," *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly* 87 (spring 2010): 119–36 for a notable exception: an examination of the media brand personalities on several dimensions and their differences across programs. However, their work cannot isolate what causes each of these evaluations—a limitation our study seeks to address.
4. Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, "Ideological News Sources: Who Watches and Why: Americans Spending More Time Following the News" (2010).
5. Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, "More Now Say GOP Likely to Win Control of House: Fewer Journalists Stand Out in Fragmented News Universe" (2010).
6. Amelia H. Arsenault and Manuel Castells, "The Structure and Dynamics of Global Media Business Networks," *International Journal of Communication* 2 (2008): 707–48; Yariv Tsfati, Riva Tukachinsky, and Yoran Peri, "Exposure to News, Political Comedy, and Entertainment Talk Shows: Concerns about Security and Political Mistrust," *International*

Journal of Public Opinion Research 21 (May 2009): 1–25; Daya K. Thussu, *News and Entertainment: The Rise of Global Infotainment* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2007).

7. James M. Avery, "Videomalaise or Virtuous Circle? The Influence of the News Media on Political Trust" *International Journal of Press/Politics* 14 (October 2009): 410–33; Baek, Kim, and Martin, "Dimensions of News Media Brand Personality"; Lauren Feldman and Dannagal G. Young, "Late-Night Comedy as a Gateway to Traditional News: An Analysis of Time Trends in News Attention among Late-Night Comedy Viewers during the 2004 Presidential Election," *Political Communication 25* (October 2008): 401–25; Heather L. LaMarre, Kristen D. Landreville, and Michael A. Beam, "The Irony of Satire: Political Ideology and the Motivation to See What You Want to See in *The Colbert Report*," *International Journal of Press/Politics* 14 (April 2009): 212–31.

8. Denis McQuail, *Media Accountability and the Freedom of Publication* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2003).

9. Cecilie Gaziano, "How Credible Is the Credibility Crisis?" *Journalism Quarterly* 65 (summer 1988): 267–78, 375; Spiro Kiousis, "Public Trust or Mistrust? Perceptions of Media Credibility in the Information Age," *Mass Communication and Society* 4 (fall 2001): 381–403; Yariv Tsfati and Joseph N. Cappella, "Do People Watch What They Do Not Trust? Exploring the Association between News Media Skepticism and Exposure," *Communication Research* 30 (October 2003): 504–29.

10. Erica W. Austin and Qingwen Dong, "Source v. Content Effects on Judgments of News Credibility," *Journalism Quarterly* 71 (winter 1994): 973–83; Kiousis, "Public Trust or Mistrust?"; Miriam J. Metzger, Andrew J. Flanagin, Karen Eya, Daisy R. Lemus, and Robert M. McCann, "Credibility for the 21st Century: Integrating Perspectives on Source, Message, and Media Credibility in the Contemporary Media Environment," *Communication Yearbook* 27 (2003): 293–335.

11. Jaeho Cho, Dhavan V. Shah, Seunghan Nah, and Dominique Brossard, "'Split Screens' and 'Spin Rooms': Debate Modality, Post-Debate Coverage, and the New Videomalaise," *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media* 53 (June 2009): 242–61; Frederick Fico, John D. Richardson, and Steven M. Edwards, "Influence of Story Structure on Perceived Story Bias and News Organization Credibility," *Mass Communication and Society* 7 (summer 2004): 301–18; Philip Meyer, "Defining and Measuring Credibility of Newspapers: Developing an Index," *Journalism Quarterly* 65 (fall 1988): 567–88.

12. Cheryl C. Bracken, "Perceived Source Credibility of Local Television News: The Impact of Television Forms and Presence," *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media* 50 (December 2006): 723–41; Maria E. Grabe, Shuhua Zhou, Annie Lang, and Paul D. Bolls, "Packing Television News: The Effects of Tabloid on Information Process and Evaluative Responses," *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media* 44 (fall 2000): 581–98; David Markham, "The Dimensions of Source Credibility of Television Newscasters," *Journal of Communication* 18 (March 1968): 57–68; John Newhagen and Clifford Nass, "Differential Criteria for Evaluating Credibility of Newspapers and TV News," *Journalism Quarterly* 66 (summer 1989): 277–84.

13. Baek, Kim, and Martin, "Dimensions of News Media Brand Personality."

14. Tsfati and Cappella, "Do People Watch What They Do Not Trust?"

15. Erik P. Bucy, "Media Credibility Reconsidered: Synergy Effects between On-Air and Online News," *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly* 80 (summer 2003): 247–64.

16. Carl I. Hovland and Walter Weiss, "The Influence of Source Credibility on Communication Effectiveness," *Public Opinion Quarterly* 15 (winter 1951–52): 635–50.

17. See Shearon Lowery and Melvin L. DeFleur, *Milestones in Mass Communication Research: Media Effects* (New York: Prentice Hall, 1983) for a comprehensive look at media effect theories and their impact on the average citizen.

18. Alan M. Rubin, "Television Uses and Gratifications: The Interactions of Viewing Patterns and Motivations," *Journal of Broadcasting* 27 (winter 1983): 37–51.

19. Mutz and Reeves, "New Videomalaise."

20. Davy Janssen and Raphael Kies, "Online Forums and Deliberative Democracy," *Politica* 40 (September 2005): 317–35.

21. James S. Ettema, "Journalism as Reason-Giving: Deliberative Democracy, Institutional Accountability, and the News Media's Mission," *Political Communication* 24 (April–June 2007): 143–60; Janssen and Kies, "Online Forums and Deliberative Democracy."

22. Bruce A. Ackerman and James S. Fishkin, *Deliberation Day* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2004), 66.

23. Ettema, "Journalism as Reason-Giving."

24. Geoffrey Baym, *From Cronkite to Colbert: The Evolution of Broadcast News* (London: Paradigm, 2010).

25. "State of the News Media."

26. Baym, *From Cronkite to Colbert.*

27. Jody Baumgartner and Jonathan S. Morris, "*The Daily Show* Effect: Candidate Evaluations, Efficacy, and American Youth," *American Politics Research* 34 (May 2006): 341–67; Jody Baumgartner and Jonathan S. Morris, "One 'Nation,' under Stephen? The Effects of *The Colbert Report* on American Youth," *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media* 52 (December 2008): 622–43; Young Mie Kim and John Vishak, "Just Laugh! You Don't Need to Remember: The Effect of Entertainment Media on Political Information Acquisition and Information Processing in Political Judgment," *Journal of Communication* 58 (June 2008): 338–60; LaMarre, Landreville, and Beam, "Irony of Satire"; Jonathan S. Morris, "*The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* and Audience Attitude Change during the 2004 Party Conventions," *Political Behavior* 31 (March 2009): 79–102.

28. Robert A. Baron and Rodney L. Ball, "The Aggression-Inhibiting Influence of Nonhostile Humor," *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* 10 (January 1974): 23–33; Anca M. Miron, Beverly Brummett, Brent Ruggles, and Jack W. Brehm, "Deterring Anger and Anger-Motivated Behaviors," *Basic and Applied Social Psychology* 30 (December 2008): 326–38; Brian Sternthal and C. Samuel Craig, "Humor in Advertising," *Journal of Marketing* 37 (October 1973): 12–18.

29. Jim Lyttle, "The Effectiveness of Humor in Persuasion: The Case of Business Ethics Training," *Journal of General Psychology* 128 (April 2001): 206–16; Morris, "*The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* and Audience Attitude Change."

30. Nicholas A. Kuiper, Sandra D. McKenzie, and Kristine A. Belanger, "Cognitive Appraisals and Individual Differences in Sense of Humor: Motivational and Affective Implications," *Personality and Individual Differences* 19 (September 1995): 359–72; Sternthal and Craig, "Humor in Advertising."

31. Baumgartner and Morris, "*The Daily Show* Effect."

32. Akiba Cohen, *The Television News Interview* (Newbury Park, CA: Sage, 1987).

33. Michael Schudson, "Question Authority: A History of the News Interview," *Media, Culture, and Society* 16 (October 1994): 565–87.

34. Brent Cunningham, "Rethinking Objectivity," *Columbia Journalism Review* 42 (July–August 2003): 24–32.

35. Baumgartner and Morris, "*The Daily Show* Effect."

36. Michael X. Delli Carpini and Bruce A. Williams, "Let Us Infotain You: Politics in the New Media Environment," in *Mediated Politics: Communication in the Future of Democracy*, ed. William L. Bennett and Robert M. Entman (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 160–81.

37. Marianna Patrona, "A Mess and Rows: Evaluation in Prime-Time TV News Discourse and the Shaping of Public Opinion," *Discourse and Communication* 3 (May 2009): 173–94.

38. Steven E. Clayman, John Heritage, Marc N. Elliott, and Laurie L. McDonald, "When the Watchdogs Bark? Conditions of Aggressive Questioning in Presidential News Conferences," *American Sociological Review* 72 (February 2007): 23–41; see also Eran Ben-Porath, "Interview Effects: Theory and Evidence for the Impact of Televised Political Interviews on Viewer Attitudes," *Communication Theory* 20 (August 2010): 323–47.

39. Ben-Porath, "Interview Effects."

40. Ettema, "Journalism as Reason-Giving"; Janssen and Kies, "Online Forums and Deliberative Democracy."

41. Baym, *From Cronkite to Colbert*.

42. Baumgartner and Morris, "*The Daily Show* Effect."

43. Miron et al., "Deterring Anger"; Sternthal and Craig, "Humor in Advertising."

44. Kuiper, McKenzie, and Belanger, "Cognitive Appraisals."

45. Lyttle, "Effectiveness of Humor"; Morris, "*The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* and Audience Attitude Change."

46. Patrona, "Mess and Rows"; Schudson, "Question Authority."

47. Richard Forgette and Jonathan S. Morris, "High-Conflict Television News and Public Opinion," *Political Research Quarterly* 59 (September 2006): 447–56; Diana C. Mutz, "Effects of 'In-Your-Face' Television Discourse on Perceptions of a Legitimate Opposition," *American Political Science Review* 101 (November 2007): 621–35; Mutz and Reeves, "New Videomalaise."

48. Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, "Well Known: Public Option, Sonia Sotomayor, Little Known: Cap and Trade, Max Baucus" (2009).

49. We controlled for a second experimental manipulation in this article—whether or not guests maintained a civil vs. uncivil tone in the debate. Our definition of civility is adopted from Deborah J. Brooks and John G. Geer, "Beyond Negativity: The Effects of Incivility on the Electorate," *American Journal of Political Science* 51 (January 2007): 1–16,

and Mutz and Reeves, "New Videomalaise," and included two related components: their civility in referencing the other side (respectful vs. derogatory name calling) and in their interaction (polite turn taking vs. interruptive speech patterns). This manipulation remains separate from our manipulation of host style: the host always interacts respectfully and politely with his guests. Similarly, the host never engages in direct criticism of the guests themselves, although he does, in certain conditions, question or mock their policy positions. Thus, our manipulations of guest tone and host style do differ not only in the target of the manipulations (host vs. guests), but also in their conceptual and operational definitions. These differences are reflected in the outcomes: the manipulation of guest tone does not directly affect nor interact with host style to affect any of the dependent variables examined in this study.

50. Full versions of the scripts, the stimulus materials, and the experimental design will be available at the lead author's website at http://emilyk.vraga.org/ after publication.

51. Fico, Richardson, and Edwards, "Influence of Story Structure"; Meyer, "Defining and Measuring Credibility."

52. While our Cronbach's alpha for our media trust measures does not exceed .70, the level that measures involving more than three items are expected to meet, media trust has proven to be an exceptionally difficult concept to measure. Guy J. Golan and Anita G. Day, "In God We Trust: Religiosity as a Predictor of Perceptions of Media Trust, Factuality, and Privacy Invasion," *American Behavioral Scientist* 54 (October 2010): 120–36; David A. Jones, "Why Americans Don't Trust the Media: A Preliminary Analysis," *International Journal of Press/Politics* 9 (spring 2004): 60–75; Kiousis, "Public Trust or Mistrust?" Because our media trust questions are adopted from previous research (Tsfati and Cappella, "Do People Watch What They Do Not Trust?") and because our indices are substantially more reliable than others (see Golan and Day, "In God We Trust"; Kiousis, "Public Trust or Mistrust?") and approach the conventional accepted value, we chose to combine these items into an index to avoid the pitfalls inherent in single-item measurement of key concepts.

53. Mutz and Reeves, "New Videomalaise."

54. Mutz and Reeves, "New Videomalaise."

55. This control was necessary also because ideology differed significantly between our experimental conditions ($F = 3.54$, $p < .05$). We tested a host of other demographic variables and media use variables, including consumption of news programming, cable news, and comedic news shows, attitudes about global warming, and age, gender, and year in school, to ensure random assignment occurred on these variables. Please contact the lead author for details of these analyses.

56. As noted above, change in media trust is tested by using the posttest value as the criterion variable and controlling for the pretest, or lagged, value of the same measure. We also tested these analyses using a subtractive change score between pretest and posttest ratings of general media trust. The results are identical for all of the hypotheses tested to those presented in the text and are available from the authors on request.

57. See Kiousis, "Public Trust or Mistrust?"; Mark D. Watts, David Domke, Dhavan V. Shah, and David P. Fan, "Elite Cues and Media Bias in Presidential Campaigns: Explaining Public Perceptions of a Liberal Press," *Communication Research* 26 (April 1999): 144–75.

58. Tsfati and Cappella, "Do People Watch What They Do Not Trust?"; Baek, Kim, and Martin, "Dimensions of News Media Brand Personality."

59. Ettema, "Journalism as Reason-Giving"; Janssen and Kies, "Online Forums and Deliberative Democracy."

60. Clayman et al., "When the Watchdogs Bark?"; Schudson, "Question Authority."

61. Lance W. Bennett, "The Burglar Alarm That Just Keeps Ringing: A Response to Zaller," *Political Communication* 20 (April–June 2003): 131–38.

62. See Ben-Porath, "Interview Effects."

63. Baym, *From Cronkite to Colbert*; Kjerstin Thorson, Emily Vraga, and Brian Ekdale, "Credibility in Context: How Uncivil Online Commentary Affects News Credibility," *Mass Communication and Society* 13 (July–August 2010): 289–313.

64. Mutz and Reeves, "New Videomalaise."

65. Kuiper, McKenzie, and Belanger, "Cognitive Appraisals"; Sternthal and Craig, "Humor in Advertising."

66. Avery, "Videomalaise or Virtuous Circle?"

67. Bucy, "Media Credibility Reconsidered"; Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, "Ideological News Sources."