

# Laughter, Learning, or Enlightenment? Viewing and Avoidance Motivations Behind *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report*

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*This project integrates a uses and gratifications perspective into the study of political satire, to explore the reasons why young people prefer (or avoid) political satire programming, and to understand how viewing and avoidance motivations relate to political and psychological constructs. Results indicate that respondents who prefer political satire report watching for the humor, to learn about current events, because they see it as unbiased, to make news fun, and to contextualize the news. Analyses also reveal significant differences in the demographic and psychological profiles of respondents who watch (and avoid) political satire for different reasons.*

As research on the content and effects of political satire programming (Like Comedy Central's *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report*) expands, it becomes apparent that the impact of these programs is not universal. Some of the most significant contributions to this literature have explored the role played by moderating variables in effects processes (Cao, 2008, 2010; LaMarre, Landreville, & Byrne, 2009; Xenos & Becker, 2009; Young, 2004). One burgeoning area of research has begun to explore viewer perceptions of and orientations to political humor (Becker, Xenos, & Wiasanen, 2010; Hmielowski, Holbert, & Lee, 2011). Rooted in Uses & Gratifications approaches to mass media (Katz, Blumler, & Gurevich, 1974), studies of audience perceptions and motivations have helped scholars explicate theory-driven effects mechanisms that link viewer perceptions with processing motivations (Eveland, 2001; McLeod, Kosicki, & McLeod, 1994).

The goal of the current project is to integrate a uses and gratifications perspective into the study of political humor, to understand the reasons some people prefer shows like *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report* (*TDS/CR*), while other people do not. Using a genre-ranking exercise to identify those with a *TDS/CR* preference and those who are *TDS/CR* avoidant, the project explores how viewing and avoidance

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motivations relate to political and psychological constructs—from political knowledge and efficacy to political interest and need for cognition. By understanding the different reasons people have for consuming—or *avoiding*—political humor and the socio-political profiles of these viewers, this project will help scholars develop nuanced models of political humor effects and will shed light on the normative implications of exposure to political satire.

### **Political Satire Effects: The Importance of Moderating Variables**

Political communication scholars are beginning to articulate the macro and microlevel processes that render political satire significant in our postmodern political media environment. Empirical studies of effects have explored how shows like *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* and *The Colbert Report* affect democratic outcomes, from political knowledge (Cao, 2008; Kim & Vishak, 2008; Young & Hoffman, 2012) to political attention and information seeking (Cao, 2010; Feldman, Leiserwitz, & Maibach, 2011; Feldman & Young, 2008; Xenos & Becker, 2009) to political discussion (Young & Esralew, 2011), participation (Cao & Brewer, 2008; Hoffman & Young, 2011; Moy, Xenos, & Hess, 2005) as well as trust and efficacy (Baumgartner & Morris, 2006; Hoffman & Thompson, 2009). As this body of research grows, it becomes clear that the effects of exposure to these programs are not universal. Often, we find unique effects of exposure to political satire on certain kinds of viewers under certain circumstances (Cao, 2008, 2010; Holbert & Young, 2013; LaMarre et al., 2009; Xenos & Becker, 2009; Young, 2004).

### **Viewer Perceptions and Uses and Gratifications in the Study of Political Satire**

Additional research on potential moderators of political humor effects has focused on audience perceptions. Becker and colleagues (2010) applied a “third person effects” perspective in their analysis of how acceptable young people consider *The Daily Show* to be as a source of political influence. The authors found that frequent viewers and viewers who share the ideological leanings of the show are the least likely to experience a third person effect. LaMarre, Landreville, and Beam (2009) found differing perceptions of *The Colbert Report* among key ideological subgroups such that viewers selectively interpreted the meaning of the humorous show in ways that supported their own ideological leanings.

In line with the call to explicate audience perceptions of and orientations to political humor, is a recent push to better understand *why* people consume political humor in the first place. Scholars are beginning to operationalize predictive constructs like “affinity for political humor” (Hmielowski, Holbert, & Lee, 2011)

to help identify the underlying dimensions driving appreciation and consumption of political humor. Such research has its roots in Uses and Gratifications (U&G) approaches to mass media (Katz, Blumler, & Gurevich, 1974). Unlike their contemporaries who envisioned media consumption as passive and ritualistic (Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, & Signorielli, 1980), Katz and his colleagues outlined an approach to the study of media that conceptualized the audience as active, selective, and mindful media consumers who, if asked, would be capable of articulating their reasons for consuming media content. U&G envisioned audience members motivated by a desire to obtain certain gratifications (entertainment, escape, catharsis) or fulfill certain needs (information acquisition, correlation of information, social utility) through exposure to mediated content.

Not only are uses and gratifications important to understand in their own right (see Papacharissi, 2008; Papacharissi & Mendelson, 2007), but such constructs may also serve as moderators of a diverse range of media effects (Blumler, 1979; Han et al., 2009; Park, Kee, & Valenzuela, 2009; Rubin & Perse, 1987; Rubin & Windahl, 1986; Windahl, 1981). In fact, scholars have integrated concepts and assumptions of uses and gratifications to explicate information processing mechanisms that account for differential media effects. Theoretical approaches to political communication effects such as the O-S-O-R model (McLeod et al., 1994) or Eveland's (2001) Cognitive Mediation Model, explain how outcomes of exposure to media content vary as a function of the audience member's reason for consuming that content in the first place. Such incorporations of uses and gratifications constructs with information processing mechanisms reflect a promising avenue of research; one which has been largely untapped in the study of political humor effects.

## Young People and Political Humor

To date, across a large and growing body of political humor scholarship, younger people report consuming political humor more often than older people (Hmielowski, Holbert, & Lee, 2011; Young & Tisinger, 2006). In addition, younger people report learning about politics from political comedy shows more often than older people, a statistic that has increased over the past decade (Pew, 2008). Empirical analyses of news consumption among young political humor viewers indicate that young viewers of *The Daily Show* and *Colbert* report consuming more (not less) political information from traditional sources, particularly online, and through talk radio (Young & Tisinger, 2006). Because of the importance of this key demographic group, it is here, on young people, where we focus our attention regarding the study of the uses and gratifications associated with political humor consumption.

RQ<sub>1</sub>: What are young people's motivations for viewing *TDS/CR*?

To understand the role that political humor plays in the political landscape, it is not only important to understand why certain young people prefer *TDS/CR*, but

why some young people do not. Historically, U&G studies included analyses of these “avoidances”—or “negative forces . . . which result in nonuse of the media” (Becker, 1979, p. 56), mainly in the context of news (McLeod & Becker, 1974; McLeod, Brown, Becker, & Ziemke, 1977). Recent research (Lariscy, Tinkham, & Sweetser, 2011) has incorporated the concept of *avoidance* into the study of online political information among young people, illustrating the formation of information gaps as a function of cynicism and efficacy. Similarly, developing an understanding of not just why individuals *consume* political humor, but also why they *avoid* it, will help us to understand the role played by political humor in the media environment.

RQ<sub>2</sub>: What are young people’s motivations for avoiding *TDS/CR*?

Next, to get a better sense of the potential hybridity in viewing motivations—or what overlap may exist between them—these analyses explore the extent to which viewing motivations relate to one another and how avoidance motivations relate to one another.

RQ<sub>3a</sub>: How do viewing motivations relate to one another?

RQ<sub>3b</sub>: How do avoidance motivations relate to one another?

## Viewing Motivations Meet Socio-Political and Psychological Constructs

One of the advantages of studying viewing and avoidance motivations is discovering what drives certain *types* of people to seek out or avoid political satire programming. Cross-sectional studies of the *TDS* audience suggest high levels of political interest, attention, and knowledge among viewers (Young & Tisinger, 2006). Additional research indicates high levels of internal political efficacy among *TDS* viewers and low trust in political institutions (Baumgartner & Morris, 2006). Yet, thus far, we don’t know if, *within* the *TDS/CR* audience, different kinds of viewers seek out *TDS/CR* for specific reasons—which might lead to distinct processing goals and pathways. Viewing motivations likely signal unique levels of cognitive engagement with media content, a proposition that is particularly relevant when working with information processing mechanisms. The current project is not designed to test the effects of exposure to political humor or to test which processing pathway different viewers take when watching these shows. Instead, this analysis will explore *TDS/CR* viewing and avoidance motivations, and assess how these motivations correlate with relevant socio-political and psychological constructs. By understanding how viewing/avoidance motivations correlate with other socio-political or psychological characteristics, we can better link viewing/avoidance motivations to possible effects mechanisms in the future.

While several political and demographic constructs have been found to correlate with *TDS* viewing (knowledge, interest, efficacy, party ID, ideology, gender), the

psychological construct need for cognition (NFC) (Cohen, 1957) has rarely been integrated into the study of political humor. This is a marked absence from the literature since studies of humor effects are often rooted in dual processes models of attitude formation and change (Nabi, Moyer-Guse, & Byrne, 2007; Young, 2008), a body of research in which NFC has long played a central role (Cacioppo, Petty, Kao, & Rodriguez, 1986). As originally conceptualized by Cohen (1957), NFC is a psychological trait that indicates an individual's propensity to think hard about complex issues. As operationalized, NFC does not measure one's *ability* to think, but rather one's appreciation of and enjoyment derived from complex thought (see Cacioppo & Petty, 1982). Hence, when integrated into dual processing models of attitude change, NFC is treated as an indicator of processing *motivation*. Studies confirm that individuals high in NFC engage in deeper processing when anticipating more complex messages (as opposed to simple ones), hence suggesting that NFC increases cognitive elaboration through a priori motivation (Cacioppo, Petty, Feinstein, & Jarvis, 1996; See, Petty, & Evans, 2009). If NFC triggers central processing in anticipation of complex messages, then people varying in levels of need for cognition may have different motivations for watching ironic political satire such as *The Daily Show* or *Colbert*.

RQ4: How are young peoples' *TDS/CR* viewing motivations predicted by their socio-political and demographic profiles?

RQ5: How are young peoples' *TDS/CR* avoidance motivations predicted by their socio-political and demographic profiles?

## Methods

### Data

A survey was administered to students in two communication courses at a large Eastern university in February 2010. Students were provided with a link to an online questionnaire administered through Qualtrics survey software. Four hundred and ninety six students were invited to complete the survey in exchange for extra credit. A total of 398 students (80.2% response rate) completed the questionnaire.

## Measures

### Independent Variables

*Ranking of Daily Show/Colbert Report (TDS/CR).*

Using a "click and drag" feature on the online survey, students were asked to "think about the kinds of programming they watched in the past month on

**Table 1**  
**Television Genres Randomized for Respondent Ranking Exercise**

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Talent-based reality shows, like <i>American Idol</i> , <i>So You Think You Can Dance</i> , <i>Top Chef</i> , or <i>Project Runway</i>
Young adult fictional dramas, like <i>90210</i> or <i>Gossip Girl</i>
Medical dramas, like <i>House</i> , <i>Private Practice</i> or <i>Grey's Anatomy</i>
Satirical comedy programs, like <i>The Daily Show with Jon Stewart</i> or <i>The Colbert Report</i>
Competition-based reality shows, like <i>Survivor</i> or <i>The Amazing Race</i>
Crime or Spy dramas, like <i>CSI</i> , <i>NCIS</i> , <i>Law and Order</i> , <i>Bones</i> , <i>Chuck</i> , or <i>The Mentalist</i>
Comedies or Sitcoms, like <i>Two and a Half Men</i> , <i>The Big Bang Theory</i> , <i>the Office</i> , <i>Modern Family</i> , <i>Curb Your Enthusiasm</i> , <i>How I Met your Mother</i> , or <i>30 Rock</i>
Sci-Fi or Fantasy shows, like <i>V</i> , <i>Lost</i> , or <i>Flash Forward</i>
Evening Newscasts, like those hosted by Brian Williams (NBC), Katie Couric (CBS), or Charles Glibson (ABC)
Cable news opinion shows, including MSNBC's Rachel Maddow or <i>Countdown</i> with Keith Olbermann or FOX's Glenn Beck or the <i>O'Reilly Factor</i>
Young adult reality shows, like <i>Jersey Shore</i> or <i>The Real World</i>
Reality dating shows, like <i>For the Love of Ray J</i> , <i>the Bachelor</i> , <i>Tough Love</i> , or <i>Rock of Love</i>
Sports programming, including live games and matches or shows like <i>SportsCenter</i>

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TV or online'' and to rank the 13 genres of programming from *most watched* to *least watched*. Genres exemplars were based on the top rated programs according to Nielsen reports. The wording of the *TDS/CR* Genre was: ''Satirical comedy programs, like *The Daily Show* with Jon Stewart or *The Colbert Report*.'' This wording (''satirical comedy'' instead of ''political satire'') was chosen to minimize exaggerated scores based on the word ''political.'' Genres were randomized when presented to participants (see Table 1).

The decision to use a genre-ranking exercise rather than a quantitative measure of actual exposure to each genre was borne out of a need to identify those with an affinity for (or aversion to) the programming. The genre-ranking exercise affords us a mechanism that forces respondents to make a preference from within a set of 13 typical genres. Hence, regardless of one's actual television exposure, we can have a sense of who *would* be watching *TDS/CR* (or not) if given the choice.

#### *Preference for TDS/CR.*

Those who reported *TDS/CR* as one of their *three most viewed* genres were coded 1 for *TDS/CR* preference. Respondents who did not rank *TDS/CR* in their top three

were coded zero. Eighty-two respondents (20.6%) ranked *TDS/CR* in their top three preferred genres ( $M = .21$ ,  $SD = .41$ ).

*Avoidance of Daily Show/Colbert Report (TDS/CR).*

Those who reported "Satirical comedy programs, like *The Daily Show* with Jon Stewart or *The Colbert Report*" as one of their *three least viewed* genres were coded 1 for *TDS/CR* avoidance. Respondents who did not rank *TDS/CR* in their bottom three were coded zero. While the word "avoidance" typically implies a deliberate attempt to *not* experience something, previous uses and gratifications literature (Becker, 1979; Kim & Rubin, 1997) has used the term to refer to the act of non-viewing, regardless of the reason (intentional avoidance or mere disinterest). Hence, this operationalization of avoidance is not designed to exclusively capture intentional non-viewing, but any form of non-viewing (the reasons for which will be explored in participants' responses to the "avoidance motivation" question). Fifty-five respondents (13.82%) ranked *TDS/CR* in their bottom three preferred genres ( $M = .14$ ,  $SD = .35$ ).

*Daily Show/Colbert Report Viewing Motivations.*

Those respondents who ranked *TDS/CR* in their top three most viewed genres ( $N = 82$ ) were then asked: "What are some reasons why satirical comedy shows (like *The Daily Show* or *The Colbert Report*) are appealing to you?" Based on a preliminary reading of the responses, the author and one undergraduate coder created a coding scheme to capture the presence or absence of seven categories of viewing motivations including, funny/entertaining, learning the news, unbiased/truthful, context, liberal, relatable, and making news fun (see Table 2 for details and statistics). Each response could be coded as containing more than one viewing motivation, hence these categories are not mutually exclusive. After two independent reliability trials, Krippendorff's Alphas ranged from .7–1.0.

*Daily Show/Colbert Report Avoidance Motivations.*

Those respondents who ranked *TDS/CR* in their three least viewed programs ( $N = 55$ ) were then asked: "What are some reasons why satirical comedy shows (like *The Daily Show* or *The Colbert Report*) are not appealing to you?" Again, the author and undergraduate coder created a coding scheme to capture the presence or absence of six avoidance motivations including, "not funny," "offensive," "don't understand it," "not interested," and "never seen it." Each response could be coded as containing more than one avoidance motivation. After two independent reliability trials, Krippendorff's Alphas ranged from .8–1.0.

*Need for Cognition.*

An abridged NFC battery was created by randomly selecting 13 of the traditional 36 NFC items (Cacioppo & Petty, 1982). The abridged measure (13 items) was

**Table 2**  
**Reliability and Descriptive Statistics for *TDS/CR* Viewing and**  
**Avoidance Motivations (of 81 Respondents who Ranked *TDS/CR* in**  
**Top Three and 53 who Ranked *TDS/CR* in Bottom Three)**

	Krippendorff's Alpha	<i>N</i> (%)	<i>M</i> ( <i>SD</i> )
<i>TDS/CR</i> Viewing Motivations ( <i>N</i> = 81)			
Funny/good mood/entertaining: Respondent watches for humor or entertainment.	.83	66 (80.49%)	.82 (.39)
Learning the news: Respondent gets information from the shows.	.96	34 (41.46%)	.42 (.50)
Unbiased/truthful: Respondent views the shows as real, unbiased, and truthful.	.90	8 (9.76%)	.10 (.30)
Context/comprehension: The shows put prior knowledge into context, help respondent understand background or implications.	.90	7 (8.54%)	.09 (.28)
Liberal: Respondent believes that shows are politically liberal and likes this.	1.0	1 (1.22%)	.01 (.11)
Relatable: Respondent can relate to the shows.	1.0	3 (3.66%)	.04 (.19)
Makes news more interesting/fun: Respondent feels that <i>TDS</i> enhances news viewing experience.	.71	32 (39.02%)	.40 (.49)
<i>TDS/CR</i> Avoidance Motivations ( <i>N</i> = 53)			
Not funny: Respondent understands the show but does not find it funny.	.87	22 (40.00%)	.42 (.50)
Offensive/doesn't take issues seriously: Respondent is offended by the show or feels it disrespects important issues.	1.0	2 (3.64%)	.04 (.19)
Don't understand humor or references: Respondent does not understand an aspect of the show—either the topics or the humor.	.84	6 (10.91%)	.11 (.32)
Not interested in topics/boring: Respondent is not interested in the topics.	.86	25 (45.45%)	.40 (.49)
Never seen it: Respondent has never seen the show.	1.0	5 (9.09%)	.09 (.30)

designed to ease the burden on respondents. Respondents were asked how much they agreed or disagreed (on a 5-point scale) with 13 statements including: "I really enjoy a task that involves coming up with new solutions to problems," "I only think as hard as I have to (rev)," "I would prefer complex to simple problems." The final NFC score was calculated as the mean of these 13 items ( $M = 3.33$ ,  $SD = .50$ , Cronbach's Alpha = .79).



*Political Knowledge.*

Four multiple choice items measured political knowledge. Correct responses were coded "1" and all others coded "0." Items included, "Who has the final responsibility to determine if a law is constitutional or not?" "Do you happen to know which party currently has the most members in the U.S. House of Representatives?" "Do you happen to know what political job or office is now held by John Roberts?" "How much of a majority is required for the US Senate and House to override a presidential veto?" ( $M = 2.56$ ,  $SD = 1.12$ , Cronbach's Alpha = .45).

*Internal Political Efficacy.*

Respondents were asked how much they agreed or disagreed with four statements (*Strongly disagree* = 1, *Strongly agree* = 5): "I consider myself to be well-qualified to participate in politics." "I think that I am better informed about politics than most people." "Sometimes politics seems so complicated that a person like me cannot really understand what is going on." (Rev) "I feel that I have a pretty good understanding of the important political issues facing our country." Efficacy was calculated as the mean of these four items. ( $M = 2.78$ ,  $SD = .92$ , Cronbach's Alpha = .77).

*Political Interest and Attention.*

Respondents were asked "Generally speaking, how *interested* are you in what is going on with politics and public affairs?" (Extremely (5), quite (4), somewhat (3), not very (2), not at all (1)). ( $M = 2.98$ ,  $SD = .93$ ) and "Generally speaking, how often do you *pay attention to* information about politics and public affairs?" (Very often (4), Sometimes (3), Rarely (2), Never (1)) ( $M = 2.79$ ,  $SD = .69$ ). Due to their high reliability (Cronbach's Alpha = .83), these two measures were averaged into one interest/attention score ( $M = 2.89$ ,  $SD = .76$ ).

*Party Affiliation.*

Party ID was recoded into three dummy variables: Strong Democrats and Democrats ( $N = 173$ ,  $M = .44$ ,  $SD = .50$ ), Republicans and Strong Republicans ( $N = 91$ ,  $M = .23$ ,  $SD = .42$ ), independent and other ( $N = 125$ ,  $M = .32$ ,  $SD = .47$ ).

*Political Ideology.*

"Which of the following best describes your political ideology?" Extremely liberal (1), liberal (2), neither liberal nor conservative (3), conservative (4), extremely conservative (5). ( $M = 2.61$ ,  $SD = .86$ ).

*Gender* was measured with a dummy variable for males ( $M = .29$ ,  $SD = .45$ ).

*Total Television Viewing.*

"Not counting movies, how many total hours of television programming would you say you watched in the past week (50 or more, 35–49, 20–34, 10–19, 4–9, 0–3)." Categories were recoded to their midpoints and the variable was treated as interval ( $M = 11.71$ ,  $SD = 10.22$ ).

## Results

As illustrated in Table 2, the most frequently cited reason for preferring shows like *TDS* and *CR* is humor and entertainment (RQ<sub>1</sub>). 80% of respondents who ranked *TDS/CR* in their top three found the shows appealing because they are funny, entertaining, or put them in a good mood. Next, 41% of those with a *TDS/CR* preference reported watching the shows as sources of information and knowledge. A related category, enjoying *TDS/CR* because it makes news and fun and entertaining, was mentioned by 39% of respondents. It is important to note that "making news fun" includes both those who cite *TDS/CR* as a fun delivery mechanism for news and those who cite *TDS/CR* as a mechanism to make the information already acquired from other news sources more fun/entertaining. Next, almost 10% of respondents with a *TDS/CR* preference reported enjoying these shows because they were perceived as unbiased, truthful, and real. About 9% of respondents preferring *TDS/CR* did so because of its ability to contextualize and provide details/background to their understanding of political issues and events and to aid in political comprehension and understanding.

Turning to RQ<sub>2</sub>, of those respondents who ranked *TDS/CR* in their bottom three genres, 45% did so because they lacked interest in the subject, found the content boring/uninteresting, or found other genres more appealing (see Table 2). Next, 40% of those who avoided *TDS/CR* did so because they did not find it funny. Some of these respondents reported understanding the humor, but not appreciating it. Almost 11% of *TDS/CR* avoiders reported not understanding the humor or content of the show enough to be able to appreciate it while 9% reported having never seen the show. Interestingly, some respondents reported that they were "not interested in the news," a response that was coded as "finding the content uninteresting/boring."

Cross correlations between *TDS/CR* viewing motivations (RQ<sub>3a</sub>) revealed only three significant relationships; all of them with "watching because it's funny/for the humor." People who reported watching *TDS/CR* for the humor were more likely to also report watching the show to learn about the news ( $r = .28$ ,  $p < .05$ ), suggesting that learning and laughing may occur simultaneously—at least as perceived by these viewers. Next, there was a significant correlation between viewing because "it's funny" and because it "makes the news fun" ( $r = .26$ ,  $p < .05$ ). This is due to the nature of the coding scheme, since respondents who reported that *TDS/CR* made learning current events entertaining and funny would be coded for both the "funny/entertaining" category and for "makes news fun" category. Finally, those

who reported watching these shows for context/background were significantly *less* likely than their peers to report watching the shows "because it's funny" ( $r = -.31$ ,  $p < .01$ ). This result will be explored in the multivariate tests that follow.

Interestingly, the lack of a significant correlation between reporting that *TDS/CR* "making news fun" and *TDS/CR* as sources of information/learning, suggests that the two do not operate hand in hand. Many of those who reported that *TDS/CR* "made news fun" made no explicit reference to "acquiring information" or "learning" from the shows. Instead, many simply stated that these were alternative formats where news was presented in an "entertaining" or "less depressing" way. Another interesting observation is that some of those who stated that *TDS/CR* "made news fun" were referring to news or information they obtained elsewhere. For them, *TDS/CR* made previously-acquired information enjoyable in a secondary way. For example, a respondent stated, "Mainly [shows like *TDS/CR*] take the information I read daily in the newspaper or in the news and make them easier to remember . . . being able to recall things in quick and witty ways makes them more entertaining." Another writes, "[*TDS/CR*] touch on topics I already know about from reading the newspaper, but expound on them in hilarious ways." Or "After watching the news and catching up on the latest stories, I like to see the way that Stewart and Colbert make them humorous because the news can be very depressing."

Cross correlations among the avoidance motivations ( $RQ_{3b}$ ) revealed only two significant relationships. First, those people who reported not watching *TDS/CR* because it's "not funny" were significantly *less* likely to say that the show was "uninteresting/boring" ( $r = -.34$ ,  $p < .01$ ) and less likely to report that they had never seen the show ( $r = .27$ ,  $p < .05$ ). The latter of these is logical since one wouldn't know if a show were unfunny if he/she had never seen it. The negative correlation between boring and unfunny suggests that these reasons are perceived as distinct. Perhaps unfunny captures a lack of humor appreciation in the presence of comprehension, while "boring" suggests an overall dismissal of the content as uninteresting. It is also possible that "boring" is a surrogate for "not understanding it," among those unwilling to admit such a lack of comprehension.

Before exploring  $RQ_4$ , which examines *TDS/CR* viewing motivations as the dependent variable, logistic regression was used to assess what socio-political and demographic characteristics were predictive of *TDS/CR* preference alone. The following constructs were included in the model: gender, party affiliation, political ideology, internal political efficacy, political interest/attention, political knowledge, need for cognition and total television viewing. Results (not shown in the interest of space) indicate that of these constructs, *only* gender was a significant predictor of *TDS/CR* preference ( $p < .001$ ), with males more likely than females to prefer this programming. If anything, the lack of significant findings point to the need to go beyond models predicting mere consumption of *TDS/CR*, to explore instead the distinct reasons viewers watch these shows.

To explore  $RQ_4$ , logistic regression was used to predict each viewing motivation (except "viewing because it's liberal" because only one respondent assigned this motivation).<sup>1</sup> Respondents who did not rank *TDS/CR* in the top three (and hence

were not asked why they watched *TDS/CR*) were coded "0" for all viewing motivations. As illustrated in Table 3, the only significant predictors across the models were gender and need for cognition. Since the role of gender is likely an artifact of the significant relationship between being male and reporting a *TDS/CR* preference in the first place (as discussed above), we turn our attention to need for cognition. According to the models, respondents who were high in need for cognition were significantly more likely than their peers to report viewing *TDS/CR* for context or background ( $p < .03$ ). These high NFC respondents were also significantly *less* likely than low NFC respondents to report viewing *TDS/CR* because it's funny ( $p < .09$ ) or because they could relate to the shows ( $p < .04$ ) (see Table 3).

To explore RQ<sub>5</sub> regarding the predictors of avoidance motivations, logistic regression was used (excluding the category "offensive" because of its  $N$  of 2).

**Table 3**  
**Logistic Regression Results Predicting Audience Viewing Motivations**

	Funny	Learning	Truthful/ Unbiased	Context	Relate	Makes News Fun
	<i>B</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>B</i>
	( <i>SE</i> )	( <i>SE</i> )	( <i>SD</i> )	( <i>SD</i> )	( <i>SD</i> )	( <i>SD</i> )
(Constant)	-1.39 (1.34)	-3.52# (1.81)	-2.81 (3.62)	-12.43* (5.14)	8.39 (7.10)	-2.33 (1.82)
Efficacy	.17 (.22)	-.35 (.29)	.58 (.59)	-.11 (.78)	1.76# (1.06)	.18 (.29)
Interest/attention	.17 (.26)	.57 (.35)	-.50 (.69)	.56 (.91)	-.76 (1.32)	.09 (.35)
Democrat	.08 (.49)	-.61 (.64)	-1.20 (1.31)	-.75 (1.6)	-1.63 (2.17)	.47 (.69)
Independent	.42 (.43)	-.03 (.53)	-.32 (1.00)	-17.69 (374.97)	-17.54 (285.52)	.64 (.60)
Political ideology	-.09 (.21)	-.20 (.27)	-.41 (.54)	-1.04 (.79)	-.94 (1.14)	.06 (.28)
Political knowledge	.15 (.15)	.28 (.21)	-.08 (.43)	.80 (.62)	-.27 (.80)	.34 (.22)
Need for cognition	-.52# (.31)	-.11 (.41)	.08 (.82)	2.22* (1.05)	-3.78* (1.83)	-.61 (.41)
Male	1.21*** (.31)	1.68*** (.42)	.92* (.06)	-.53 (1.08)	1.44 (1.68)	.72# (.42)
Total TV viewing	-.03 (.02)	.01 (.02)	-.10 (.06)	-.01 (.04)	-.13 (.12)	-.07* (.03)
Nagelkerke $R^2$	.13	.16	.19	.33	.40	.12
$N$	389	389	389	389	389	389

Note. \*\*\* $p < .001$ , \*\* $p < .01$ , \* $p < .05$ , # $p < .1$ .

Across the models predicting each of the four avoidance motivations, only one included significant predictors.<sup>2</sup> (In the interest of brevity, results are not shown in a Table). When predicting “don’t watch because they don’t understand the humor/references,” two constructs were significant predictors: political knowledge ( $B = -1.35$ ,  $SE = .65$ ,  $p < .04$ ) and efficacy ( $B = -2.43$ ,  $SE = 1.10$ ,  $p < .03$ ). In both instances, respondents lower in knowledge and lower in efficacy were significantly more likely than their high knowledge/high efficacy peers to report avoiding *TDS/CR* because they didn’t understand it.

## Discussion

To date, our understanding of what draws people to shows like *TDS* and *CR* has been limited. Is it predominantly a source of entertainment or information? The current project advances the research on political satire in several crucial ways. First, these results suggest that, not only do people report viewing *TDS/CR* for many different reasons (including fun/entertainment, learning, to make news fun, and for context/background), but certain *TDS/CR* viewing motivations operate together (like humor and learning)—while others appear to be mutually exclusive (like humor and context). Second, findings suggest that viewers who consume *TDS/CR* for contrasting reasons may be driven by important political, demographic or psychological distinctions. Third, by asking viewers to rank their genre preferences, these analyses identify individuals who prefer or avoid *TDS/CR* in a competitive media environment. And finally, by measuring viewing and avoidance motivations with an open-ended prompt, these data reflect a more organic assessment of the nuanced reasons underlying viewers’ consumption of *TDS/CR* than typical closed ended measures.

It may not be surprising that young people report watching *TDS/CR* because “it’s funny” or because they see it as “source of information.” But the additional responses, such as viewing *TDS/CR* because the respondent perceives these shows as “truthful, accurate and unbiased” or because they provide important “context, background or perspective” offer important insight to our study of political humor audiences and effects. In addition, the hybridity of political satire’s form and function is illustrated by the fact that viewers who see the show predominantly as entertainment also cite it as a source of information—suggesting that viewers perceive this genre as satisfying multiple needs or gratifications simultaneously.

Another important contribution of these analyses concerns the finding that 40% of those who prefer *TDS/CR* report that these shows *make news fun*. In spite of this sizable percentage, there is a notable absence of self-reported “learning from *TDS/CR*” among these same respondents. Follow up analyses reveal that many of those reporting that *TDS/CR* “make news fun” are referring specifically to news and information they acquired somewhere *other* than *TDS/CR*—with *TDS/CR* providing a secondary level of enjoyment to the news awareness they already possess. The notion that *TDS* and *CR* bring another level of enjoyment to information that viewers

*already have* is consistent with the results of the *TDS/CR* avoidance analysis which showed people low in political knowledge and efficacy avoid these shows because they don't understand them. Without the knowledge to "get" the jokes, and without the efficacy to have faith in one's own political understanding, it follows that such individuals would simply not tune in.

Interestingly, these observations echo past statements that Jon Stewart himself has made about the function of his show:

If [kids] came to our show without knowledge our show wouldn't make any sense to them. . . . We assume so much knowledge on our show. . . . We assume a knowledge base. . . . They're not getting their news from us. They're coming to us to find out what the funny is on it. (C-Span, 2004)

Stewart consistently refers to his program as a commentary on (rather than a chronicling of) the news. He has called *The Daily Show* ". . . a sort of editorial cartoon," "a digestive process . . ." ("Bill Moyers talks with," 2007) that "distills the news to its most humorous nugget" (NOW, 2003).

One could argue, however, that these very descriptions illustrate an important dimension of political learning. Those viewers who report watching *TDS/CR* for context or background clearly perceive that they are deriving *some* form of enhanced meaning or understanding through these shows—even if they don't cite *TDS/CR* as a source of information *per se*. The fact that the individuals who watch *TDS/CR* for "context or background" are significantly *higher* in "need for cognition" points to a unique educational function that *TDS/CR* may play beyond merely transmitting information about the occurrence of current events. For these *TDS/CR* fans who enjoy thinking and engaging in deeper levels of cognitive processing, political satire is *not* thought of as diversion/entertainment; nor is it considered a source of political information. Instead, for these high NFC viewers, political satire may help fuel the kind of broad, integrative thinking that helps them make connections and gain insights.

It is important to note that several of the viewing and avoidance motivations identified here also appear to correlate with other audience characteristics. For example, males are *more* likely than females to report watching *TDS/CR* because it's funny, because it's truthful/unbiased, and to learn about current events. The obvious question raised by such findings concerns what, if anything, might be the dominant viewing motivations of females— or might there be an explanation for why *their* reasons for watching are not internally consistent enough for us to identify a dominant viewing motivation among females.

The limitations of this analysis include the undergraduate sample, and the relatively small subset of respondents who ranked *TDS/CR* in their top 3 ( $N = 81$ ) or bottom 3 ( $N = 53$ ) preferred genres, and hence were the only ones issued the open ended items. Second, it is possible that certain peoples' propensity to elaborate on their answers could have increased their likelihood of being counted in multiple coding categories, hence inflating the cross-category correlations. However, in spite of these limitations, the data point to a diverse set of political satire viewing and

avoidance motivations, some of which appear to be driven by other unique audience characteristics. These findings will help scholars develop more nuanced audience-based mechanisms of political satire processing and effects.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>GLM results indicate significant overall effects of efficacy ( $p < .08$ ).

<sup>2</sup>A more conservative set of tests, GLM, was also run. GLM analysis indicates significant overall effects on the set of dependent variables (all six viewing motivations) for both gender (Wilks' Lambda = .96,  $F(7, 372) = 2.53$ ,  $p < .02$ ), and NFC (Wilks' Lambda = .96, 2.06,  $p < .05$ ).

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