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## Ferguson on Facebook: Political persuasion in a new era of media effects



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### ABSTRACT

In 2014, media outlets deemed political satirist John Oliver's show the best of the year. Described as “the online water-cooler,” his show has become a talking point for many on social media. In this study, we tested the effects of such political comedy and the influence of social pressure in a simulated Facebook environment ( $N = 189$ ). Participants in this experiment were asked to view a video clip from Oliver's show (high or low salience topic) and in two of the four conditions, a series of Facebook comments contradicting Oliver's views (as a form of social pressure) were provided. Results support a message-consistent persuasive effect of political comedy for both high and low salience issues but finds that message-incongruent commentary reduces this persuasive effect. Thus, the current study provides further insight regarding persuasive effects of sharing political information on social media and new opportunities for exposing entertainment seekers to politics.

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### 1. Introduction

On August 9, 2014 in the St. Louis suburb of Ferguson, Missouri, Michael Brown, an unarmed black teenager, was shot dead by Darren Wilson, a young, white police officer (Clarke & Lett, 2014). As protests broke out and the Ferguson police responded, the incident escalated into a national conversation on police militarization and racial tensions. A week after the event, British political satirist John Oliver used his weekly HBO show, *Last Week Tonight*, to discuss the incident in a 15-min video essay that addressed racial inequality in criminal justice and the militarization of the police. The next day, Oliver's segment was shared virally through social media and major online news outlets. Salon Magazine made the video a *Must-See Morning Clip* (Gupta, 2014) while Vox said the video was, “exactly as angry and hilarious as you might want it to be” in their post (VanDerWerff, 2014; para. 1). Time Magazine shared the video with the headline, *Watch John Oliver Deliver a Flawless Takedown of the Turmoil in Ferguson* (Dodds, 2014). To date, Oliver's video has reached well over seven million online views,

over 65,000 YouTube ‘likes’, and has over 7000 YouTube comments (Last Week Tonight, 2014b).

A week prior to his essay on the events in Ferguson, Oliver tackled payday lending and highlighted the controversy surrounding this industry. According to the Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation (FDIC), payday lending is characterized as, “small-dollar, short-term, unsecured lending to borrowers typically experiencing cash flow difficulties” (Hodson, Owens, & Fritts, 2003; para. 1), and Oliver classifies the industry as one of the most resilient (Last Week Tonight, 2014a). Although this practice has provided banks with growth opportunities, the FDIC identifies a number of risks associated with interest rates, state regulations, and fraud. In his essay, Oliver claims that one in twenty households has taken out a payday loan at some point (Last Week Tonight, 2014a). Despite having almost six million views, Oliver's essay on payday lending did not receive as much coverage as his Ferguson essay.

The viral success of videos such as these caused *The Huffington Post* to deem Oliver's *Last Week Tonight* 2014's best show. In explaining this designation, Jacobs (2014) called the show “the online water-cooler” and stated that it fulfills viewers' need for “scrutiny instead of reaction.” Oliver was also included in Time's list of *Top 10 Shows of 2014*, where his ability to go viral was highlighted (Poniewozik, 2014). *New York Times* writer David Carr praised the

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success of the show by explaining the brilliance of HBO's move to post clips of his program on YouTube to gain an audience beyond the 4-million television viewers (Carr, 2014). Oliver's show represents a nexus in digital media as political comedy and social media combine to create a uniquely potent form of viral video consumption, where viral clips act as talking points for individuals who may not otherwise engage with political media to begin discussing political issues and opinions. Consequently, the overlap of political comedy and social media allow a potential counterpoint to the isolating (Sunstein, 2007) and fragmenting (Prior, 2007) consequences of the digital media revolution on political media consumption.

In what follows, we present an experimental study of the persuasive effects of viral political comedy in a social media environment for both high-salience content, such as the Ferguson controversy, and low-salience content, such as practices of the payday loan industry. This experiment tests the direct persuasive effects of Oliver's political comedy when presented through Facebook and evaluates changes in this direct persuasive effect when Oliver's political comedy is presented in conjunction with hostile comments in a manipulated Facebook environment. Results confirm the direct persuasive effect of political comedy and demonstrate that hostile comments reduce this effect particularly when the subject is a low-salience issue for the viewer. Prior to the presentation of this study, literature on media effects and political comedy are considered.

## 2. Media effects in the digital age

### 2.1. Changing media effects

The modern media landscape has transformed the way people consume political information. In particular, social media consist of websites and applications that allow users to create content, share content, and network socially with a wide variety of people (Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2007). Social media have transformed the political landscape, and such technologies will continue to be a juggernaut for political messages (Hendricks & Schill, 2014). One of the primary outcomes of the digital transformation is that people now have the ability to select content that suits their interests. Media consumers are no longer forced to passively consume whatever content is broadcast on the major networks. Sunstein (2007) warned that the ability to create customized media environments would result in information cocoons in which people were only exposed to perspectives that reinforce their predispositions. However, recent work in selective exposure (Garrett & Stroud, 2014) suggests that people are unlikely to avoid contrary perspectives even if they do have a preference for attitude-congruent information.

Rather than information cocoons, the primary consequence of increased choice in the digital media environment appears to be the ability to opt out of politics altogether. Prior (2007) found that, in a high choice media environment, people who prefer entertainment media to coverage of news and current events are likely to seek entertainment-oriented programming and rarely, if ever, encounter political information. Arceneux and Johnson (2013) explored the implications of the entertainment/news-seeking divide in a series of experiments on media choice and persuasive effects. They found that media effects are strongest among entertainment seekers and, because entertainment seekers are least likely to encounter political media, the authors conclude that political media effects are likely to be minimal in a high choice environment.

The convergence of social media and political comedy provide a possible counter-force to the digital affordance that allows

disinterested users to avoid political information. Though entertainment seekers may not deliberately seek information about politics and current affairs, they may encounter this information inadvertently through entertainment media. For example, Baum (2002) argued that entertainment media could "expand the size of the attentive public" (p. 91) by exposing entertainment-oriented media consumers to information about politics and current affairs. Social media hold the potential to catalyze an even greater expansion of the attentive public through the viral video phenomenon. Specifically, when political comedy is shared through social media and entertainment websites (such as *The Huffington Post* and *Gawker*), people who may not follow politics may be exposed to political comedy through social media.

Contrary to Sunstein's concern about media echo chambers, there is substantial evidence that the Internet in general, and social media in particular, facilitate exposure to diverse political perspectives. Initial research on the Internet suggests that incidental contact with diverse political content is more likely to occur online (Brundidge, 2010). Because exposure to political information (especially heterogeneous political information) often occurs accidentally in spaces not specifically devoted to political conversation (Wojcieszak & Mutz, 2009), humorous content on social media could provide an ideal space for inadvertent exposure to political information as well. This is especially true given the weak ties maintained through social media as users maintain connections with a wider variety of people (Ellison et al., 2007; Hampton, Goulet, Rainie, & Purcell, 2011; McLeod & Lee, 2012). Research on network heterogeneity suggests that social media do encourage encounters with diverse political perspectives (Choi & Lee, 2015; Colleoni, Rozza, & Arvidsson, 2014; Kim, 2011; Lee, Choi, Kim, & Kim, 2014). Though most of the existing research deals with exposure to political difference through social media, it is an encouraging signal that social media may also present uninterested entertainment seekers with opportunities to consume political comedy.

If entertainment seekers who would not deliberately seek out political content encounter it through social media, what are the effects likely to be? Over a decade of research on the educational potential of entertainment media has yielded somewhat mixed results. Entertainment media, especially explicitly political comedy such as *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report*, may increase the political knowledge of viewers (Baek & Wojcieszak, 2009; Baum, 2002; 2003; Feldman, 2013; Hardy, Gottfried, Winneg, & Jamieson, 2014; Kim & Vishak, 2008; LaMarre, 2013; Parkin, 2010), perhaps by increasing attention to traditional news media (Cao, 2010; Feldman & Young, 2008; Xenos & Becker, 2009; Young & Tisinger, 2006). Others, however, have found that direct learning from comedy is quite limited (Baumgartner & Morris, 2011; Hollander, 2005). Though political learning is an important outcome of media use, this study is primarily focused on the persuasive effects of entertainment media on political attitudes.

### 2.2. Persuasive effects of political comedy

Research on the persuasive effects of political comedy demonstrates a fairly consistent direct persuasive effect. Political comedy is best understood not as "fake news," but rather as a form of political dialog that uses parody and satire to critique contemporary news (Baym, 2005). For example, ridicule of Sarah Palin on *Saturday Night Live* reduced evaluations of the vice-presidential candidate (Baumgartner, Morris, & Walth, 2012) and mockery on *The Daily Show* reduced evaluations of both Democrats and Republicans during the 2004 presidential election (Baumgartner & Morris, 2006). *The Daily Show's* coverage of the 2004 nominating conventions only reduced evaluations of Republicans, but Morris (2009)

argues that this was a result of one-sided ridicule rather than differential effects. Research on *The Colbert Report* yielded the only possible contrary finding, as viewers of Colbert's satirical skewering of President Bush and the GOP's march to war with Iraq actually increased support for the war effort (Baumgartner & Morris, 2008), though the authors argued that this finding was likely a result of viewers failing to decode Colbert's irony and warned that the finding may not hold for regular viewers who are familiar with Colbert's character.

Though social media drastically expand the potential audience of political comedy, more than doubling the number of views Oliver's Ferguson segment received, they also present the content in a different environment. First, these videos are divorced of the context of the show. Viewers who are unfamiliar with the style and personality of the program are invited to view a single segment. Baumgartner and Morris' (2008) Colbert study demonstrates the potential complications of out-of-context viewing, as people unfamiliar with the satirical character read the performance literally. Facebook adds another layer of complexity to this issue. Because people are free to comment on the content of the videos, contrary messages can be presented that undermine the claims advanced in the video.

Research on the effects of group communication provides clues for how Facebook comments might alter the direct persuasion of political comedy. Sunstein (2009) summarized decades of research on the influence of social pressure in group discussion dynamics to consider the consequences of online communities. He demonstrated that group discussions influence people through three mechanisms: persuasive arguments (new information is entered into consideration), reputational pressure (people want to fit in and feel uncomfortable being contrarian), and confirmation (the presence of multiple perspectives all echoing the same view creates the impression that the position is legitimate). All of these mechanisms are likely to surface in Facebook discussions of political comedy, as people can present additional information to contradict the claims made by the video. A social media context in particular is designed for user-to-user interactivity, which is dialogic in nature (Tedesco, 2007). The mere presence of dissenting voices will raise the social stakes of agreeing with the video, and the presence of numerous comments that challenge the video will act as disconfirming perspectives.

Another layer of complexity is added by the ambiguous Facebook audience. The audience for a political post on Facebook combines people from multiple social spheres of one's life and, because content posted to social networking sites can be copied, shared, and spread widely, the "real" audience on Facebook is unspecified (Marwick & boyd, 2011; Vraga, Thorson, Kligler-Vilenchik, & Gee, 2015). The networked audience on Facebook combines friends and acquaintances from different social spheres, and this "context collapse" creates potentially uncomfortable pressure from the intersection of competing contexts (Marwick & boyd, 2011). Such diversity in the networked audience enables social norms, which represent individuals' basic knowledge of what others do and what others think they should do (Cialdini, 2003). Due to enhanced diversity on social networks, normative influence in particular may play a strong role in the persuasion process.

Norms are situational or mental representations of appropriate behavior that guide behavior in certain situations (Hogg & Reid, 2006), and they serve as collective representations of acceptable group conduct as well as individual perceptions of group behavior (Lapinski & Rimal, 2005). Normative influence means that people will conform under the direct surveillance of others; conversely, when surveillance of others is removed, people are less likely to conform (Spears & Lea, 1994). Moreover, the unique attributes of a diverse social media network may strengthen the desire to

conform, as Lapinski and Rimal (2005) posit that public behaviors – such as those on Facebook – are more subject to normative influence than private behaviors. Importantly, Stroud, Scacco, Muddiman, and Curry (2014) found that a single individual can affect behavioral norms in an online comment section, and in particular, an opinion leader can affect the quality of comments left by other commenters. Consequently, disconfirming perspectives in the form of Facebook comments can foster strong social cross pressures, which could in turn increase the desire to norm with the commenters. We would thus expect that social pressure working against the persuasive claims of the video would reduce persuasion, though it is unclear whether it would overcome the persuasiveness of the political comedy.

Finally, research on political persuasion has demonstrated that when individuals are highly invested in a topic, they are likely to resist persuasive attempts (Lodge & Taber, 2013). Because strong prior attitudes influence the way new information is evaluated and integrated into memory, people should be resistant to change regarding issues they deem to be high in personal salience. However, if people encounter a topic that they are unfamiliar with, they should have a more difficult time counter-arguing because they lack the information necessary to do so. They should also be less motivated to counter-argue because the issue is of lower personal salience. Based on the aforementioned research and review of literature, we offer three hypotheses:

**H1.** Exposure to political comedy on social media will result in message consistent persuasion.

**H2.** Exposure to Facebook comments contradicting the content of political comedy will reduce the message consistent persuasion of political comedy.

**H3.** Message consistent persuasion from exposure to political comedy will be stronger for low-salience issues than for high-salience issues.

### 3. Method

#### 3.1. Pilot study

A pilot study was conducted to identify high and low salience issues for the experimental manipulation. Participants were recruited from classes at a large Midwestern university and came from a diverse variety of majors. Of those contacted, 87 completed the pilot through a link using the online survey software *Qualtrics*. Participants were asked to rank-order a randomized list of current political issues based on their perceived importance, with 1 as the most important and 9 as the least important. The issues included: Ferguson and race relations in America, Ferguson and police militarization, the death penalty, Dr. Oz and dietary supplements, student debt, payday loans, native advertising, corruption in FIFA, and net neutrality. Student debt was ranked with the highest importance on average ( $M = 2.17$ ,  $SD = 1.59$ ), followed by Ferguson and race relations in America ( $M = 3.99$ ,  $SD = 2.24$ ), Ferguson and police militarization ( $M = 4.19$ ,  $SD = 2.06$ ), the death penalty ( $M = 4.35$ ,  $SD = 2.34$ ), misleading advertising for dietary supplements ( $M = 5.26$ ,  $SD = 2.24$ ), net neutrality ( $M = 5.89$ ,  $SD = 2.45$ ), corruption in FIFA ( $M = 6.33$ ,  $SD = 2.77$ ), payday lending ( $M = 6.38$ ,  $SD = 1.86$ ), and native advertising ( $M = 6.44$ ,  $SD = 2.12$ ). Moreover, 48% of participants ranked both race relations and police militarization among the top three most important issues. Fifty-three percent of participants ranked payday lending among the bottom three least important issues.

Participants were then randomly assigned to one of six long

essay segments from John Oliver's *Last Week Tonight*, each related to the aforementioned issues. After viewing a single video, participants responded to a series of questions regarding the importance of the issue and their attitude on the topic. Participants were again asked to rank-order the randomized list of current political issues based on their perceived importance, with 1 as the most important and 9 as the least important. The topic of student loans was rated as high salience ( $M = 2.34$ ,  $SD = 1.85$ ), while payday lending was among the least salient ( $M = 6.00$ ,  $SD = 2.06$ ). Results of the pilot study indicated that issues of police militarization ( $M = 3.53$ ,  $SD = 2.11$ ) and racial tension ( $M = 3.94$ ,  $SD = 2.24$ ) related to Ferguson were most salient to participants while remaining sufficiently controversial. It was important that issues be controversial so that participants would not all be predisposed to the same position. Though student loans were more salient than Ferguson, we feared there would not be enough diversity of opinion regarding student loans in our student sample. Based on these results, Ferguson and payday lending were selected as the high and low salience subjects to be included in the experiment.

### 3.2. Participants

Participants were recruited from a public speaking course at a major Midwestern university and offered extra credit to participate. None who participated in the pilot were eligible to participate in the experiment. Of the 402 students contacted, 198 elected to participate and 189 complete cases were recorded for analysis. The average age of respondents was 20 ( $SD = 1.16$ ). Of the respondents, 120 (63.5%) identified as female, 68 (36%) identified as male, and 1 (0.5%) withheld a gender identity. One hundred and thirty-nine (73.5%) identified as Caucasian, 26 (13.8%) as African American, nine (4.8%) as Asian, eight (4.2%) as Hispanic/Latino, two (1.1%) as Native American, and five (2.6%) as a race or ethnicity not listed. Of the respondents, 66 (34.9%) identified as Republican, 64 (33.9%) as Democrat, 38 (20.1%) as Independent, and 21 (11.1%) as not affiliated with a major party.

### 3.3. Procedures

A four-group between subjects experiment was conducted to test the hypothesized relationships. Participants were asked to visit a media laboratory to participate in a study throughout November 2014, prior to the Grand Jury decision to not indict Officer Wilson in Ferguson. After completing the online pre-test, *Qualtrics* randomly assigned participants into one of four conditions. In all conditions, participants were presented with a 15-min clip from John Oliver's *Last Week Tonight*. Participants were either exposed to a video about the issues in Ferguson or payday lending. Within each of those conditions, participants were either exposed to the video only, or the video accompanied by Facebook comments that criticized John Oliver and challenged the information he presented in the video. Following video exposure, all participants were prompted to complete some additional information processing tasks that included composing their own Facebook comment and browsing related news articles to assist in formulating their comment. Following this activity, participants responded to questions regarding their attitudes toward Ferguson and payday lending. 45 participants viewed the video about Ferguson and read accompanying comments, 45 viewed the Ferguson video without accompanying comments, 51 viewed the payday lending video with accompanying comments, and 48 viewed the payday lending video without accompanying comments.

### 3.4. Stimulus

The Ferguson video-only condition consisted of a clip from John Oliver's YouTube channel. This video had originally aired on his HBO show roughly a week after the shooting of Michael Brown, and lasted for 15 min and 9 s. Throughout this video, Oliver explored racial inequality in treatment by police as well as the increasing militarization of America's local police forces. In the first portion of the video, Oliver highlighted differences in the ways white community members and black community members describe inter-racial harmony in Ferguson. He decried the different treatment of different racial groups over drug crimes. In the second portion of the video, Oliver described how the Department of Defense had made unnecessary military equipment available to local police communities, such as small towns in New Hampshire. Oliver argued that the police were not soldiers, and they were not properly trained as military members to carry or operate such equipment. Oliver ultimately suggested that police in towns such as Ferguson should be de-militarized.

The Ferguson video with comments condition included the above video as well as a series of comments. Facebook comments following the Ferguson clip were in response to the two issues: racial tensions and police militarization. Comments were largely in opposition to John Oliver's arguments. Some commenters defended the actions of the police, opining that the police have a difficult job and sometimes need to make difficult decisions. Other commenters claimed that riots in small town America were serious enough to warrant police militarization. Regarding racial tensions, some commenters claimed to be from the St. Louis area, and informed readers that they had not observed any major racial tensions during their time living there. Other commenters attacked Oliver's arguments, claiming that he was making faulty analogies. All comments were composed by the researchers and were designed to present an information challenge to the video. In an effort to improve external validity, comments were designed to mimic the tone and style of Facebook discourse commonly observed by the researchers. A complete transcript of the comments following the Ferguson video is provided in [Appendix A](#).

The payday loan video-only condition consisted of a 16 min and 31 s clip from John Oliver's YouTube channel. The video centers on the practices of payday loan companies that have received recent scrutiny for questionable business practices. Oliver critiqued that while these companies claim to help people who need quick cash, in actuality, they enable a "circle of debt." Oliver provided evidence of exorbitant interest rates and hidden fees in the fine print that were difficult to understand prior to taking out a payday loan. Additionally, Oliver claimed that the payday loan industry was particularly skilled at avoiding governmental regulation.

The payday loan plus comments condition included the above video as well as a series of comments. Facebook comments following the payday loan clip were largely in opposition to John Oliver's arguments. Several commenters claimed that payday borrowers were at fault for their financial problems. Some commenters expressed that the borrowers' problems stemmed from their own irresponsibility, as opposed to the practices of the payday loan industry. Other commenters commended the payday loan industry for providing Americans with a much-needed service for those in need of quick cash. A complete transcript of the Facebook comments following the payday loans video is provided in [Appendix B](#).

### 3.5. Variables and measures

#### 3.5.1. Issue attitudes

Attitudes toward payday lending, police militarization, and racial tension were measured using 3-item scales developed by the

researchers to reflect the positions presented by the video and commenters. Participants responded on a 7-point agreement scale, with 1 indicating “strongly disagree” and 7 indicating “strongly agree.” The payday lending attitude scale ( $M = 4.87$ ,  $S.D. = 1.26$ , skewness =  $-0.27$ , kurtosis =  $-0.46$ ,  $\alpha = 0.71$ ) included three items: “Payday loans are a legitimate business-it’s not their fault if irresponsible borrowers get into trouble with debt,” “Payday lenders prey on the poor and vulnerable,” and “Substantial regulations are needed to stop the abusive payday loan industry.” The political militarization scale ( $M = 4.14$ ,  $S.D. = 1.59$ , skewness =  $-0.18$ , kurtosis =  $-1.06$ ,  $\alpha = 0.82$ ) included three items: “The police are too violent and militarized,” “The police should use whatever they need-military equipment included-to keep us safe,” and “The police treat citizens like enemies in a war.” Lastly, the racial tension scale ( $M = 3.87$ ,  $S.D. = 1.84$ , skewness =  $0.03$ , kurtosis =  $-1.14$ ,  $\alpha = 0.90$ ) included three items: “The shooting in Ferguson proves that black youth are not safe from police violence,” “The officer that shot Michael Brown in Ferguson was just doing his best in a tough situation,” and “If we learn anything from Ferguson, it’s that black life is not appropriately valued in America.”

### 3.6. Analytic procedures

All hypotheses were tested in structural equation modeling (SEM) using the *Lavaan* software developed by Rosseel (2012) for the *R* ecosystem. SEM was chosen because it is a way to merge factor analysis and path analysis into one comprehensive statistical methodology (Holbert & Stephenson, 2002). Furthermore, SEM was used due to the ability to correct measurement error in latent variables and analyze weighted means (Little, 2013).

## 4. Results

To test the hypotheses, we first specified a multiple group measurement model with attitudes toward racial tensions, attitudes toward police militarization, and attitudes toward payday lending as the latent variables. The between subjects grouping variable was the experimental condition assigned to the participant. Most SEM identification procedures (i.e. marker variable and fixed factor) do not allow the estimation of latent means or latent variances because, with the marker variable method, the reproduced mean is simply the mean of the item selected as the marker and, with the fixed factor method, the latent mean is fixed to zero. However, Little, Slegers, and Card (2006) developed an effects coding procedure to generate weighted latent means and latent variances that are corrected for measurement error. Using this procedure, we generated latent means and standard deviations for each of the four groups. Latent means on the three attitude variables are presented in Table 1. The multiple group model fit the data well,  $\chi^2(24) = 37.383$ ,  $p < 0.05$ , RMSEA = 0.054 (0.012–0.087), CFI = 0.985, NNFI/TLI = 0.978, SRMR = 0.040.

Equality constraints can be used to test for significant mean differences between groups in an SEM framework (Little et al., 2006). The model in which all latent means are freely estimated

will always fit the data better (have a lower chi-square value) than the model in which the latent means are constrained to be equal across groups. The reduction in model fit from the equality constraint will result in an increase in chi-square and this chi-square change can be evaluated for significance to determine if the equality constraint is tenable (no significant differences) or if the constraint significantly reduces model fit relative to unconstrained model (significant differences exist). Three omnibus tests were conducted to determine if the experimental groups expressed different latent attitudes. There were significant differences between experimental conditions in attitudes about police militarization ( $\Delta \chi^2(3) = 26.06$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), racial tensions ( $\Delta \chi^2(3) = 10.18$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ), and payday lending ( $\Delta \chi^2(3) = 24.55$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ).

Because the experiment randomly assigned participants to four groups (Ferguson video only; Ferguson video plus comments; payday loan video only; payday loan video plus comments) and all respondents reported attitudes about all three variables, those who watched the payday loan video serve as a control group for the Ferguson attitudes and those who watched the Ferguson video serve as a control group for payday lending attitudes. Because there were two control groups for each attitude (video only; video plus comments), pairwise comparisons between the two control groups were conducted to assess the effectiveness of random assignment. Those in the two payday loan conditions should not have different attitudes about Ferguson, and indeed pairwise comparisons confirmed that attitudes about police militarization ( $\Delta \chi^2(1) = 0.32$ , *n.s.*) and racial discrimination ( $\Delta \chi^2(1) = 0.6$ , *n.s.*) were not significantly different in the two payday loan conditions, nor were attitudes about payday lending ( $\Delta \chi^2(1) = 0.66$ , *n.s.*) significantly different in the two Ferguson conditions.

The constrained latent mean from the two control conditions was used as a single reference for pairwise comparisons to test the hypotheses. In other words, to determine if the Ferguson video persuaded viewers about police militarization, the latent mean for attitudes about police militarization in the Ferguson video-only condition was compared to the combined latent mean from both payday loan conditions. All latent means are presented in Table 1.

Upon establishing our model fit and ensuring randomization, we tested the hypotheses. The first hypothesis predicted that exposure to political comedy through social media would result in message-consistent persuasion. The experimental design provides three tests of this: attitude change about police militarization, racial discrimination, and payday lending as a result of exposure to either the Ferguson video or the payday loan video. Relative to the two payday loan conditions, those who watched the Ferguson video without comments had attitudes significantly more in agreement with Oliver on both police militarization ( $\Delta \chi^2(1) = 22.05$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) and racial discrimination ( $\Delta \chi^2(1) = 9.09$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ). Those who watched the payday loan video without comments had attitudes significantly more in agreement with Oliver relative to those in the two Ferguson conditions ( $\Delta \chi^2(1) = 22.49$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). Consistent with H1, there is strong evidence of message-consistent persuasion in all three cases.

The second hypothesis predicted that the persuasiveness of the

**Table 1**  
Latent mean scores for issue Attitudes.

Condition	Payday lending $M$ ( $SD$ )	Racial tension $M$ ( $SD$ )	Militarization $M$ ( $SD$ )
Payday- Video	5.50 (0.93) <sup>bcd*</sup>	3.40 (0.85) <sup>cd***</sup>	3.50 (1.28) <sup>cd***</sup>
Payday- Video + Comments	5.00 (0.89) <sup>cd**</sup>	3.70 (1.79)	3.70 (1.45)
Ferguson- Video	4.50 (1.19)	4.50 (1.58)	5.00 (1.26) <sup>ab**</sup>
Ferguson- Video + Comments	4.40 (0.90)	4.10 (1.58) <sup>ab**</sup>	4.50 (1.40) <sup>ab**</sup>

Note: a = Payday-Video; b = Payday-Video + Comments; c = Ferguson-Video; d = Ferguson-Video + Comments.

Note: \* = significant at 0.05; \*\* = significant at 0.01; \*\*\* = significant at 0.001.

video would be reduced by the presence of commenters who dispute Oliver's arguments. There are three possible outcomes that are consistent with this hypothesis: the comments could persuade readers to disagree with Oliver more than those in the control conditions (reverse the persuasive effect), they could completely eliminate the persuasive effect of the video but not change attitudes relative to control groups, or they could minimize but not eliminate the persuasive effect of the video. There were three tests of H2, one for attitudes about police militarization, one for attitudes about racial tensions, and one for attitudes about payday lending.

Attitudes about police militarization were still more in agreement with Oliver relative to the control conditions ( $\Delta \chi^2(1) = 10.05$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ) and, though lower, were not significantly different than the video only viewers ( $\Delta \chi^2(1) = 2.01$ , *n.s.*). The reduced mean score in the comments condition is consistent with social persuasion but the lack of a significant difference between the two Ferguson conditions suggests either that this difference was incidental or that we were underpowered to detect the smaller effect of social persuasion.

Differences between attitudes about racial discrimination in the Ferguson comments condition and the control conditions were only marginally significant ( $\Delta \chi^2(1) = 2.97$ ,  $p = 0.09$ ), but there were not even marginal differences between attitudes about racial discrimination in the video only versus video plus comments condition ( $\Delta \chi^2(1) = 1.52$ ,  $p = 0.22$ ). As can be seen in Table 1, attitudes about racial discrimination in the comments condition were between attitudes in the video only condition and control attitudes. Neither difference was large enough for us to detect significance but it appears, as with attitudes about police militarization, attitudes about racial discrimination in the comments condition were closer to the video condition than the control conditions. This is consistent with a small effect of social pressure; although, as with the above, we cannot rule out the possibility that mean differences are a function of chance.

There was more evidence of social persuasion regarding attitudes about payday lending. Those who both viewed the video and read comments were significantly more in agreement with Oliver relative to the control conditions ( $\Delta \chi^2(1) = 7.46$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ) but significantly less in agreement relative to those who only watched the video ( $\Delta \chi^2(1) = 4.60$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ). In other words, the Oliver video persuaded viewers to be more critical of payday lending but the contrarian comments reduced the size of this effect. This finding is the most consistent with the hypothesized effect of social pressure on Facebook. In all, there is only partial support for H2. As can be seen in Fig. 1, the nature and direction of the relationships are the same for all three attitudes. The video alone exerts a direct persuasive effect but this effect is reduced by the presence of

contradictory comments. However, we cannot be certain that this effect is not a product of chance regarding attitudes about Ferguson.

The third hypothesis predicted that the persuasiveness would be a function of issue salience. Specifically, the more salient issue (Ferguson) was expected to be less subject to change whereas the less salient issue (payday lending) would be associated with weaker and less certain attitudes and therefore more subject to persuasion. However, inspection of the latent means suggested no support for this hypothesis. In each case exposure to the video alone was associated with nearly 1-point more agreement with Oliver on a 7-point agreement scale, and the video plus contrary comments was associated with a 0.5 increase in agreement relative to the control. This was the case for low salience attitudes (payday lending), high salience attitudes (Ferguson and police militarization), and high salience, high sensitivity attitudes (Ferguson and racial discrimination). In short, no support was found for H3. Mean differences for all three attitudes are presented in Table 1.

## 5. Discussion

One of the most profound consequences of the digital media revolution has been to provide people the option of opting out of the political conversation (Prior, 2007). Because those most interested in politics are least likely to be affected by political media (Arceneux & Johnson, 2013), one consequence of the evolving media landscape is a reduction in media effects on political attitudes. However, when political comedy and social media converge, entertainment seekers may find themselves accidentally exposed to persuasive information. The results of our experiment demonstrate that exposure to political comedy through Facebook can influence attitudes. Because comedy may bait entertainment seekers into consuming political information, and because social media facilitate unintended exposure to political comedy, this convergence acts as a counterforce to the limitation on media effects ushered in by the high choice era. The following discussion will consider the theoretical implications of these findings as well as the limitations of this study and directions for future research.

The first hypothesis predicted that exposure to political comedy through social media would result in message-consistent persuasion. There was strong evidence of persuasion for attitudes toward police militarization, racial discrimination, and payday lending. These results are consistent with past research that found message-consistent persuasion from political comedy (Baumgartner & Morris, 2006; 2008; Baumgartner et al., 2012; Morris, 2009). These findings also extend previous research by demonstrating that the effects of political comedy can go beyond ridicule and can shape

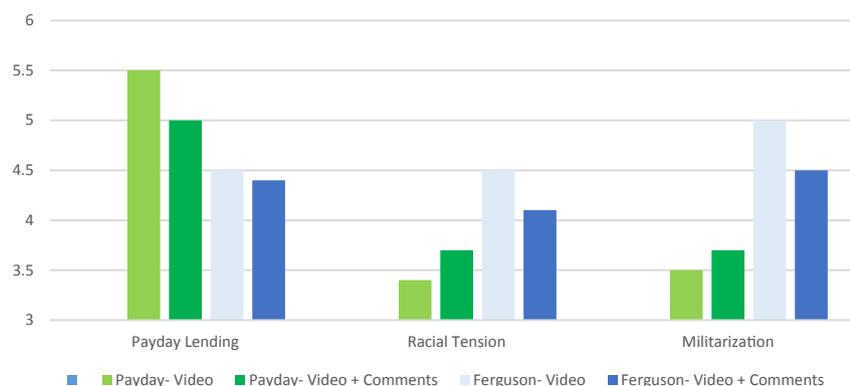


Fig. 1. Latent mean scores for issue Attitudes.

attitudes on issues of social controversy as well.

These findings demonstrate that political comedy may act as a counter-weight to the limited media effects that result from the high choice digital environment. Arceneux and Johnson (2013) argue that persuasive media effects should be limited because those who consume political messages are the most interested, the most informed, and thus the most motivated and able to resist persuasion. However, Arceneux and Johnson (2013) found message consistent effects of partisan media on entertainment seekers. They argue that these effects should be uncommon because entertainment seekers will be the least likely to use partisan media. Political comedy is distinct from partisan media because entertainment seekers may be motivated to view a video by the promise of humor. This is especially likely if a Facebook friend shares the video with an endorsement of the entertainment value of the content. Because these entertainment-oriented viewers will be less politically sophisticated, they will be less motivated and less able to resist the persuasion embedded in the videos. As a result, social media sharing of political comedy may be a unique source of new media effects.

The second hypothesis predicted that the persuasiveness of political comedy in a social media environment would be influenced by the presence of commenters who disputed Oliver's arguments. As Sunstein (2009) has argued, online communities provide opportunities for group pressure to influence political attitudes, and social norms in online public spaces add extra complexity due to competing social contexts within the Facebook audience (Marwick & Boyd, 2011; Vraga et al., 2015). In the simulated group discussion, people encounter new information, confirming or disconfirming voices, and reputational incentives to conform to the dominant perspective. There was mixed support for the influence of social pressure. In all three cases, the difference from the control group was almost twice as large for the video only condition. However, only some of these differences were statistically significant using conventional standards. The most obvious interpretation of the data is that the comments diluted the persuasive effect of the video. In line with Warner and Neville-Shepard (2014), an interruption to a persuasive message online has the potential to minimize the message's persuasive effect. However, beyond dissenting social media commenters, it appears a more robust mechanism is necessary to reverse or eliminate persuasion altogether.

The third hypothesis predicted that the persuasiveness would be a function of issue salience. Specifically, we predicted that the more salient issues of racial tension and police militarization would be less subject to change, whereas the less salient issue of payday lending would be more subject to persuasion. However, there was no support for this hypothesis. Attitudes about racial tension and police militarization were not more resistant to change. This is contrary to the findings in Lodge and Taber (2013) work on motivated reasoning that demonstrates biased processing of high salience issues. However, this result may be unique to political comedy shared on social media. Because many users are entertainment oriented, they may not have the necessary information to counter-argue even if they are motivated (e.g., Arceneux & Johnson, 2013). Furthermore, the cognitive effort required to decode political humor may disrupt argument scrutiny, making counter-arguing more difficult (Young, 2008). In other words, social media viewing of political comedy may be uniquely persuasive because comedy is more difficult to counter-argue and the audience is less equipped with the information required to develop counterarguments.

### 5.1. Limitations

Although this study was designed and conducted based on

previous experimental research, it is not without limitations. First, the Ferguson case was salient but was not as controversial as expected in the experimental sample. We may not have been able to detect counter-arguing because there were not enough participants who possessed strongly held attitudes on the issues prior to social media exposure. Moreover, one of the disadvantages of our post-test only design is we did not account for prior attitudes based on processing. It would have been beneficial to have such a measure, and as a result, this is a limitation of the study. Furthermore, because there were two related issues in the Ferguson condition, some participants were more ambivalent because attitudes toward issues were not parallel with one another. For example, a participant may have indicated that racial tension was an important problem but did not feel that the Ferguson police needed to be de-militarized. Second, though our experimental design attempted to mimic Facebook as closely as possible, none of our hypothetical commenters were actual members of our participants' weak networks. So though we attempted to replicate social pressure, the actual influence of the comment of a trusted and respected friend would surely be greater. Third, though we attempted to generate comments that were similar in tone and persuasive content for each condition, it is possible that the hypothetical rebuttals to the payday lending video were more persuasive than the comments attached to the Ferguson video.

Finally, we did not compare the effects of political comedy to similar videos in traditional news media so we cannot be sure any specific persuasive effect is a result of the humorous presentation of the content. Our study focuses on political comedy not because it may be more or less persuasive, but because it may lure entertainment-seeking audiences with the promise of humor. However, some of our findings are suggestive of a unique persuasive effect of comedy that may be attributed to Young's (2008) finding that argumentative scrutiny is reduced when viewing political comedy. An experiment that compares counter-arguing political comedy (of which we found no evidence) with counter-arguing traditional media could investigate the possibility of a persuasive effect unique to political comedy.

### 5.2. Future directions

Because there are individual differences in the effort people exert when processing messages, we should not assume that the persuasive effect observed here is uniform for all viewers. Future research should investigate the role need for cognition plays in the persuasive effects of online environments. Individuals who possess a high need for cognition are not only much more adept than others at dissecting arguments, but they are also more skilled in generating their own counterarguments. Future research should also explore the assumption here that the lure of humor will invite entertainment-seekers to consume political comedy when it is presented to them through social media. Though there is extensive research on the role of social media in fostering political heterogeneity (Choi & Lee, 2015; Colleoni et al., 2014; Kim, 2011; Lee et al., 2014), more needs to be done to determine whether disinterested users unintentionally encounter political information on their social media environments and, if so, whether humor increases their motivation to view and process the information. Additionally, this study only investigated the possible reduction in persuasive effects caused by contradictory comments. Future research should investigate the possibility that the persuasive effect of political comedy can be amplified by message-consistent Facebook comments. Finally, each social media platform provides unique opportunities for user interaction. This study demonstrated how the dialogic

opportunities presented by Facebook influence the persuasive effects of political comedy. However, other social media such as YouTube and Twitter present different styles of user engagement that may limit or alter the effects observed here. Research on differing styles of user engagement, individual posts, and posts by strong ties and weak ties alike could lead to diverse results (Pennington, Winfrey, Warner, & Kearney, 2015). Future research should investigate the effects of other social media platforms.

## 6. Conclusion

One of the major consequences of the digital media revolution has been to allow people to use media that conforms to their prior interests. Because many people are not actively interested in politics, the current media environment allows many people to avoid political information (Prior, 2007) and therefore limits the possible effects of political news to the most politically sophisticated and thus most resistant to media effects (Arceneux & Johnson, 2013). The experiment presented here suggests that the combination of social media and political comedy may act as a counter-force. However, though political comedy is persuasive, it is also embedded in a virtual group discussion that has the potential to reduce these effects. Entertainment seekers may be more likely to encounter political information disguised as entertainment and recommended by friends in their social networks. These incidental encounters with political information clearly have the potential to influence the attitudes of these entertainment seekers. However, the nature of this effect is also influenced by subsequent communication through social media. This study demonstrates that, as our media environment continues to evolve, new opportunities for interrelated media effects will emerge.

### Appendix A. Transcript of John Oliver Ferguson condition comments.

Ellen Lorenz: A curfew makes them feel tired of being treated as criminals? They ARE being criminals!!!

Naomi D'Urso: You can tell there is more going on in that story and in that community than you get from the video. There are parts of St. Louis that are really dangerous. I wouldn't want to have to deal with that danger every day. I'm sure the same is true for Saginaw. Some cities have gotten really bad.

Tom Kline: Those guys from Michigan were total bros. I bet \$100 they were stoned when they shot that video.

Lea Gritti: lol "if you are getting high in your dorm room right now, there is a SWAT team outside and they are coming to get you"

Francis Lavoie: ... where is Ferguson?

Lea Gritti: It's right outside of St. Louis. I grew up in St. Louis (well, outside) and I never noticed all this racial tension John Oliver is talking about. People in my high school were cool about that kinda stuff.

Jonathan Lucht: Comparing racial tension to penguins? Seriously?

Fiona McDowell: Why does the police force have to mirror the community exactly in diversity? Race only matters to racists. So don't hire racist cops and no big deal.

Tom Kline: I don't know why people only talk about the small number of police who might be racist. 99% of cops are good people who treat people fair regardless of their race. They do a hard job and get a bad name because the media only focus on the 1% of bad ones.

Devashish Forrer: It is CLEAR that the police force has to be militarized! I am glad our police have all the resources they need to keep us safe. Businesses and the people who run them should not

have to suffer. Just look at this – [Business forced to close during Ferguson riots suing state].

Ellen Lorenz: I hate that they blame the police on these issues. That's a hard job and it's dangerous. My dad is a police officer and has to make hard decisions every day and every time there is a bad situation we act like this is all the police do. It's his job to keep people safe.

Seth Barnes: I personally feel safer knowing that our cops have the equipment they need to handle people like the shooters in body armor and the terrorists that bomb marathons. He joked about the tank for the pumpkin festival but there was a RIOT at the festival this year! [Frats Clash With Riot Police at Keene, N.H., Pumpkin Festival].

### Appendix B. Transcript of John Oliver payday loan condition comments.

Ellen Lorenz: There are more payday loans stores than McDonalds. That's crazy. It sounds like a successful business to me. Give the people what they want.

Francis Lavoie: Even borrowers who are in debt think that payday loans are helpful and continue to make the choice to borrow. No one is forcing them to borrow money – Sarah Silverman even highlights a number of options ... some more realistic than others.

Naomi D'Urso: Exactly! Some people don't have other options and need a payday loan. Just pay it back when you get paid – LIKE THE NAME SAYS – and you won't have any problems. My uncle got into trouble with payday loans. My parents had to bail him out. He's kinda a deadbeat though. There is a reason poor people are poor – bad decision making. It's not my job to worry about them.

Devashish Forrer: It is the responsibility of the borrowers to keep from getting trapped in debt. Oliver points out that borrowers are re-borrowing before their next paycheck. Why would they knowingly re-borrow before their next paycheck? Think twice about paying that fancy smart phone instead of your oil change!

Seth Barnes: Sarah Silverman is amazing.

Lea Gritti: Of course John Oliver wants more regulation. Do you think it's because he's British or because he's a liberal? Seriously, why do all Europeans think government needs to be the solution? I'm sure, if Obama had his way, there would be a whole Payday Loan Czar to regulate everything. [*Choking Capitalism: Small biz strangled by regulation*].

Tom Kline: If there really is a payday loan store on every corner, just go to the one with the lowest interest rate. If borrowers paid attention to the fine print they would go to the best stores and competition would solve the problem by itself. That's how capitalism works. Don't buy bad products and they go away!!!

Francis Lavoie: It would be hard for you to understand if you don't have a credit card – some people don't have the ability to sign up for credit cards. Payday loans provide a legitimately helpful service for them. Just check out "The Truth About Payday Loans": [*The Truth About Payday Loans* | [Credit.com](http://Credit.com)].

Lea Gritti: Just be responsible.

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