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To cite this article: Freddie J. Jennings, Josh C. Bramlett & Benjamin R. Warner (2019) Comedic Cognition: The Impact of Elaboration on Political Comedy Effects, *Western Journal of Communication*, 83:3, 365-382, DOI: [10.1080/10570314.2018.1541476](https://doi.org/10.1080/10570314.2018.1541476)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/10570314.2018.1541476>



Published online: 05 Nov 2018.



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# Comedic Cognition: The Impact of Elaboration on Political Comedy Effects

Freddie J. Jennings, Josh C. Bramlett,  
& Benjamin R. Warner

*Political comedy has become an integral component of the political information environment. Though a great deal has been learned about the informative and persuasive effects of political comedy, the medium continues to evolve. John Oliver's Last Week Tonight presents heavily researched segments about issues that are often neglected in more traditional media. In the following study, we draw on the Elaboration Likelihood framework to argue that these long-form/low-salience segments challenge existing assumptions about the way people process political comedy. Specifically, we argue that effortful processing will enhance information acquisition and persuasion, that the social/sharing nature of the evolving media ecosystem will influence these effects, and that outcomes will be conditioned by an individual's affinity for political humor. Results from a randomized experiment support these conclusions.*

*Keywords:* Affinity for Political Humor; Elaboration Likelihood Model; John Oliver; Media Effects; Political Comedy

Political comedy has emerged as a significant contributor to the political information environment. *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* and *The Colbert Report* were especially prominent in establishing the relevance of political comedy in the U.S. media landscape

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(Amarasingam, 2011; Jones, 2010). For the past decade, the study of political humor has focused heavily on the comedy of Stewart and Colbert (e.g., Baumgartner & Morris, 2008; Baym, 2005; Feldman, 2013; Jones, 2010). In 2015, Stewart retired from *The Daily Show* to be replaced by Trevor Noah, and *The Colbert Report* was replaced by Larry Wilmore's *The Nightly Show* when Colbert moved to *The Late Show* on CBS. In the wake of this transition, *The Daily Show* alumnus John Oliver garnered national attention for his weekly HBO show, *Last Week Tonight* (Helmores, 2014). His program has been praised as among the best satirical comedy programs on television (Purcell, 2017) and won the Emmy for outstanding variety talk series in 2016 and 2017 over more traditional comedy programs like *The Tonight Show* and *The Late Show*.

Oliver's show is distinct when compared to other forms of political comedy because it features deep dives (as they are called on the show) that devote 15–25 minutes exclusively to one topic that has been thoroughly investigated by a staff of researchers (Blake, 2015; Purcell, 2017). What makes these deep dives even more unique is that they often focus on low-salience issues that receive little attention in the traditional press (Blake, 2015; Kenny, 2014; Purcell, 2017). For example, Oliver has covered issues such as payday lending, bail reform, and international elections in his long-form deep dives—issues that are not well known and that do not clearly invite partisan motivated reasoning. Though previous studies (e.g., Baumgartner & Morris, 2008; Feldman, 2013; Kim & Vishak, 2008) have found that viewers engage in low-information processing of comedic messages, where cursory analysis is employed and less cognitive effort is expended, it is possible that Oliver's information-rich segments about low-salience issues could lead to more active engagement with the message.

This study expands our understanding of political humor by illustrating that some existing findings—namely that political comedy requires minimal cognitive processing to inform and persuade viewers—are perhaps effects of contextual features of previous political comedy (namely *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report*). Many existing findings may be a feature of the content of earlier political comedy which focused on highly polarized topics (e.g., presidential elections, the Iraq war), often covered stories that regularly appear in traditional media, and rarely devoted more than a few minutes to any given topic. Because Oliver's deep dives deviate from all three of these features, they provide an opportunity to test whether information-rich and lengthy political comedy can result in persuasion and information acquisition through effortful processing. This study also capitalizes on the increasingly social nature of the digital media environment to consider how sharing comedic videos might influence the effects of political comedy. Finally, we consider the important role of an individual's affinity for political humor in conditioning the effects of political comedy. In what follows, we advance the argument that *Last Week Tonight* is emblematic of an evolution in political comedy, review existing findings on the effects of political comedy to advance theoretical hypothesis, present a randomized experiment that tested these hypotheses, and discuss the results.

### ***Last Week Tonight* and Political Comedy**

Political comedy long predates the contemporary media environment. Its prominence in the U.S. political culture can be traced back to at least the work of Mark Twain and later Will Rogers (Jones, 2010). However, when considering modern political humor, most discussions begin with late-night television monologues featuring one-liners about current events in the news. Baum (2002) argues that network television programs such as *Late Show with David Letterman* provide limited, yet significant political information to viewers. The emergence of mock-cable news formats on *The Daily Show* and *Colbert Report* were different from programs such as *The Late Show* or *The Tonight Show* because they were politics-centric programs that discussed news beyond the set-up/punch-line format of traditional late-night monologues (Jones, 2010). These programs have been found to influence political learning (Hardy, Gottfried, Winneg, & Jamieson, 2014; LaMarre, 2013; Warner, Hawthorne, & Hawthorne, 2015; Xenos & Becker, 2009), interest and efficacy (Becker, 2011), attitude formation (Greenwood, Sorenson, & Warner, 2016; Kim & Vishak, 2008; Warner et al., 2015), cynicism (Baumgartner & Morris, 2006), and participation (Cao & Brewer, 2008).

While Stewart and Colbert are no longer on Comedy Central, *Daily Show* alumni Samantha Bee and John Oliver currently host political comedy shows on cable TV alongside Trevor Noah's revamped *Daily Show*. *Saturday Night Live* alumnus Seth Meyers has transformed *Late Night* into a politics-heavy program with a format that has characteristics of both *The Daily Show* and SNL's "Weekend Update." With Meyers and Stephen Colbert (*The Late Show*) on the broadcast networks and Oliver, Bee, and Noah on cable TV, the current late-night entertainment landscape is rife with politics-centric comedy.

This transformation of the political comedy landscape has occurred within a hybrid media environment that allows people to get political news from sources outside of the traditional network platforms (Baym, 2010; Chadwick, 2013). Young viewers, in particular, are more likely than older viewers to watch entertainment programs to obtain information and learn about politics (Boukes, Boomgaarden, Moorman, & de Vreese, 2015; Gottfried, Barthel, Shearer, & Mitchell, 2016; Hollander, 2005). Consequently, individuals who are not actively seeking information when watching entertainment programs may still acquire political information because the program they are viewing provides incidental exposure to the news (Baum, 2002). Therefore, individuals who typically pay little attention to politics may be especially likely to learn from entertainment media (Cao, 2010). Having said this, young people who view political comedy programs with the objective of obtaining information about current events and politics learn more than individuals with strictly entertainment-oriented motives (Feldman, 2013).

Much existing research on political comedy has focused on what might be called short-form comedy. For example, Baum (2002) studied exposure to Jay Leno's and David Letterman's nightly monologues. While these monologues frequently covered the same issue over a protracted period of time, the set-up/punch-line format meant

that only surface-level information was presented. Similarly, although Stewart's *The Daily Show* provided more depth and context, segments were often montages of news coverage and focused on daily headlines. Hence, research suggests that even *The Daily Show* resulted in only modest information acquisition (Baumgartner & Morris, 2006; Hollander, 2005; Kim & Vishak, 2008).

We argue, however, that the 2012 election saw an evolution in the televised political comedy landscape that may challenge the view that political comedy can only produce shallow information processing. Stewart and Colbert collaborated on a recurring segment on *The Colbert Report* that featured extended discussions of campaign finance in the post-*Citizens United* legal environment. These segments featured numerous interviews with campaign finance lawyer Trevor Potter, the former chair of the Federal Election Commission and former general counsel to the John McCain presidential campaign in 2000 and 2008. Research about these segments demonstrates that they generated more thoughtful engagement and learning than observed in previous studies of political comedy (Hardy et al., 2014; LaMarre, 2013; Warner et al., 2015). Hardy et al. (2014) called the series "an extended civics lesson" (p. 348) and Colbert's coverage resulted in a Peabody Award (Subramanian, 2012). These segments previewed a change in the structure of political comedy, representing a new phase in what Baym (2010) calls the emergent paradigm of broadcast news. The contemporary television landscape features additional examples of long-form comedy, including Oliver's deep dives on *Last Week Tonight* and Meyers's near daily "Closer Look" segments. As we argue below, these long-form segments may change the way audiences process political comedy.

### *Elaboration*

Though viewers of political comedy are exposed to political information, they may not all process that information in the same way. Petty and Cacioppo (1986) argue that people process information along a continuum from a purely peripheral route—in which information is not directly examined and heuristic cues are used to make decisions about the veracity of the information—to a purely central route—in which they think critically about the message and spend more time elaborating on the information presented. When individuals elaborate on a message, they think through the information and carefully analyze the argument. Petty and Cacioppo posit that high elaboration is a prerequisite to memory-based learning and enduring attitude change. Importantly, individuals are more resistant to persuasion when an issue is of high personal relevance because they are incentivized to counterargue with attitude-discrepant information (Kahan, Peters, Dawson, & Slovic, 2017; Lodge & Taber, 2013). Moreover, individuals tend to have greater knowledge of high-involvement issues, which increases their ability to elaborate (but also counterargue) the message (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986).

Current research suggests that elaboration on messages contained in political comedy is generally low (Baumgartner & Morris, 2008; Kim & Vishak, 2008). However, long-form political comedy may be different because the increased focus on detail and substance may invite greater cognitive elaboration. For example, recent research has demonstrated that Oliver's deep dive on net neutrality resulted in levels of information acquisition that were comparable to news programming about the same topic on ABC (Becker & Bode, 2018). The finding that comedy resulted in levels of learning comparable to traditional news diverges from most past findings (Baumgartner & Morris, 2006; Hollander, 2005; Kim & Vishak, 2008) with the exception of research about Colbert's Super PAC coverage (Hardy et al., 2014; LaMarre, 2013; Warner et al., 2015). Hence, it is possible that previous findings suggesting political comedy resulted in little effortful processing and modest learning may have been a function of the structure of the comedy programs studied rather than a characteristic of news-as-comedy per se.

Similarly, research suggesting that political comedy produces little cognitive elaboration had been tied to research on persuasion through distraction. In this view, political comedy persuades, in part, because people are cognitive misers and, when they devote their cognitive resources to getting the joke, they have fewer resources available to scrutinize the message and develop counterarguments (Young, 2008). Conversely, political comedy could fail to persuade if viewers dismiss the message as "just a joke" (Nabi, Moyer-Gusé, & Byrne, 2007, p. 33). Therefore, Boukes et al. (2015) recommend for political comedians to "not provide too many discounting cues but make clear that although they bring their message in the form of a joke, they are serious about the content" (p. 739). In other words, political comedy can be most persuasive when it is both entertaining and informative.

Though the arguments in political comedy can be discounted by viewers as nothing more than jokes (Nabi et al., 2007), Oliver's deep dives have the potential to disrupt the "discounting cue" because his deep dives are much longer and more thoroughly researched (Kenny, 2014; Suebsaeng, 2014) when compared to traditional political comedy. Hence, arguments on *Last Week Tonight* are presented with a great deal of evidence to support claims, indicating a level of seriousness while still delivering jokes. However, though cognitive elaboration can be associated with little persuasion when viewers counterargue, low salience issues should result in less counterarguing because viewers lack both the ability (in the form of issue-relevant knowledge) and motivation (because a low-salience issue is by definition not central to how a person sees themselves) to counterargue. As a result, elaboration on low-salience issues should result in more attention to the evidence presented. We should therefore expect Oliver's deep dives to be most persuasive when focused on low salience issues that are unlikely to generate counterargument. In fact, Greenwood et al. (2016) found that Oliver's segments about payday lending were more persuasive than his segments on Black Lives Matter protests in Ferguson, Missouri.

To summarize, elaboration on political comedy can result in greater information acquisition when the structure of the comedic messages is more informative (Becker

& Bode, 2018; Hardy et al., 2014; LaMarre, 2013; Warner et al., 2015). Furthermore, greater information acquisition in turn can produce greater persuasion under conditions of greater elaboration if the audience is less motivated and able to counter-argue—as would be the case with low-salience issues (e.g., Greenwood et al., 2016). Hence, we expect, *H1: Higher elaboration on messages in long-form political comedy will be associated with greater a) information acquisition (both recognition and recall) and b) attitude/message congruence.*

Though the relationship between elaboration and information processing is well documented, political comedy is unique precisely because information is delivered in a humorous way. One significant factor that influences how political humor is processed is an individual's affinity for political humor (Hmielowski, Holbert, & Lee, 2011). Hmielowski and colleagues developed a scale to better explain why people consume political comedy (Holbert et al., 2013). We argue that individual differences in affinity for political humor should also influence the effects of viewing political comedy because people who tend to enjoy political comedy will be more open to comedic political messages and more willing to engage the content. Moreover, individuals who view political comedy as a source of both news and entertainment can learn more from it than those who do not share that view (Feldman, 2013). Hence: *H2: Affinity for political humor will be positively associated with a) information acquisition and b) attitude/message congruence.*

### *Framing and Priming*

The hybrid media landscape interacts with the consumption of political comedy in significant ways. As Becker and Waisanen (2013) observed, political comedy has an ability to form online publics. Regarding *Last Week Tonight*, the weekly HBO show averages 4.7 million viewers (Hensch, 2016); however, each deep dive is also posted on *YouTube*. The views of most of Oliver's deep dives on *YouTube* regularly exceed the weekly broadcast ratings of the program. In 2015, only one of 35 videos failed to exceed his average weekly TV rating, and the seven most watched segments on *YouTube* from the season exceeded 10 million views (see Table 1). Making the clips available on *YouTube* allows the videos to be shared on *Facebook*, *Twitter*, or other social media where they often go viral (Zipkin, 2016). Moreover, social media sharing allows clips to have longer shelf lives than one airing on television (Baym, 2010).

The frequent online sharing of political comedy via social media creates opportunities for individuals to frame how the content is presented and prime how it is consumed. As Cacciatore, Scheufele, and Iyengar (2016) note, when logically equivalent information is framed in different ways the effects of the media may differ. In other words, the way a video clip is framed can produce different effects by priming different responses from an audience. When sharing a video on social media, the user's commentary can influence the way another user perceives and processes it. When the content of the clip is the same,

**Table 1** Last Week Tonight's 2015 Deep Dives

Title	Views	Title	Views
Government Surveillance	12,716,720	North Dakota	6,125,271
Televangelists	12,100,900	Paid Family Leave	6,097,164
Sex Education	11,372,153	U.S. Territories	5,969,113
Tobacco	10,026,999	LGBT Discrimination	5,742,165
Migrants and Refugees	8,479,794	Torture	5,647,366
Canadian Election	8,403,266	Public Defenders	5,495,564
Fashion	8,192,426	Bail	5,267,302
Standardized Testing	8,035,910	Municipal Violations	5,247,378
Online Harassment	7,411,070	The IRS	5,151,512
Infrastructure	7,308,608	Daily Fantasy Sports	5,025,260
The NCAA	7,265,092	Pennies	5,017,152
Marketing to Doctors	7,147,117	Washington, DC, Statehood	4,972,381
Chickens	6,827,164	Patents	4,896,958
FIFA II	6,745,460	Elected Judges	4,629,559
Transgender Rights	6,634,351	Mandatory Minimums	4,563,904
Stadiums	6,615,297	Prisoner Reentry	4,480,750
Mental Health	6,359,879	Medicaid Gap	3,577,702
Food Waste	6,354,544		

*Note.* YouTube views were collected on August 16, 2016.

but the portrayal of it through the user's commentary is different, this is a form of equivalence framing (Cacciatore et al., 2016).

Priming describes the process through which an initial message influences the processing of subsequent stimuli (Iyengar & Kinder, 1987; Meyer & Schvaneveldt, 1971; Pan & Kosicki, 1997). Visual cues online can prime the way users process and react to information (Manosevitch, Steinfeld, & Lev-On, 2014). One way the processing of political comedy might be influenced is by priming viewers to perceive the content as primarily entertaining or informative. For example, Feldman (2013) found that learning from The Daily Show differed depending on if viewers thought of it as entertainment or news. Thus, differences in elaboration may not be a result of the content of the political comedy but, instead, audience expectations entering the viewing experience based on the framing of the social media post. This suggests that, as articulated by reversal theory, the orientation of the audience toward a humorous message will constrain or enhance the effects of the message. Reversal theory argues that an individual's motivations and emotion when presented with new information influences the manner in which they process and react to a message. The reversal theory presents four metamotivational states, which can be reversed or changed depending on the moment and context (Apter, 2001, 2007). A telic ("serious," ends-based) motivation implies that a person is engaging in a given activity (i.e., viewing a humorous video) to achieve a specific goal (i.e., learning about the news of the day).



Conversely, a paratelic (“playful,” means-based) motivation implies an activity is undertaken for the value of the activity itself (i.e., to enjoy the video, to be amused, cf. Jung, Hui, Min, & Martin, 2014). Because political comedy often contains both informative and humorous content, either motivation may be utilized. Specifically, frames that emphasize the humorous content of messages may prime a paratelic mindset in which individuals focus on the comedic content, not the underlying message. Conversely, frames that emphasize the informational value of the content may prime a telic mindset, where individuals focus on the arguments and information in the message. Hence, these frames may result in different processing methods and different levels of influence despite the fact that the content of the comedic message is the same. We thus hypothesize, *H3: Telic (serious) framing will increase message elaboration.*

In contrast, use of a paratelic (playful) frame may reduce a viewer’s willingness to elaborate on the information presented in the video, leading him/her to dismisses the content as “just a joke” (Nabi et al., 2007, p. 33). On the other hand, people who enjoy political humor should react differently to being primed by a paratelic frame than those who do not because the frame engages their affinity for political humor. Hence, *H4: Paratelic framing will decrease message elaboration among those low in affinity for political humor.*

## Method

### *Sample and Procedure*

A randomized experiment was conducted in a media lab at a large midwestern university. Participants ( $N = 179$ ) were recruited from basic Communication and Journalism courses. The average age of the participants was 19.8 ( $SD = 2.38$ ). There were 102 females and 77 males in the majority White ( $n = 137$ ; 76.5%) sample. Of these, 39.1% ( $n = 70$ ) identified as Democrats and 40.6% ( $n = 73$ ) as Republicans. Participants completed a pretest that included questions about demographic information as well as a measure of affinity for political humor. They were then randomly assigned to one of three conditions: telic (information) frame, paratelic (entertainment) frame, and control (neutral framing).

### *Stimulus*

Each participant watched a video from John Oliver’s HBO show *Last Week Tonight*, a show billed on HBO’s website with this description: “Comedian John Oliver satirically covers the week in news, politics and current events in this Emmy-winning variety series” (Last Week Tonight with John Oliver, n.d.). The episode focused on the U.S. territories and the rights of the citizens (Last Week Tonight with John Oliver, 2015). In the video, Oliver discussed the rights withheld from the citizens of the five U.S. territories, including the right to vote in federal elections and receive automatic citizenship. Through interviews, personal stories, and commentary, Oliver

provided viewers with information about the history, culture, and the controversy facing the U.S. territories and their residents. The video lasted 13:11 minutes.

In the experiment, participants were presented the video as though it were a Facebook post linking to a BuzzFeed article with an accompanying headline and descriptive blurb. The headline and description were manipulated to create three conditions: one that encouraged a telic (serious) attitude about viewing, one that encouraged a paratelic (playful) attitude about viewing, and a control that did not prime any particular motivational state. In the telic condition, the headline read, "Check out this informative video from John Oliver's show" and the description said, "Political commentator John Oliver delivers an insightful monologue about U.S. territories that provides vital information about the issue. You'll be surprised how much you learn." For the paratelic condition, the headline read, "Check out this hilarious video from John Oliver's show" and the description said "Comedian John Oliver delivers an epic, side-splitting monologue that will have you rolling. Be prepared to laugh!" Finally, the control condition contained the headline, "Check out this video from John Oliver's show," and the description said: "Talk show host John Oliver delivers a monologue about the U. S. Territories." Following the video, participants completed a posttest measuring issue-related learning and message/attitude congruence.

### *Measures*

#### *Affinity for Political Humor*

We utilized Hmielowski et al. (2011) 11-item scale to measure affinity for political humor. Participants were asked to respond on a 7-point Likert-type scale (1 = *strongly disagree*; 7 = *strongly agree*) for items such as "I appreciate political humor because it can make me feel more knowledgeable about politics"; "I appreciate political humor when it helps me make better sense of why our political system is dysfunctional"; "I appreciate political humor because it allows me to be friendly with people who hold political views that are different from my own" ( $M = 4.56$ ,  $SD = 1.03$ ,  $\alpha = .92$ ).

#### *Elaboration*

To measure elaboration, we utilized the Message Elaboration Measure (Reynolds, 1997) that was adapted from a previous measure of mental elaboration (Cacioppo, Petty, & Morris, 1983). The scale consisted of 12 statements (e.g., "While watching the video and reading the comments, were you..." "Doing your best to think about what was said"; "Deep in thought about the arguments made in the comments"; "Reflecting on the implications of the arguments"). Participants responded to each item with their level of agreement with the statement: 1 = *strongly disagree*; 7 = *strongly agree*, ( $M = 5.46$ ,  $SD = .85$ ,  $\alpha = .91$ ).

### *Information Acquisition*

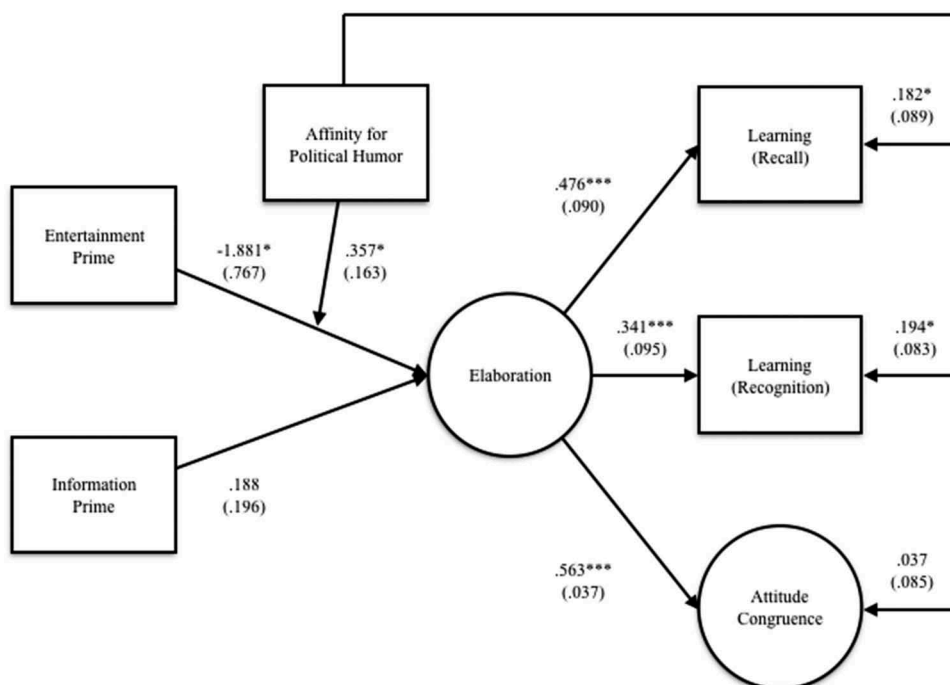
Consistent with past research on learning (Kim & Vishak, 2008; Postman, Jenkins, & Postman, 1948), information acquisition was tested by assessing the recall and recognition of information from the video. Recall was measured with four fill-in-the-blank items with six possible correct responses (“Name three of the U.S. territories (3 answers)”); “What is the main issue for residents of U.S. territories discussed in this video?”; “Which U.S. territory has over a quarter of its land covered by U.S. military bases?”; and “Residents of which U.S. territory are not granted automatic citizenship?”,  $M = 5.14$ ,  $SD = 1.25$ ,  $min. = 0$ ,  $max. = 6$ ). Recognition was measured with five multiple choices items (“Which of these is not a U.S. territory?”; “What year was the Supreme Court ruling, *Downes v. Bidwell*, that established the many rights of U.S. territory residents?”; “Which U.S. territory has the top military recruiting station in the entire U.S. and U.S. territories?”; “How many U.S. territories are there?”; and “What is the population of all the U.S. territories combined?”,  $M = 2.87$ ,  $SD = 1.29$ ,  $min. = 0$ ,  $max. = 5$ ). The two aspects of knowledge acquisition were analyzed separately.

### *Attitude Congruence*

Attitude congruence is a measure of the extent to which participants expressed attitudes similar to those presented in the video. The video focused on rights for citizens of American territories; thus, individuals expressing support for greater rights were more attitudinally congruent. This variable was measured with six items: “Residents of the U.S. territories should be granted citizenship”; “Residents of the U.S. territories should be able to vote in presidential elections”; “U.S. territories should be granted statehood”; “Each U.S. territory should have a representative in Congress (with voting rights)”; “America should overturn the court ruling barring many rights to residents of U.S. territories”; and “Residents in U.S. territories are currently treated fairly” (reverse coded). Participants responded from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*). More support for the rights of the citizens of U.S. territories indicated greater attitude congruence. After watching the video, participants had a mean score of 5.85 ( $SD = .88$ ,  $\alpha = .78$ ).

## **Results**

The hypotheses were tested with a hybrid path model using Maximum Likelihood (ML) estimation in Lavaan developed by Rosseel (2012) for the *R* ecosystem. Path analysis allows researchers to test indirect effects (i.e., the effects of the primes on knowledge acquisition and persuasion via elaboration). The experimental conditions were entered as dichotomous variables (1 = frame present). Elaboration and attitude congruence were specified as latent variables. Latent variables correct for measuring error, providing more precise estimates of theoretical relationships (Kline, 2016). To preserve just-identification, indicators were combined into three parcels for each latent variable (cf. Little, Rhemtulla, Gibson, & Schoemann, 2013). Because recall

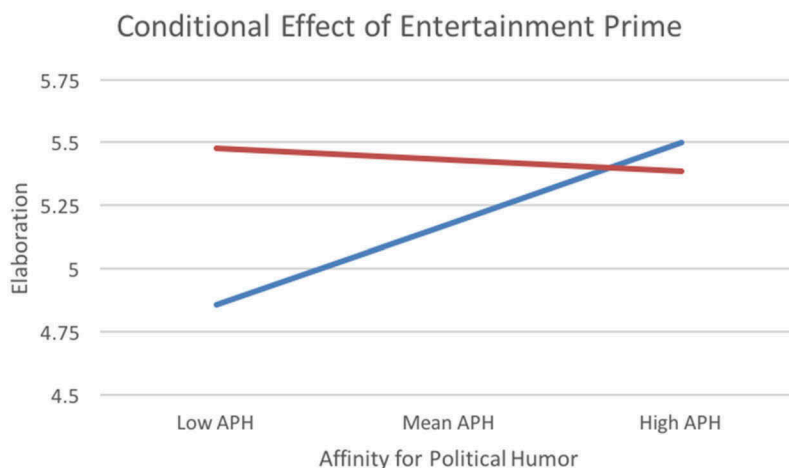


**Figure 1** Final Structural Model.

*Note.* Path model for effects of viewing political comedy. The hybrid model was fit using Maximum Likelihood estimate and included two latent variables: attitude congruence and elaboration. Affinity for political humor was specified as a manifest variable to facilitate interaction analysis. Recall and recognition of information were observed variables. Both attitude congruence and elaboration were parceled to preserve just-identification (see Little et al., 2013 for a discussion of the benefits of this approach). The model fit the data well:  $\chi^2(41) = 54.18$ ,  $p = .081$ , RMSEA = .042 (.000–.070), CFI = .977, NNFI/TLI = .967, SRMR = .037.

and recognition were both composite scores they were specified as manifest variables. Affinity for political humor was entered as a manifest, rather than latent, variable to facilitate interaction analysis. The model fit the data well,  $\chi^2(41) = 54.18$ ,  $p = .081$ , RMSEA = .042 (.000–.070), CFI = .977, NNFI/TLI = .967, SRMR = .037.

Results are displayed in Figure 1. Path estimates represent regression coefficients. Consistent with H1, those who elaborated more on the message were more likely to recall factual information about U.S. territories, were more likely to recognize the correct answers to questions about the U.S. territories, and were more likely to express attitudes that were congruent with the opinions expressed in the video. As predicted in H2, people who had greater affinity for political humor were also more likely to recall and recognize factual information about U.S. territories but, contra the hypothesis, were not more likely to express attitudes congruent with those presented in the video. Contrary to H3, those who received a frame that included a telic prime were no more likely to elaborate on the message relative to those in the control condition. Similarly, the paratelic prime did not reduce elaboration. In other words, there were no apparent differences in the extent of elaboration or informative



**Figure 2** Conditional Effect of Entertainment Prime.

*Note.* The conditional effect of the entertainment prime (blue) on elaboration depending on affinity for political humor. Levels of affinity for political humor represent the mean value (4.56) and one standard deviation below (3.53) and above (5.59) the mean.

and persuasive effects of the video among those who were primed to view the video as an informative opportunity.

Consistent with H4, the effect of the paratelic frame on elaboration was conditioned by affinity for political humor. The nature of this conditional effect is presented in Figure 2. As illustrated, those lowest in affinity for political humor elaborated on the message less if they were primed to view the video as an exercise in entertainment.

## Discussion

Recent shifts in the television landscape have transformed but not diminished the role of political comedy. One prominent feature of this evolution is that long-form political comedy is more present than in the past, especially in Oliver's deep dives and Meyers's closer looks. Furthermore, perhaps unique to *Last Week Tonight*, audiences are now exposed to issues that often receive little coverage in the 24-hour news cycle. Our results demonstrate that these two developments coincide to create the conditions for greater information acquisition and persuasion via effortful cognitive elaboration. These results reveal three theoretical insights about elaboration, framing, and affinity for political humor. First, elaboration enhances the effects of long-form political comedy. Second, the framing of political comedy on social media can prime the way some viewers process and are affected by the humorous messages. Third, affinity for political humor influences information acquisition and persuasion from political comedy.

First, our study contributes to a growing body of research (Becker & Bode, 2018; Greenwood et al., 2016; Hardy et al., 2014; LaMarre, 2013; Warner et al., 2015) that suggests long-form political comedy results in different effects when compared to the shorter segmented programs that heretofore have dominated the research on political comedy. Traditionally, researchers have found that viewers do not think very deeply about political comedy and are largely influenced because the comedic message distracted cognitive resources (Young, 2008). However, long-form comedy is more extensively researched than short-form and explained in more detail by the host (Blake, 2015; Kenny, 2014). In context of low-salience issues, these messages should be less susceptible to traditional barriers facing political persuasion because viewers likely lack the information and motivation to refute the well-researched claims of the host. The very fact that claims are well-researched may indicate a level of seriousness that leads viewers to not discount the message (Boukes et al., 2015). This is consistent with past findings that Oliver's deep dives about low-salience issues were persuasive (Greenwood et al., 2016) and informative (Becker & Bode, 2018). Our findings are novel in that they clarify the role of elaboration in information acquisition and persuasion; people who engaged in effortful consideration of Oliver's segment on the U.S. territories learned more and were more persuaded when compared to those who elaborated less.

Second, the way in which political comedy is distributed is evolving. Views on YouTube of *Last Week Tonight* (see Table 1) often eclipse live-viewing of the program on HBO (Hensch, 2016) and have totaled as many as 33 million (Purcell, 2017). Often, individuals are exposed to links to the YouTube video on Facebook, which allows for variations in presentation. Because viewers are influenced differently depending on whether they view political comedy as news or entertainment, and an informational prompt can increase effortful processing (Feldman, 2013), the way political comedy is presented by those who share it can influence the effects of the message. Feldman (2013) suggests that "educators or journalists could do more to emphasize the informational value of political comedy" (p. 604). Though we did not find that emphasizing the informative value of the program (i.e., a telic prime) enhanced effortful processing, we did find evidence that learning and persuasion were a function of elaboration. As noted above, the amount of time and research devoted to topics on Oliver's program may communicate a seriousness that makes priming the informational utility of the message unnecessary. We observed that those who did not receive a prompt engaged in the same amount of effortful processing, were as persuaded, and learned as much, as those who received a telic frame. Unfortunately, because we did not include a measure of metacognitive frames, we do not know if people in either condition actually adopted a telic disposition when viewing the video. Future research should directly observe the motivation of viewers to clarify whether our findings regarding elaboration are due to an appreciation of the informational value of the video.

Though we were unable to observe an effect of the telic frame, we did find that the paratelic frame reduced elaboration for those viewers low in affinity for political

humor. Compared to people low in affinity for political humor who were provided a telic or neutral frame, those informed to expect a humorous video elaborated less, learned less, and were less persuaded as a result. This suggests that people who do not appreciate political humor were more likely to discount the message likely due to an expectation that the content of the video would be incongruent with their viewing preferences.

Third, we found that affinity for political humor also influenced the extent to which individuals learned from political comedy—though there was no direct effect on persuasion. This suggests that people who enjoy political humor will learn more from the content of coverage compared to those who do not. Further, there were no significant differences in information acquisition based on condition (i.e., the frame utilized) among those high in affinity for political humor. This suggests that the framing of political comedy on social media does not matter for those who enjoy political humor, but frames that emphasize the humorous content can diminish the value of the videos for those low in affinity for political humor. When Hmielowski et al. (2011) proposed affinity for political humor as a theoretical concept, they identified it as a key variable explaining motivation to consume political satire. Our findings extend this insight by illustrating that affinity for political humor influences not only the decision to consume political comedy, but also the effects of this consumption. Scholars of political comedy should therefore carefully attend to this critical variable when designing future studies of the effects of political comedy.

Like all research, there are limitations to the study. First, the study employed a modest but direct priming statement. A stronger priming statement might have produced a stronger effect on the presentation of the video. The priming statements themselves were simple and arguably more awkward than one often encounters in social media. However, they were designed to emphasize simplicity at the expense of conversational elegance. A more naturalistic manipulation modeled after actual social media posts might result in stronger effects.

Second, we did not directly observe (or indirectly assess) the mindset of the people who viewed the videos so we cannot be sure the priming statements resulted in telic or paratelic orientations. We tested the effect of our frames on elaboration but reversal theory posits the motivational state as an additional mediator (i.e., Apter, 2007). Without a pilot test or manipulation check to verify that our frames primed these motivational states, we cannot be sure reversal theory is the mechanism that best explains our findings. As discussed above, future research should explore the possibility that these metamotivational states can be primed through social media frames. Third, the video was not “shared” by actual members of the participants’ social network so the influence of social pressure could not be assessed. Fourth, a convenience sample was utilized, and it is possible that the effects of elaboration and priming would be different among older and more diverse populations. Finally, the study only examined a low-salience political issue. Though this was by design, future research should replicate these effects with messages that are likely to trigger partisan motivated reasoning.

## Conclusion

Televised political comedy is among the most dynamic features of the current political information environment. Though we know a great deal about political comedy from studies of late night monologues and pioneering work on Stewart and Colbert, we must update our understanding of the effects of political comedy to keep pace with changes in the medium itself. Oliver's deep dives represent an important evolution both because they are long, information-rich, well-researched arguments and because they often expose viewers to lower-salience issues that are frequently neglected in other news media. This study demonstrates that these features result in media effects that would not be anticipated by prior research. First, elaboration boosted both information acquisition and persuasion, a finding contrary to the expectation that political humor primarily influences people when they do not scrutinize a message. Second, sharing through social media can further complicate the effects of political comedy because of the influence of framing. Finally, affinity for political humor influences information acquisition. That viewers who enjoy political comedy learned more from John Oliver points to Geoffrey Baym's defense of political comedy: "On one hand, 'to entertain' means to amuse and to give one pleasure, but it also can mean to engage with and to consider" (Baym, 2010, p. 120).

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