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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)

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