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Senses of humor, media use, and opinions about the treatment of marginalized groups

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We dedicate this article to the late Dr. Paul D. Skalski, our valued colleague and friend, who loved research and life.

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ABSTRACT

This research examines public opinions toward marginalized groups, applying the notion of multiple "senses of humor" as a filter in the process of opinion formation while controlling for the relative impact of media exposure on such opinions. A sample of 288 students at a large urban university responded to an online survey measuring a variety of public opinions, media use (including traditional, news, and interactive) variables, four senses of humor (disparagement, dark/arousal, incongruity, and social currency), and social locators, including political orientation. Results confirm that, in addition to social locators, senses of humor provide a viable set of predictors of public opinion about marginalized groups, clearly surpassing media use. Further, the senses of humor are found to be linked to political orientation, raising issues of the commonalities and origins of these critical filters of sociopolitical attitudes.

1. Introduction

1.1. Public opinion

As the United States becomes increasingly heterogeneous, a better understanding of the formation of public opinions toward fractious public topics and toward various marginalized societal groupings is in order. Different conceptualizations of what constitutes "public opinion" make certain distinctions—between basic values and transitory preferences, between organized and unorganized opinions, between the public and private expressions of opinions, and between an aggregate, socially controlling force and a collection of individual opinions (Nimmo, 1978; Nisbet, 1978; Zukin, 1981). One important distinction between opinion expression in private versus public settings is manifested most clearly in the spiral of silence perspective (Noelle-Neumann, 1989). If people believe their views are losing ground, they are seen as less likely to express their opinions in public for fear of negative reactions, and are less likely to share opinions with friends, contributing to an appearance that minority views are held by more people than is the case. According to this perspective, "[p]ublic opinion is based on the unconscious striving of people living in a social unit to arrive at a common view, at the kind of agreement which is required to act and, if necessary, to make decisions" (Noelle-Neumann, 1989, p. 4). However, in a pluralistic society, the reality of a truly "common" view becomes less likely, particularly as "cyber-balkanization" continues to erode mass audiences (Jeffres, Neuendorf, & Atkin, 1999; Jeffres, Neuendorf, Bracken, & Atkin, 2009).

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The increasing pluralism of America's demography is matched by exploding options for information acquisition and variations in media content types. One way to cope with this mountain of messages is through humor, yet research into public opinion has neglected this potential strategy of filtering and coping. And humor can be important for both privately held and publicly expressed opinions in conversations, as well as for processing of mediated messages. The present study examines notions of public opinion and the individual differences that are potentially related to such strategic applications of humor. We focus, in particular, on the notion of multiple "senses of humor" as a filter in the process of opinion formation, while including a consideration of the historically important role of media messages in this process.

1.2. Public opinion and mass communication

The influence of mass communication in creating a "common view" of public opinion has been acknowledged for nearly a century, dating back to Walter Lippmann's (1922) seminal work that served as the foundation for agenda setting theory. Since then, numerous agenda setting studies have been conducted, beginning with McCombs and Shaw (1972) and proceeding to the present day (see McCombs & Reynolds, 2009, for a review). This research generally supports the idea that mass media have a strong influence on public opinion, due to an emphasis on certain issues over others. Similarly, cultivation theory (Gerbner, 1969) argues that the mass media (television in particular) present a consistent stream of images that affect audience perceptions of reality, leading to a *mainstreaming* or overriding of differences in perspective and behavior among heavy viewers (Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, Signorielli, & Shanahan, 2002). The implication of classic mass communication theories such as agenda setting and cultivation is that heavy media users should have similar perceptions and public opinions reflective of the media presentation of reality, and that media exposure is a primary mechanism by which opinions on public issues are formed.

1.2.1. Challenges to mass communication: media changes and individual differences

Traditional notions of mass communication effects have been challenged in recent years due to (a) changes in the media environment and (b) greater attention to individual differences in reception to mass messages. Chaffee and Metzger (2001) recognized that the diffusion of computer and information technologies has fostered more individualized media products tailored to smaller, homogenous audiences rather than an undifferentiated mass. This reality, coupled with the sheer number and diversity of communication channels available to audiences today through cable television and the Internet, challenges the likelihood of true mass communication effects. Instead, it suggests that selective exposure is more likely in the new media environment, with audiences choosing channels and content that reflect their predispositions.

Indeed, a widening body of literature is investigating individual differences in determining media exposure motives and, ultimately, public opinion. Much of this work addresses how one's state may influence media exposure (e.g., Bryant & Zillmann, 1984; Labbé, Schmidt, Babin, & Pharr, 2007; Zillmann, 1988), and other work looks at how one's personality traits determine media attendance and response (e.g., Beatty, Hsim, & Jones, 2001; Finn, 1997; Liebert & Spiegler, 1994; Weaver, 2003). The uses and gratifications framework (Katz, Blumler, & Gurevitch, 1974; Rosengren, 1974) considers the motivations one expresses when selecting and attending to media. It suggests that individuals seek media to manage their emotional state in an effort to achieve an optimal level of arousal (Donohew, Finn, & Christ, 1988; Zillmann & Bryant, 1994). While the emphasis of uses and gratifications is media attendance to achieve a desired state, previous research has also acknowledged that psychological traits may push individuals to use media to achieve specific gratifications (Lin, 1996). When considered together, one's personality traits may determine media habits, which enable individuals to move toward their optimal level of arousal.

In the age of identity-politics, a politician might gain standing with dominant culture constituencies by extolling the ills of "welfare queens," "anchor babies," gay marriage, etc. (e.g., Anastasio, Rose, & Chapman, 2005; Neuendorf, Skalski, Atkin, & Jeffres, 2011). Political discourse has thus become more negative as pundits increasingly use ad hominem attacks and wall-to-wall commercials try to cast doubt on opponents—or perceived "out-groups"—rather than advancing issues or positions (e.g., Bucy, Gantz, & Wang, 2007). Political events and issues seem particularly prone to filtering through various "senses of humor," as evidenced through jokes about political figures such as Barack Obama, stories on Internet news sites such as *The Onion*, and the enduring popularity of television programs like *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report*. This investigation considers the role of sense of humor in the formation of public opinion, specifically opinions about marginalized cultural groups.

1.3. Opinions concerning marginalized groups

Racial attitudes have been conceptualized at multiple levels, from institutional (Lopez, 2000) to individual, with institutional racism potentially causing or reinforcing attitudes at the individual level. Randall (2008, p. 1) notes that "[i]nstitutions can behave in ways that are overtly racist (i.e., specifically excluding Blacks from services) or inherently racist (i.e., adopting policies that result in the exclusion of Blacks)." At the individual level, despite the widespread belief that blatant racism retreated following passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 (e.g., Pew Research Center, 2010; Wilson, 2012), research suggests that stereotypical beliefs persist, although in subtle, implicit or symbolic forms (e.g., Devine & Elliot, 2000; Schuman, Steeh, Bobo, & Krysan, 1997; Sniderman & Carmines, 1997; Wittenbrink, Judd, & Park, 1997, 2001). Such scholarship posits that a symbolic racism—motivated by symbols including welfare, single parenting, crime, affirmative action, and even such specifics as the "birther" movement attack on Barack Obama, as well as the perception that Blacks have gotten more than they