

**WHERE HUMOR AND PERSUASION INTERSECT: A
CONTENT ANALYSIS OF LATE NIGHT POLITICAL
COMEDY HOSTS' COVERAGE OF THE 2016
PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION**

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Abstract

In what has become a highly mediated culture, society has experienced a merging of entertainment and news. This merger, coined "infotainment," has faced criticism by some who question its credibility. Others, however, have praised it for its unique approach. Regardless, audiences continue to engage with this genre, particularly gravitating towards late night political comedy shows like *The Daily Show*, *The Late Show*, and *Last Week Tonight*. The unique impact that these messages' comedic deliveries have on audiences has been previously studied, however the specific audience effects demonstrated hinge largely on the content of the messaging itself.

Throughout an election season peppered with scandals from both major party candidates, this content analysis seeks to evaluate the specific comedic methods and language choices adopted by late night political comedy hosts covering such events. Through a six-week data collection period, scandal-related content of *The Daily Show*, *The Late Show*, and *Last Week Tonight* was evaluated to determine the extent to which the hosts discussed the candidates' scandals, the frames they utilized in doing so, and the differences in coverage between programs.

Results of this analysis yielded a clear liberal bias displayed by each of the three hosts, who devoted significantly more coverage to Donald Trump's scandals than to Hillary Clinton's. Further, not only did this content analysis reveal a quantitative discrepancy between coverage of the candidates, but qualitative differences, as well. Discussion of Donald Trump's scandals included solemn tones and incriminating commentary, while conversation of scandals surrounding Clinton seemed aimed toward exonerating her and shifting the blame to other parties. Further, each host served to frame the election negatively, expressing a general feeling of anxiety and lack of confidence in the results of the 2016 election.

Introduction

Media have long been a major influence on the political scene, serving as both an important source of information and an outlet for candidates and elected officials to spread their respective messages. As society's media tendencies have evolved over time, expanding beyond what once was a print-dominated culture, the intersection between media and entertainment has become magnified. Traditional hard news programming (long considered to be the most popular and credible source of news information) has been challenged by a variety of new media forms.

Late night political comedy shows use humor as a vehicle for informing the public on world affairs. Ranging in form from mock news broadcasts to live interview formats, these shows capitalize on a highly saturated media environment to offer viewers a fresh take on the news. Surpassing traditional expectations regarding balanced reporting, these programs test journalistic boundaries to blend news and entertainment while maintaining informational accuracy.

Like traditional news, late night comedy shows focus on the issues of the day, providing commentary and critique on current events and public figures. Considering the highly politicized culture that resulted from the 2016 presidential election, much of the late night political content, and that of traditional news more broadly, has honed in on the presidential candidates and their respective campaign activity. Comprising much of this coverage have been the various scandals surrounding both candidates that have dominated conversation throughout the election, greatly impacting the political sentiment of the electorate. The high frequency of these scandals, coupled with their respective severity, committed by both major party candidates has set this election season apart from those throughout history. Just as the actions that have transpired throughout the 2016 election season have proved distinctive in nature, the impact of the corresponding news

coverage, such as that of late night political comedy programs, likely yields a similar effect, thus warranting additional study.

Conversation surrounding these scandals was present throughout the presidential campaign, receiving coverage across various media outlets. In addition to the more investigative coverage that they received on traditional news networks, late night political comedy shows chimed in with similar discussion veiled with humor. For the purposes of this analysis, the three political comedy programs most significantly contributing to this dialogue are *Last Week Tonight* with John Oliver, *The Daily Show* with Trevor Noah, and *The Late Show* with Stephen Colbert. Not only do these three programs cover several network types, including premium, basic, and network channels, but they each fulfill a significant role in the political comedy genre more broadly.

Taking into account both the cognitive impacts of humorous arguments and the current political environment, this content analysis will examine the various strategies utilized and messages disseminated by late night political comedy programs throughout the 2016 Presidential Election and their associated coverage of both major candidates' personal and political scandals.

Justification

In a 24-hour news cycle, information is constantly disseminated to the public. At all hours of the day, viewers have access to news reports of any number of local, national, or global issues unfolding in real time. The majority of these reports are produced by traditional news outlets like CNN, Fox, or ABC and are comprised of anchors, field reporters, and expert analysts who strive to deliver balanced, factual reporting. With the abundance of news sources reporting around the clock, less traditional forms of news have emerged, serving as niche programming that stand on their own against the major networks. Among these are late night comedy shows such as *The Daily Show* that use humor as a tool to attract viewers and deliver the news in a unique manner.

Despite criticism that the blending of news and entertainment devalues traditional media, studies of these late night political comedy shows have yielded evidence of positive learning effects on viewers. Whether attracting audience members for their news or entertainment value, late night political comedy shows have been shown to trigger additional news searching among the audience in which “less politically interested viewers...seek out additional information about the issues from other news sources (Amarasingam, 2011, p. 13). Under a veil of comedy, these shows discuss relevant world events, delivering information to the public in a manner that is perhaps more accessible to some audiences than more traditional forms of news.

With the chosen humor serving as a sort of heuristic, audience members’ grasp on the details of political events is tested by their ability to understand the jokes being delivered, which therefore may call on them to complete additional research. “By providing simplified caricatures that rely on highly accessible partisan and ideological stereotypes and groupings,” these soft news programs are able to use comedy in order to “facilitate awareness and understanding of

political issues” (Amarasingam, 2011, p. 50). Not only are positive learning effects seen among viewers of late night political comedy shows at the time of broadcast, but the long-term impacts of humorous argument have been explored through additional research.

Jokes presented by late night political comedy hosts “are unlike traditional forms of political information as they require active audience participation” in order to “construct [the] joke’s meaning” (Young, 2004, p. 4). This increased state of attention triggered by the employment of humorous techniques has also been shown to enhance memory among viewers through the activation of certain concepts that increases their accessibility and likelihood of being referenced in the future (Young, 2004, p. 4). These findings regarding viewers’ learning impacts highlight the validity of late night political comedy shows and the fusion of humor and news more broadly.

With much of the existing research on this topic exploring the effects of late night political comedy on viewers, a discussion surrounding the broader implications of this type of content on representations of political candidates is lacking. As media operates within democratic societies as a critical check on government action, the significant nature of its contributions warrants further analysis. Particularly during an election season, late night political comedy programs serve as powerful voices that resonate among the public in a manner unlike traditional broadcasts.

A key element of 2016 presidential election content was the collection of scandals that plagued both major candidates. While the coverage spanned across various networks, its unique humorous presentation on late night political comedy shows is of particular interest. Engaging in conversation regarding presidential candidates’ personal and political scandals via humor is likely to yield effects observable beyond the individual viewer.

In these cases, the juxtaposition of political figures' highly regarded offices and immoral, scandalous behaviors sparks an obvious conversation to take place on any news platform. When considering traditional hard news programs, journalists generally expose political scandals in their efforts to both inform the public and hold leaders accountable for their actions. While working towards the same goal of promoting public awareness, political comedy hosts additionally strive toward entertaining the public through their use of humor.

The incitement of laughter throughout these conversations, while fitting for late night comedy programs, may encourage a lack of seriousness with which viewers should approach the information they are given. Although many late night political comedy hosts deem themselves comedians, rather than journalists, the public's undeniable use of shows like *The Daily Show* as sources of political information could be jeopardized by the humorous content, ultimately skewing their comprehension of serious political matters (Amarasingam, 2011, p. 50). Further, making political figures the consistent targets of current events-based punch lines threatens to undermine public expectations of both their roles in government and the serious implications of their work.

Literature Review

The increased prevalence of soft-news programming has given rise to many political comedy television shows that challenge the impact of traditional news sources. Programs such as *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* and other entertainment-based shows have been studied in order to determine their impact on viewers and the political process more broadly. In contrast to traditional hard-news programming, these late-night talk shows rely more heavily on sensationalism, drama, and the personalities of the television hosts themselves. While posing a clear impact on audiences, the specific effects of these programs is contested, as is their validity as primary sources of political information.

Many communication scholars, including Neil Postman and Joshua Meyrowitz, have studied the evolution of media and the individual impacts of different mediums on society's information culture. Progressing from oral to print to televised, this transformation has been considered by some to be a main contributor to the dissolution of public discourse and its conversion into the art of show business. With this evolution, as posited by Postman, is the parallel adaptation of society's concept of the truth (Postman, 1985, p. 24). With a heightened focus on news as entertainment, as evidenced through the increased popularity of late night political comedy programming, the credibility of emerging soft new programs has been questioned, particularly regarding their coverage of political and world affairs. Postman's claim can be recognized as an outgrowth of this phenomenon, suggesting that we, as a society, rest on the verge of "amusing ourselves to death" through inundation of entertainment-driven media. This possibility, he posits, threatens to render many vital sources of information obsolete.

Similarly acknowledging the media evolution that has taken place, yet rejecting its threat to the overall value of information, Meyrowitz considers the coexistence of old and new media

forms. Despite claims that more traditional forms of media have been devalued through the integration of televised entertainment-oriented programming, Meyrowitz (1985) argues that “new media need not destroy or replace old media in order to have a significant effect on the structure of social information-systems” (p. 71). This position suggests a lesser threat than that argued by Postman and seemingly emphasizes the line that can be drawn between various forms of media and their use in society. Rather than accept that the evolution of information sources occurs in an exclusive manner, Meyrowitz offers the perspective that many media forms may co-exist while maintaining the integrity of individual impacts. Considering Postman’s blurring of the line between sources of news and entertainment, this perspective seems to challenge the totality of such a phenomenon and its threat on an information-seeking society.

In disseminating information to society through televised channels, though, Meyrowitz acknowledges the potential conflict associated with such mass distribution. “The controversy surrounding television programming,” he posits, “is not rooted in television content per se, but in the problems inherent in a system that communicates everything to everybody at the same time” (Meyrowitz, 1985, p. 87). Late night political comedy shows occupy a niche of television programming, appealing not only to an audience interested in world news, but to a more particular segment of the population simultaneously attracted by the comedic content.

Despite Postman’s argument regarding the value of print media and the dissolution of public discourse associated with the rise of TV, Meyrowitz’s (1985) research points to several benefits afforded by a televised society that rejects “the segregated systems of the past” (p. 89). The prevalence of confirmation biases among many media consumers, particularly involving the digestion of political information, poses a challenge to the development of a well-informed society. The specialization of print media facilitated this bias, frequently being used as a way for

consumers to “reinforce their special identities” (Meyrowitz, 1985, p. 89). As prevalent sources of information with coverage of a range of topics, “people are generally extremely particular about *which* newspaper they bring in to their homes” that best “reflect the reader’s personal identity” (Meyrowitz, 1985, p. 89). With its inability to target particular segments of the population, televised news avoids these effects and therefore increases the likelihood of exposing the public to a range of information.

Through its mass broadcast, televised programs are able to reach “rich and poor, young and old, scholars and illiterates, males and females, and people of all ages, professions, classes, and religions” (Meyrowitz, 1985, p. 90). This sense of communion among viewers afforded by televised broadcasts allows the medium to serve as a public arena – a status that print media is fundamentally unable to achieve. Broadcasting to a mass audience, stories reported on television programs are more likely to be recognized as social realities, as viewers who tune in get the sense that “they are keeping in touch with other Americans and with what is ‘happening’” (Meyrowitz, 1985, p. 91).

The evolution of news media has not only resulted in the development of new sources of information, but a highly saturated information culture in which many exist at once. With so many different programs aiming to achieve different reactions, viewers are able to hand select the news sources with which they will interact. While the presentation of information is specific to its outlet, each story being told in a unique manner, all exist as fragments of media for public negotiation (Goodson, 2011).

With this media fragmentation is an inherent sense of competition among outlets who, while seeking different reactions, are in in pursuit of a common goal – audience attention. Occupying a unique space among other news media fragments, late night political comedy

programs are particularly salient due to their use of humor. This strategy allows such shows to stand out among competitors and achieve specific cognitive impacts through their employment of humorous arguments.

Serving as one media fragment, the widespread audience effects of *The Daily Show* have been measured, pinpointing its use of humor as a tool for persuasion. With some of its comedy intentionally divisive in nature, these shows straddle the line between news and entertainment, blending the impacts of both information and comedy (Goodnow, 2011, p. 64). Contributing to viewers' understanding of world events and the political process, the forms of political comedy utilized throughout these programs may work not only humorously, but persuasively (Goodnow, 2011, p. 61). Despite Postman's fear that the information culture has deteriorated into one concerned only with entertainment, Amarasingam (2011) suggests that the positive effects of political comedy may be understated.

Viewers, Amarasingam suggests, are able to critically analyze political situations presented throughout political comedy programs through their use of humor as a political heuristic. "Political entertainment," by this logic, "can facilitate awareness and understanding of political issues (especially among those with lower levels of political interest) by providing simplified caricatures that rely on highly accessible partisan and ideological stereotypes and groupings" (Amarasingam, 2011, p. 50). Claims of disengagement from the political process at the hand of these non-traditional news forms can thus be questioned, as their impact may be enabled by humor rather than inhibited.

Further supporting claims of political engagement among viewers of political comedy programs is the notion that such shows may trigger additional news searching. Amarasingam (2011) presents his claim that "jokes about issues on *The Daily Show* lead less politically

interested viewers to seek out additional information about the issues from other news sources” (p. 13). While critics may argue Postman’s view that the integration of purely entertainment-oriented features in news programming threatens its validity as an information source, Amarasingam’s work would indicate that it actually stimulates more independent research among viewers than would traditional hard-news programming. His study of late night political comedy shows, therefore, yielded positive outcomes related to post-viewing learning impacts despite critics’ claims.

The concept of additional information searching presented through Amarasingam’s research also confronts criticisms of the fragmented nature of information encouraged by television’s entertainment culture. Considering the deterioration of public discourse into “the language of headlines – sensational, fragmented, impersonal” proposed by Postman, additional information searching, if truly encouraged by late night political comedy, may offer a remedy. While Postman argues that this sensationalized form of discourse forces the receiver of the news, rather than the sender, to ascribe meaning, he does not consider the phenomenon suggested by Amarasingam (Postman, 1985, p. 70).

When considering the various meanings that will accompany messages being mass broadcast via television programs, the underlying credibility of such outlets must be considered. Late night political comedy, as it is typically hosted by prominent public figures like Jon Stewart or Stephen Colbert, blurs the line between celebrity and authority, making this distinction difficult for viewers to recognize. Postman (1985) stresses the importance of “the credibility of the teller” when accepting information as reality, and asserts that “being a celebrity is quite different from being well known,” and therefore trusted as a source of information (p. 102, 132).

With celebrity hosts simultaneously serving as sources of political information, Postman's theory might argue against their credibility, but Barbur and Goodnow (2011) make the case for the ethos of political comedy hosts. Following the media evolution articulated by both Postman and Meyrowitz, traditional hard-news programming evolved into "a commoditized, profit-centered business rather than a unique, public-centered profession," with an expanded role of entertainment (Goodnow, 2011, p. 4). The increase in media competition and sensationalized news programming that followed has resulted in a hit to traditional news viewership and an overall loss in perceived credibility. Despite this loss for hard-news programming, "shows that mix news with entertainment, such as late night talk shows, have gained viewers" (Goodnow, 2011, p. 4).

These shows' up-front integration of humor and entertainment into their broadcasts shield them from accusations of bias and allow their programs to exist outside of traditional journalistic standards. Operating as hybrids of news and entertainment, posit Barbur and Goodnow, these hosts' prioritization of comedy, maintaining that they do not operate as traditional news programs, protect their sense of credibility among viewers (Barbur, 2011, p. 8).

Arguing that the honest integration of comedy into soft-news programming of the political genre maintains a sense of credibility, Goodnow extends her research by exploring the persuasive effects of humor. Although many viewers tune into late-night political comedy programs for the sole purpose of seeking entertainment, in these cases they are simultaneously exposing themselves to political arguments delivered through humor. The potency of these arguments, according to Goodnow (2011), results from their "reliance on common values" agreed upon between the arguer and audience (p. 69). While arguments devoid of humor, such as many of those presented through more traditional news sources, threaten to "build anger and

tension in an audience,” humorous arguments stir the audience while simultaneously relieving pressure and serving as a sort of tension release (Goodnow, 2011, p. 71).

The persuasion of humorous arguments can be studied not only among immediate viewers, according to Goodnow (2011), but on an expanded audience enabled by “the forwarding of clips from friends [and] the appearance of clips on blogs and other news shows [that] will place the humorous argument into the political cognition of these more passive viewers” (p. 73). The effect of humor as an argumentative strategy on late night programming is an increase in cognitive accessibility, pushing the shows’ content to the forefront of viewers’ minds and making it more likely to be remembered. According to Goodnow, this effect could thus lead to significant long-term effects for habitual consumers of late-night political comedy.

With much research concerning the impacts of late-night political comedy in an entertainment culture, as well as the role of televised news more broadly, these studies comment not only on the form in which news is presented, but on the public figures whose actions are featured. Both Postman and Meyrowitz, through their research on the evolution of news coverage, speak to an alteration of the political sphere in which entertainment plays an increasingly significant role. Through their heavy focus on the concept of celebrity in the news environment, they have altered public estimations of the political hero and highlighted changing expectations for elected officials and their associated news coverage.

Not only has the impact of mass broadcast enabled the increased portrayal of public officials as celebrities, but it has similarly impacted their negative exposure. Serving as a vehicle for all information, televised news programming works not only to relay positive information, but has matched efficiency in reporting political scandals, as well, which “have been a part of civil society since the immemorial” (Just & Crigler, 2014, p. 2). The result of highly publicizing

elected officials is not only the creation of celebrity-like figures used for entertainment purposes, but also to uncover and report potentially controversial activity that might otherwise go undetected. These effects have been demonstrated through the frequent reveal of various elected officials' scandals and their subsequent impacts on the political environment.

The frequency of politicians' mediated scandals, both personal and political, has significantly grown throughout "the 20th and into the 21st centuries as market driven journalism has sought to attract large audiences to their news coverage" (Just & Crigler, 2014, p. 2). Although the primary goal of news programming is to inform the audience, broadcasting "attention-grabbing news" is a necessary labor in order to "maximize audience size and ... revenues ... in the highly competitive marketplace" (Just & Crigler, 2014, p. 3). With this goal in mind, mediated political scandals are inherently dramatic and therefore increase a network's probability of attracting viewers' attention. With a fairly constant stream of scandals for media outlets to report, the broadcast of "politicians' personal misdeeds has ... given rise to highly critical analysis of media 'feeding frenzies,' (i.e. highly negative, personalized and sensational stories)" (Just & Crigler, 2014, p. 2).

Related critiques suggest that the media's consistent coverage of political scandals might have negative impacts on mass audiences, potentially reducing widespread interest in the news. Other suggested effects include a "[weakened] public regard for political institutions" and widespread cynicism in response to the abundance of scandal stories (Just & Crigler, 2014, p. 4).

Despite its critics, some consider these reports to be potential vehicles for political reform, descendent from muckraking journalism and watchdog reporting (Just & Crigler, 2014, p. 4). In this way, the wide audience reach of such news programs may render them critical checks on governmental power and transparency in spite of the potential consequences suggested

by Postman and critics of scandal reporting. Through this mass reporting, the media serves to hold governmental figures accountable for their actions and keep the electorate informed. Demonstrating that politicians “are creatures who are capable of doing tremendous good and simultaneously capable of ghastly deeds,” coverage of such scandals has contributed to a growing sense of skepticism and distrust of politicians (Washington, 2014, p. 3). Considering “news broadcasts, access to the internet, and social media, which allows a story to reach millions of viewers within a matter of hours or even minutes,” this effect has grown common as political scandals become increasingly salient among the public (Washington, 2014, p. 3-4).

Given the unmistakable impact of television in today’s mediated society, a systematic study of particular shows’ thematic content will offer deeper insights into the contributions made by the medium. Late night political comedy shows, existing at the intersection of news and entertainment, resonate uniquely among viewers through their humorous approach, which sets them apart from more traditional programming. Based on the cognitive impacts of humorous arguments, the potential implications for these types of shows on a politically oriented democratic society are significant and demand further analysis.

Methods

Given the research that has been conducted on the audience impacts of late night political comedy shows, this content analysis seeks to examine the broader implications of the genre on the political environment. Rather than focus on the cognitive implications of political humor, an analysis of the shows' content will yield a discussion regarding its greater societal impacts and contribution to the democratic process.

In analyzing the shows' uses of humor, a qualitative approach will be utilized in order to ascertain the specific strategies employed throughout the hosts' blending of humor and politics, while quantitative methods will contribute to a greater understanding of the shows' main thematic focuses. This approach, facilitating a language analysis, will bring to light the specific implications of the messages being delivered in the already-saturated political media environment. Late night political comedy programs *The Daily Show*, *Last Week Tonight*, and *The Late Show* will serve as the three sources of data driving this analysis, as they collectively represent coverage spanning from basic cable, premium, and network channels and each serve a critical role in political comedy as a genre.

The Daily Show, having appeared on Comedy Central for over a decade, has long served as a staple in the late night political comedy genre. Working as a standard bearer for other programs through its blend of humor and politics, the show's ubiquitous nature makes it a critical inclusion in any political comedy analysis. While the show's ratings following John Stewart's departure as the host have dipped, currently recorded at 840,000 average weekly viewers, its prevalence in related literature make its impact impossible to ignore (Rowles, 2016). Further, *The Daily Show's* presence on social media, with over 6 million (6,396,879) followers on

Facebook, surpasses competitors by over 4 million followers at a minimum and therefore poses a significant impact beyond its original television presence (“The Daily Show”).

Gaining his start following his work as a correspondent on *The Daily Show*, Stephen Colbert and his program *The Late Show* occupy a fundamental space of political comedy, as each has long been embedded in both comedy and politics. Having lent his voice to several national causes throughout time, Colbert’s long career in the comedy industry and omnipresence on the political scene contribute to his widespread viewership and dominating voice among other similar programs. Further, *The Late Show* boasts some of the highest rating among similar programs, with 2.62 million viewers for the 2016 season to date (“Late night ratings”).

John Oliver, host of *Last Week Tonight*, similarly jumpstarted his career working as a guest host for John Stewart on *The Daily Show*. His current program, appearing on HBO, is similarly critical to this analysis as the show’s style falls more consistent with the norms of late night political comedy programming, prioritizing the humorous delivery of the political content over its rigor. Other HBO shows, such as *Real Time with Bill Mahr*, harness more of an ideological approach to political comedy, lacking the sense of balance that is crucial to comparative analyses. *Last Week Tonight*, analyzed in September of 2014, just five months from the show’s move to HBO, was recorded to be “pulling an average of 4.1 million weekly viewers across TV airings and DVR, on-demand and HBO Go plays...putting Oliver's show narrowly ahead of *Real Time With Bill Maher's* 4 million weekly viewers, according to HBO” (O’Connell, 2014). This trend has continued, with current *Last Week Tonight* ratings hitting 4.7 million weekly viewers on average (Rowles, 2016).

The content of these three programs delivered throughout their respective monologue segments, excluding the content of live interview segments, will be evaluated through a thorough

content analysis to determine the frequency of mentions of scandal-related material. This approach will yield information regarding the chosen content of each program as well as the frequency with which it is discussed. Through a content analysis, the respective language choices made by each host can be analyzed to determine their particular impacts.

Not limited to studying political messaging, content analyses have been conducted to examine research trends in science education journals (Tekin, Aslan, & Yimaz, 2016), health regulations via various newspaper outlets (Patterson, Hilton, & Weishaar, 2016), and drug-related content published through Twitter (Cavazos-Rehg et al., 2016). Used to evaluate the content of various pieces of textual material, a content analysis is the most appropriate approach to code and study the content of late night political comedy programs.

In past content analyses of political comedy shows, content has been coded for relevance to policy, personality, and a number of other qualities. In evaluating content using this scheme, humorous techniques can be coded based on their coverage of a certain topic as well as for the political figures that they pertain to. In order to measure the effects of political comedy on candidate trait ratings, and the corresponding relationship between late night political comedy and public opinion, Young (2004) conducted a two-part content analysis aimed at the 2000 Presidential Election. The first part focuses on the content of late night jokes, examining the relationship between viewers' exposure to political comedy programming and their respective ratings of various traits associated with either of the two major party candidates, George W. Bush and Al Gore.

This analysis was conducted using two sets of 13 mutually exclusive categories, each containing a Bush variable and a Gore variable. Preliminary qualitative analysis of jokes made by Jay Leno and David Letterman targeting the two candidates preceded this study in order to

construct categories most pertinent to late-night content. Aiming to determine the traits most frequently caricatured by the late-night shows, these categories included references to both personality and policy, ranging from comments on intelligence to foreign affairs with each joke coded once.

The findings of Young's (2004) content analysis indicate that a majority of the content of late night political comedy programs focuses on personal characteristics, namely the failings, of both candidates. This finding, stemming from part one of the study, was found to be consistent throughout the analyses of both programs. Part two of this study strayed away from the content analysis strategy, measuring the effects of late night political comedy exposure on public opinion through survey methods. Ultimately, this portion of the study uncovered no significant effects of the thematic trends in late night political comedy on public opinion (Young, 2004).

Rather than divide the coding scheme between candidates, as has been done in various studies, Brewer & Marquardt (2007) separated the content of 52 episodes of *The Daily Show* by presentation format, including mock news stories and real guest interviews. The study was driven by several research questions seeking to determine the extent of political content covered throughout the show, the prevalence of issue frames employed when discussing these political topics, and the coverage of both world affairs and other news media (Brewer & Marquardt, 2007, p. 256-257).

When analyzing the content of the show's mock news stories, the researchers devised categories ranging from politics, defined as "political/governmental figures, institutions, organizations, issues, and/or processes," to news media, which was considered "news media figures, organizations, and/or practices" (Bewer & Marquardt, p. 258). The categories were non-mutually exclusive, allowing mock news stories that contained content relevant to multiple

topics to be coded as such. Interview segments were coded to examine the types of guests, including political figures, authors, news anchors, and entertainers, and what topics were covered throughout the interview, including politics, world affairs, and news media.

Brewer and Marquardt's (2007) results indicated that a majority (56%) of the mock news stories aired on *The Daily Show* addressed political topics, with over half of those including issue frames. Further, just shy of half of the stories (46%) addressed world affairs and 15 percent covered the news media (Brewer & Marquardt, 2007). As for the guest interview segments, the content analysis indicated that 52 percent pertained to politics, two thirds of which included issue frames, 25 percent pertained to world affairs, and 15 percent pertained to the news media (Brewer & Marquardt, 2007).

Despite their individual coding schemes, Young's and Brewer and Marquardt's studies are alike in their analyses of what they considered political and apolitical discussion, weighing the content of late night political comedy shows to determine the extent of their respective political conversations. Aiming to detect a similar distinction, this study will evaluate the frequency of scandal-based discussion surrounding the 2016 presidential candidates on *Last Week Tonight*, *The Daily Show*, and *The Late Show* as well as how that discussion was framed.

In this analysis, scandal will be evaluated as actions in which "government officials demonstrate poor judgment in their personal or home [lives]" or "in their professional [lives] (i.e., abuse of power, bribery, corruption, misuse of campaign contributions, favoritism, and perjury)," which ultimately "erodes citizen trust in government officials" (Washington, 2013, p. 3). The data collection of these instances will commence on October 4, 2016, six weeks prior to the general election. Coverage throughout the primary election will be excluded in order to ensure that the focus remains only on the two major party candidates, and a heavy emphasis will

be placed on the days leading up to the general election due to the high volume of media coverage and public attention that is paid to the event during that time. Given the nature of *Last Week Tonight's* less frequent broadcasts, as the show airs only once per week, the time frame under examination was extended from one month to six weeks in order to capture as much representative data as possible.

The specific research questions that this content analysis seeks to answer are: 1) To what degree were scandals covered throughout late night political comedy programs, and 1b) Which scandals received the most coverage throughout all three shows?; 2) What were the significant differences between shows and their coverage?; and 3) How were these scandals framed (according to characterization of the individual, the event, significant word choice, reference to the opposing candidate)?

Throughout the data collection process, a transcription method will be utilized to capture as much representative data as possible. Data from each program will be collected separately, and quotes reflecting either candidate's scandals will be separated into categories representative of their content. Separating this content by show, candidate, and thematic focus will facilitate a clear representation of any trends that may emerge regarding scandal coverage within each program. Further, at the conclusion of the individual data collection periods, a master data sheet will be created in order to examine overarching themes and distinctions between programs.

Previous content analyses examining late night political comedy programs have thoroughly attended to both qualitative and quantitative elements of their content, which facilitated a detailed representation of their respective findings. These have included coding for thematic elements, issue frames, and frequency of various discussions. Drawing from these prior studies, it becomes clear that content analyses require attention to several elements, which will

be incorporated in this study moving forward. While this content analyses does not seek to examine any audience impact, a similar coding scheme will be employed to evaluate the shows' discussion of various scandals illuminated throughout the 2016 Presidential Election.

Each host's respective monologues on either Donald Trump or Hillary Clinton will be evaluated to determine the extent of scandal-based discussion, with only that lasting for fifteen seconds or longer serving as one unit of analysis. To best approach answering each of the aforementioned research questions, the type of scandal discussed by each host will be coded individually within each fifteen-second unit to evaluate the language choices, categorizations, and frequency and, once complete, significant patterns will be evaluated across episodes to uncover commonalities or differences regarding the genre's overall coverage and rhetorical strategy.

Data

The content of late night political comedy shows *The Late Show*, *The Daily Show*, and *Last Week Tonight* was studied beginning six weeks prior to the 2016 Presidential Election in order to evaluate the extent to which presidential scandals were discussed. Upon examination of these episodes, 46 in total, several trends emerged. Across the three programs, coverage of scandals, defined by Washington (2013) as actions in which “government officials demonstrate poor judgment in their personal or home [lives]” or “in their professional [lives] (i.e., abuse of power, bribery, corruption, misuse of campaign contributions, favoritism, and perjury),” which ultimately “erode citizen trust,” was skewed heavily toward Donald Trump, with discussion of Hillary Clinton and her associated scandals comprising a much smaller portion of the shows’ overall coverage.

On *The Late Show*, a total of 38 minutes 48 seconds was dedicated to commentary on Trump’s scandals, while only 10 minutes 10 seconds was dedicated to Clinton’s. 23 minutes 30 seconds was dedicated to discussion of Trump’s scandals on *Last Week Tonight*, while only 4 minutes 42 seconds were dedicated to Clinton, and 1 hour 13 minutes 36 seconds were dedicated to discussion of Trump’s scandals on *the Daily Show*, while only 18 minutes 45 seconds were spent discussing Clinton’s. Of the 21 episodes of *The Late Show* examined, a total of 48 minutes 58 seconds was dedicated to conversation of the candidates’ scandals. 28 minutes 12 seconds of the 5 episodes of *Last Week Tonight* that were studied contained discussion of presidential scandals, and 1 hour 32 minutes 21 seconds of the 20 episodes of *The Daily Show* that were examined were dedicated to commentary on Trump or Clinton’s scandals.

Among the most heavily covered scandals pertaining to Donald Trump were his potential to reject the election results, covered for a total of 6 minutes 25 seconds, his suggestion that the

election was rigged, covered for 6 minutes 15 seconds, and his sexual assault allegations triggered by the leaked Entertainment Tonight video, which was covered for a total of 60 minutes 51 seconds across all three programs. Additional scandals discussed were Trump's refusal to release his tax returns, his closed casinos and bankruptcy, and his ties to Russia and Vladimir Putin, although these contributed to a less significant portion of the shows' election coverage overall. Additionally, much of the hosts' focuses on Donald Trump were centered not on recounting a particular scandal, but on a commentary of several themes related to his campaign more generally. These thematic focuses included misogyny and sexism, racism, a lack of presidential qualifications, and general characteristics related to temperament and outward appearance.

Regarding the shows' collective coverage of Hillary Clinton, the scandal discussed most frequently was the investigation related to her use of a private email server as Secretary of State. This topic included commentary on the content of emails themselves, FBI Director James Comey's responses to the investigation, and WikiLeaks activity more broadly, and was covered for 28 minutes 24 seconds in total across the three programs. In addition to this coverage, the hosts also discussed the perception of Clinton as being representative of the political establishment and motivated by power and money. Overwhelmingly, these negative associations were discussed relatively infrequently, as the most prominent mentions of Clinton involved her historic status as the first female major party presidential candidate.

Unlike the discussion of Trump's scandals throughout the 2016 presidential election, Clinton's coverage rarely took place in a distinct and discrete manner. Rather, the commentary reflected a pattern of intertextual fragmentation in which the hosts weaved discussions of Clinton's scandals into their narration of other people and events. The indirect nature in which

this conversation took place perhaps suggests attempts made by the hosts to prevent these discussions from taking full focus, instead directing viewers' attention to other events making news. This fragmented quality of their discussion made it difficult for Clinton to emerge as a main focus, perhaps an intentional outcome, as the hosts' dialogue targeted many actors other than herself.

In addition to the three hosts' coverage of Trump and Clinton's relevant scandals, each program included a significant amount of commentary on the political environment during the 2016 presidential election more broadly. Candidates aside, the forthcoming election season was framed in an overwhelmingly negative manner, as the hosts consistently voiced their disapproval of both candidates and displeasure with the contentious environment of the 2016 election. Stemming from this sense of dissatisfaction, the hosts occasionally adopted a cautionary tone, even directly encouraging their viewers to vote based on the high stakes of the election. While Noah, Colbert, and Oliver all engaged in this general election commentary, it was most prevalent throughout *Last Week Tonight*, as Oliver frequently expressed his displeasure with the political environment and referenced the election in a negative manner.

While similar patterns emerged across these three programs regarding the focal points of their conversations, each predominantly focusing on Donald Trump, the manners in which each host engaged in this dialogue differed. These distinctions emerged particularly clearly through their discussions of Trump's sexual assault allegations and *Access Hollywood* tape, as this was the most frequently discussed topic across each platform.

Trevor Noah's tone proved to have the most significant range throughout the episodes studied, as his comments existed on a broad spectrum ranging from crude and profane to serious and cautionary. Throughout the studied episodes of *The Daily Show*, Noah's language contained

more vulgarity and name-calling than that of Oliver or Colbert, perhaps due to the show's shorter airtime. As a more abbreviated program, Noah had less time to make his point through elaborate metaphors and sketches, which serves as a potential explanation for this stylistic pattern.

Despite this quick attack style frequently employed, Noah occasionally abandoned attempts to be humorous altogether, addressing the audience with a serious and careful tone. This occurred most frequently throughout his discussion of sexual assault, as Noah engaged in a detailed commentary on the differences between "saying dirty things and glorifying non-consensual sexual contact" (Noah, 2016, October 10). Noah was the only host to display this sort of jump from profanity to a more solemn tone, as Oliver and Colbert remained more balanced in their integration of humor and messaging.

Colbert's chosen comedic technique during the sample of episodes studied was the use of parody. As opposed to Noah's quicker attack style, Colbert's sketches were more drawn out and utilized deeper, more thoughtful plot lines. These skits included parodies of the Gettysburg Address, criticizing Trump for his unconventional campaign speech at this location, and a crime show parody called "FBI Email Readers Unit" referencing Clinton's email scandal. These conversations, although communicating similar messages, were lengthier and more in-depth than those occurring on the other programs, and maintained a purely humorous theme.

Oliver's comedic delivery, on the other hand, relied predominantly on the use of metaphor. While his dialogue contained a tone similar to that of the other hosts, his heavy use of this tool set his style apart. Oliver mainly presented metaphors to broadly describe the nature of the 2016 election season, drawing hyperbolic comparisons to dramatically negative situations, like a "shit filled cornucopia that just keeps on giving," to communicate his disapproval (Oliver, 2016, October 30). This tendency became somewhat of a theme throughout the episodes studied,

as Oliver traditionally prefaced his periods of election coverage with some sort of metaphor illustrating the topic's bleakness for the audience.

Similarly, Oliver relied on metaphors to criticize Donald Trump's appearance. This strategy served a purpose far greater than to simply call attention to Trump's looks, working, instead, to delegitimize his candidacy and, at times, emasculate him. The metaphoric language allowed these messages to retain a humorous content, therefore amusing the audience, while still delivering the same point.

Analysis

When examining the episodes of *Last Week Tonight*, *The Tonight Show*, and *The Daily Show* that aired in the six-week period preceding the election, several trends emerged regarding the hosts' coverage of Donald Trump versus Hillary Clinton. Categorized as late night political comedy shows, each of the three programs studied couched political discussions and criticisms in humor.

While each of the three programs studied were unique in their approaches to covering the 2016 presidential election - integrating various interviews, monologues, and comedic bits – they were remarkably similar in the amount of airtime they dedicated to the scandals of Donald Trump rather than Hillary Clinton. Throughout the election process, sexual assault scandals related to Donald Trump dominated coverage, while emails, including comments regarding WikiLeaks and FBI Director James Comey, emerged as the most frequently discussed scandal pertaining to Clinton. Although similar content emerged each of the three programs, *The Daily Show*, *Last Week Tonight*, and *The Late Show*, the manner in which each respective host delivered his message varied. The following sections will explore the content of these programs pertaining to presidential scandals throughout the 2016 Presidential Election, examining both quantitative and qualitative trends.

Setting the context of the 2016 Election

In addition to the coverage pertaining to each of the two candidates and their individual scandals, each host engaged in a discussion of the election and the unique political climate of 2016 more broadly. This commentary, proving overwhelmingly negative in nature, thus served to frame the election in a particular light and communicate an overall negative tone to viewers. Although not true across the board, in some cases this language was ancillary to a separate

conversation of the candidates' scandals, thus projecting the general feeling of hopelessness and negativity as a direct result of one of the candidates' indiscretions.

Trevor Noah employed this sort of technique, commenting in the October 10, 2016 of *The Daily Show*, "Welcome to the 2016 Presidential Election: If you're on TV and you say something that offends the nation, you're gonna lose your job. But don't worry, you can still run for President" (Noah, 2016, October 10). While speaking generally of the election, this commentary serves as a clear reference to Donald Trump and the scandal surrounding the leaked Entertainment Tonight video that fueled accusations of sexual assault and misogyny. Noah's reference to job loss seems to refer to Billy Bush, who faced these repercussions for his part in the event and presents a clear contrast to Trump's role and resulting treatment. Although these particular messages seem clear, this excerpt additionally gestures toward the presidential election more broadly, highlighting its unusual nature and standard for presidential behavior.

Stephen Colbert made similar references to the unusual election season, although avoided such specifics throughout his evaluation. While there was no shortage of discussion of each candidate throughout his coverage, Colbert also presented general commentary on the election with a tone of puzzlement and disbelief. This was reflected in comments such as,

"Oh, don't forget, Daylight Savings Time...is this weekend. Remember, it's fall back. That means when it's 2AM on Sunday morning, turn your clock back to 1AM then don't forget to set your alarm to wake you up at 2 so you can set it back to 1 again and if we all just keep doing that it'll never be Tuesday and we won't know what happens and we'll be fine" (Colbert, 2016, November 4).

With this commentary, Colbert refrained from referencing a particular candidate, instead expressing his anxiety regarding the election's results altogether. Through this sense of nervousness regarding the outcome, he communicates to viewers that, either way, the results of the election will be undesirable and perhaps cast a negative shadow on the future of the country.

This pattern emerged frequently throughout the sampled episodes of *The Late Show*, as Colbert tended to address the American public in a manner that painted them as victims of a hopeless and undeserved electoral decision. Rather than acknowledge the democratic processes that elected both Trump and Clinton as the major party candidates, Colbert instead engaged in commentary highlighting the public's undue punishment and suffering.

On the October 26, 2016 episode of *The Late Show*, Colbert likened the imminent presidential election to the sinking of the Titanic and instructing audience members to “tell your family you love them and make your peace with God” (Colbert, 2016, October 26). Again, Colbert frames the election as a dark cloud looming over the future of the nation, suggesting that neither result would be entirely favorable. Through comments like these, Colbert promotes a negative perception of the 2016 Presidential Election altogether, before even delving into the individual actions of either major party candidate.

John Oliver adopted a similar tone throughout his coverage of the election on *Last Week Tonight*. When introducing the topic of the election, generally at the start of the program, Oliver offered an alternative, satirical title, such as: “What did I do to deserve this? I always tried to be a good person is this because I stole candy once in 4th grade please stop punishing us 2016” (Oliver, 2016, October 2). The frequency of these outlandish introductions facilitated an unfavorable portrayal of the 2016 Presidential Election for viewers. The shows reflected an innate sense of suffering and an implication that the American public was being victimized by the circumstances of the presidential election.

This victim-like perspective was further highlighted through introductions in which Oliver offered an apology, such as, “I don’t even believe in past lives, but I must have done something really fucking terrible in a past life to deserve this I’m sorry I’m sorry I’m sorry

2016” (Oliver, 2016, October 16). Here, Oliver’s satirical attempt to un-do the reality of the election through his comedic apology ignores the series of democratic processes that lead to the situation, and instead focuses on his perceived undesirability and negative framing of the choices posed in the election.

Oliver explicitly called on the audience to address this negativity with action. Despite often ignoring the voting process in which both Trump and Clinton were selected as candidates, Oliver pivoted his message in his November 6, 2016 episode immediately preceding the general election. In this monologue, Oliver adopts a more solemn tone, addressing viewers directly and making no attempt to hide his political bias.

He warns viewers of the possibility of a Trump presidency, saying:

“The point is, that there is a lot to consider on Tuesday. And then, barring recounts, this nightmare of a campaign will be over, which is good, because this election hasn’t so much appealed to our better angels, as it has groped our better angels, mocked their weight, and called them sixes at best. We are at a point where this man has a genuine shot at the presidency, despite having blown up a political party, undermined confidence in our electoral system, declared open season on journalists, and unleashed a river of racism and misogyny. Also – and I feel like we have lost sight of this – he has really stupid hair. It’s important to remember that. It is frankly hard to believe that there was a time when people thought a Trump candidacy would be funny, but there was such a time...I want to believe that America will reject Donald Trump. That our innate sense of decency will kick in like some sort of moral autopilot, but I have been spectacularly wrong before.” (Oliver, 2016, November 6).

While Oliver, like other late night hosts, had spent previous weeks delivering countless jokes targeting Donald Trump, as the election inched closer, his outlook shifted. Now reflecting back on the “time when people thought a Trump candidacy would be funny,” he urges his viewers to couch their laughter and turn their focuses toward the approaching reality (Oliver, 2016, November 6). An ironic position for Oliver to take following weeks of jabs directed at Trump, he adopted more of an advising role in the days leading up to the election and attempted to use his public platform to, instead, urge the public to reject Donald Trump on their ballots.

Although other hosts similarly referenced their displeasure with the election, Oliver was the only one to directly address his hope for Donald Trump to lose, saying, “I want to believe that America will reject Donald Trump – that our innate sense of decency will kick in like some sort of moral autopilot – but I have been spectacularly wrong before” (Oliver, 2016, November 6). While it is clear through this analysis that both Trevor Noah and Stephen Colbert disapprove of Donald Trump as a serious presidential candidate, neither addressed their belief in this direct a manner, nor did they reference the innately immoral act of voting for him.

Describing the Candidates

Amidst their overwhelmingly negative commentary on the election as a whole, the three hosts thoroughly discussed the individual candidates and their respective scandals and qualities, as well. Although both candidates had clear flaws and were characterized negatively across media context in terms of behavior and appearance, all three programs focused disproportionately on Trump in this context.

Colbert’s monologues on *The Late Show* contained the most commentary regarding Trump’s appearance, including comments mocking both his hair and skin color. Some of this language regarding Trump’s appearance included descriptions of him resembling a tiger, a pumpkin, and likening his hair to a “cheese head” in conjunction with a rally held in Greenbay, Wisconsin (Colbert, 2016, October 19). John Oliver joined in on this ridicule, referring to Trump as a “spray tanned Furby” (Oliver, 2016, October 25). While not necessarily categorized as scandals, each of these comments serves to delegitimize Trump as a serious presidential candidate, a response to the backlash that was energized in the wake of several scandals. The hosts’ ridicule of Trump’s outward appearance, in the context of their commentary as a whole, contribute to their negative framing of the election and of him as a serious presidential candidate.

The three hosts' comments about Trump spanned beyond his outward appearance and delved into more innate characteristics, particularly his speech patterns. John Oliver, evaluating Donald Trump's first presidential debate performance, reported that it "consisted mainly of an incoherent jumble of sniffles and nonsense. Like a racist toddler coming out of dental surgery" (Oliver, 2016, October 2). In pointing out the incoherence of Trump's debate content, Oliver works toward further delegitimizing the candidate and undermining his credibility as a candidate. Not only voicing concerns regarding Trump's ability to be articulate his political positions, Oliver additionally categorizes Trump as a racist, drawing from behaviors that had contributed to several of his noteworthy scandals throughout the campaign. Finally, by including the toddler comment, Oliver further invalidates Trump, implying that he should not be taken seriously.

Trump's speech patterns were under fire on *The Late Show*, too, as Colbert resorted to playing a montage of incoherent moments from Trump's rallies to make his point. In one such monologue, Colbert said,

"And Donald Trump wasn't done making news. On Saturday, he turned a rally in Pennsylvania into a free-form poetry slam. 'Our country is becoming a third world country. People walk to the office, they walk to get a loaf of bread, they get shot. CNN, Clinton News Network, which no body's watching anyway, so what difference does it make? She could be crazy, she could really be crazy. They don't make movies like they used to, is that right?' And they sure as hell don't make presidential candidates like they used to, am I right?" (Colbert, 2016, October 3).

In relating Donald Trump's rally speech to a free-form poetry slam, Colbert suggests that his message lacked an obvious theme or direction. While this was perhaps a benign comment in comparison to other critiques made by Colbert, his final comment, that they don't make presidential candidates like they used to, targets Trump directly, undermining his credibility and delegitimizing him as a candidate.

Colbert's commentary on Trump's language patterns extended to word choice as well. In his October 31, 2016 episode, Colbert played a clip of Trump reacting to Clinton's email scandal, which regained attention in the wake of an investigation into Anthony Weiner's Internet use. The clip displays Trump declaring, "This is the biggest political scandal since Watergate. Her political action was willful, deliberate, intentional, and purposeful" (Colbert, 2016, October 31). Trump likely intended for these words to suggest a sense of intentionality underlying Clinton's questioned email use. Despite the intent of this message, Colbert's reaction targeted the repetitive nature of Trump's word choice, using a thesaurus as a prop and responding, "Uhh, it was also voluntary, conscious, resolve, designful, and a forethought...I'm telling you, he may not win the election, but that guy's gonna ace the SATs" (Colbert, 2016, October 31). By responding in this way, Colbert undermined the meaning of Trump's message and instead mocked his repetitive word choice. Colbert further devalued Trump's status as a serious presidential candidate by suggesting that he might not win the election and drawing a comparison to a student studying for the SATs, which perhaps served to make a broader statement regarding his maturity and readiness to be Commander in Chief.

This sort of demeaning language used to target Trump's level of maturity was employed by Oliver, as well, in the October 2, 2016 episode of *Last Week Tonight*. Regarding Trump's language patterns and vocabulary, Oliver stated that he "treats his statements like they're Pokémon. They're imaginary things that he nurtures and evolves and eventually uses to fight with strangers" (Oliver, 2016, October 2). This statement not only rejects Trump's eloquence, but mocks his public speaking capabilities and, again, draws a child-like comparison. The reference to fighting with strangers, likely referring to Trump's antagonistic Twitter activity, is likened to an online video game, again undermining his credibility.

Trump's language patterns are further problematized insofar as they connect to his tendency to present inaccurate information to the public. While these comments could be considered part of a discussion of Trump's scandals as a candidate, they simultaneously relate to his unusual speaking habits pointed out by the three hosts.

In the October 11, 2016 episode of *The Daily Show*, Trevor Noah played a montage of Trump's debate performance accompanied by an added buzzer noise indicating which of his statements was false. The comedic element of this bit was found in the frequency of the buzzer, which ultimately overpowered the dialogue itself. Following the clip, Noah responded, "It's not even that the man lies, it's more like he rejects the very idea that the point of language is to describe reality" (Noah, 2016, October 11). With the montage supplying the humorous content during this segment, Noah's commentary in this case serves less of a comedic purpose, as he shift into more of a fact-checking role. Stating that Trump is acting in discordance with what Noah deems "the point of language," he not only pokes holes in Trump's message, but in his validity as a candidate whose purpose is to present substantive political remarks. Noah continues his reaction to Trump's debate commentary, saying, "It's like someone scraped the resin from the side of the debate – just concentrated bullshit" (Noah, 2016, October 11). Again, Noah undermines Trump's legitimacy and presents an interpretation of his debate performance and messaging as insufficient for a presidential candidate.

Defining "presidential"

The focus on Trump's language patterns and tendency to present incorrect information is likely intended to emphasize an unhinged or unfiltered quality. In doing so, the hosts not only make statements regarding his public speaking ability or knowledge on current events, but also allude to a set of presidential expectations that stand in contrast with his behavior. This message

is delivered by the hosts in several ways, including commentary on his temperament, reactions to his erratic behavior, and contrasts from revered former presidents throughout American history.

Oliver, on the October 2, 2016 episode of *Last Week Tonight*, made the first of a series of statements on Trump's fitness as a candidate throughout this data collection period. Regarding Trump's assertion that he possesses a "winning temperament [to be president]" Oliver replied that Trump "could have looked in to the camera and said 'I am a small Korean woman' and it would have been more believable" (Oliver, 2016, October 2). The absurdity of this comparison communicates Oliver's disagreement with Trump's statement and overall disapproval of his temperament. Veiled by humor, this statement reveals Oliver's evaluation of Trump as dishonest and possibly unfit to become president.

Noah used references to previous American presidents and the presidency itself to express similar disapproval in the October 10 episode of *The Daily Show*. Here, he makes reference to a leaked *Entertainment Tonight* video in which Trump alluded to his history with sexual assault, specifically, his ability to make unwanted physical advancements toward women due to his celebrity status. Noah says, "When the history of American politics is written, it will be divided into two distinct eras: before pussy and after pussy" (Noah, 2016, October 10). By setting Trump in the context of American history through this reference to sexual assault, Noah suggests a sense of incompetence that sets Trump apart from other substantial figures in history. Further, suggesting that history would be divided in such a way, thus considering that this event will stand as somewhat of a landmark in time, Noah draws more attention to its significance and unprecedented nature. In his October 11, 2016 episode, Noah continues these comparisons, referring to Trump as "Groper Cleveland," a play off of former United States President Grover

Cleveland (Noah, 2016, October 11). This play on words further highlights Trump's unpresidential ethos, making a distinct contrast between him and those who came before him.

Going to perhaps the greatest length to make this point, Stephen Colbert, in the October 24, 2016 episode of *The Late Show*, made a comparison between Donald Trump and Abraham Lincoln. At first discussing Trump's recent visit to Gettysburg, introducing the link between Trump's message and Lincoln's, Colbert played a clip of Trump saying, "Every woman lied when they came forward to hurt my campaign. All of these liars will be sued after the election is over" (Colbert, 2016, October 24). Given the location of this speech, in which Colbert said Trump "stayed focused on his message of uniting the country for about 45 seconds," it was then compared to the Gettysburg Address, one of the most famous speeches in American history. To further emphasize this messaging contrast, Colbert then introduces a satiric segment featuring an animation of "Abraham Lincoln's ghost," in which he reveals what Colbert calls the "first draft of the Gettysburg Address:"

"Four score and seven years ago, our Fathers brought forth on this continent a new nation conceived on liberty and dedicated to the proposition that I did not proposition those women, they're liars! And, I mean, just look at them. They wouldn't be my first choice. And when I said 'grab 'em by the petticoat,' that was merely log cabin talk. I will sue those lying jezebels into the ground! The consecrated ground in which our brave soldiers now lie. Sad! That's why we resolve that this nation under God shall make America great again and that government of the people by the people for the people shall not perish from the earth...if I win. Otherwise, the whole Civil War is rigged! Jefferson Davis is a bad hombre! Lock him up! Lock him up! Lock him up! Lock him up!" (Colbert, 2016, October 24).

The juxtaposition of the animation of Abraham Lincoln and the hyperbolic language meant to replicate that of Donald Trump presents a stark contrast between Trump's messaging and that of traditional American presidential rhetoric. By inserting these antagonistic remarks in a segment calling attention to the Gettysburg Address, Colbert raises questions regarding Trump's readiness and qualification to join the ranks of presidents like Abraham Lincoln.

Although employing heavy satire and hyperbole, each of these comments was rooted in a statement made by Trump, as evidenced through the rally clip played prior to the segment. While not directly related to specific scandals, these qualities serve to frame Trump's candidacy in an unfavorable manner by referencing negative behavioral patterns.

Clinton's candidacy, on the other hand, was framed in a much more positive manner. While the hosts did not directly address Clinton's positive behavior patterns or personality, they relied heavily on her status as the first female presidential candidate when distinguishing her qualifications from Trump's. Clinton was heralded as a historic presidential candidate who would welcome a new wave of possibilities for females throughout the country, while Trump was continually criticized for his unconventional behavior.

On October 5, 2016, Noah used this sort of language when drawing attention to the differences between the candidates and their distinct historical legacies, saying, "Now, just 33 days left until America chooses between its first female president or its first what the fuck president" (Noah, 2016, October 5). Although the shortcomings and scandals of both presidential candidates dominated media coverage and conversation throughout the election period, Noah frames Trump as the only unlikely, unqualified candidate. He, instead of engaging in a conversation of Trump's indiscretions as well as Clinton's, utilizes more of an apples-to-oranges approach, comparing the historic status of her election to Trump's perceived lack of qualification.

Not only did the hosts' discussions of the candidates' qualifications emerge as drastically different in tone, but their commentary on their respective scandals was markedly different in both quality and quantity, as each of the three hosts seemed to dramatize Trump's scandals and minimize Clinton's.

Defining Scandals

Speaking to this dramatization and fixation, Trump's involvement in the leaked *Entertainment Tonight* video received by far the most coverage of any scandal across each of the three programs. Branching off of this incident were several additional discussions, each following a common pattern of highlighting a series of misogynistic behaviors displayed by Trump. In many cases, the hosts accomplished this by negatively highlighting Trump's relationship with women, generally as an addition or sidebar to an ongoing, sometimes unrelated, conversation.

Along these lines, in the October 27, 2016 episode of *The Late Show*, Colbert inserted a comment mocking Trump's misogyny into a broad discussion of the election. He said, "The point is, the election is getting ugly. Or, as Trump would say, 'Wouldn't be my first choice'" (Colbert, 2016, October 27). This comment makes reference to Trump's comments, which frequently harp on women's looks, including those he had used to defend himself against sexual assault allegations brought forth by women he deemed unattractive. Not only does Colbert's commentary serve to highlight the competitive, scandal-laden tone of the election, but it draws attention to Trump's previously recorded statement, thus correlating the two concepts for the audience. While this comment is introduced as a sidebar to a separate conversation, by working comments about Trump into the dialogue, Colbert works to keep these scandals relevant and thus encourages the audience's continued consideration of them, even weeks after their occurrence. This technique reflects Colbert's attempt at agenda setting, in which he works to direct the audience's attention to particular issues over others, therefore communicating which situations should be considered most important.

In another case, in his November 1, 2016 episode, Colbert discusses the tightening polls between Trump and Clinton as the election draws near and the intense candidate enthusiasm begins to decline. As part of this conversation, he includes the comment, “Although, to be fair, any time Donald Trump gets close to a woman, enthusiasm tends to decline” (Colbert, 2016, November 1). The purpose of this segment, declining voter enthusiasm and competitive polling numbers, is thus overshadowed by the theme of misogyny and the possibility that Trump’s appeal to female voters could be compromised in the wake of both allegations of sexual assault and his own statements about women. In this way, Colbert is able to report on current events while employing a selective frame so that a particular event or, in this case, scandal, remains at the forefront of viewers’ attention.

In each of the three programs, the hosts focused disproportionately on Trump’s sexual assault scandals and misogynistic behaviors as compared to other events or candidates. Their treatment of this event as the most significant scandal throughout the election is perhaps best displayed through Trevor Noah’s repetitive reference to the *Entertainment Tonight* video as “Pussygate” throughout several episodes of *The Daily Show* (Noah, 2016, October 12). This blatant comparison to Richard Nixon’s Watergate scandal, widely regarded as one of the most significant, damaging presidential scandals in American history, dramatizes Trump’s scandal and reaffirms its significance to the election.

Rather than communicate a sense of drama regarding Clinton’s most prominently discussed scandal, the hosts instead attempted to shift the focus off of her and onto other relevant actors. The most frequently discussed scandal pertaining to Clinton was her use of a private email server and the FBI investigation that ensued, which comprised 28 minutes and 24 seconds of overall coverage across the three programs examined. This conversation included minimal

discussion of Clinton's individual actions, and instead highlighted the actions of FBI Director James Comey and the released WikiLeaks.

In the October 31, 2016 episode of *The Late Show*, Stephen Colbert engages in a discussion of FBI Director James Comey's second letter to Congress regarding Clinton's emails, which indicated that more had been discovered throughout a separate investigation into Anthony Weiner's email use. Regarding this development, Colbert says, "This October surprise comes right as Secretary Clinton was riding high in the polls in the wake of sexual assault allegations against Donald Trump. Truly, for the Clinton campaign, horny men giveth and horny men taketh away" (Colbert, 2016, October 31). Rather than focus on the scandal itself, and therefore engage in a discussion centered on Clinton, Colbert shifts the focus to Weiner and Trump. In doing so, he suggests that this discovery of new emails, and potential investigation, was an example of men taking away something that was rightfully hers – in this case, her lead in the polls and potential election.

This theme of punishment was consistent regarding discussion of Clinton's email scandals, and was again brought up by Colbert in his November 2, 2016 episode. Also referencing Comey and the FBI investigation into Clinton's email use, he says, "It looks like the FBI is trying to hurt Hillary's campaign, which has a lot of people upset. Mostly Russia. That's their gig" (Colbert, 2016, November 2). Again, the focus is shifted away from Hillary and onto other parties, with Colbert going as far as to suggest that the FBI is using the investigation as a tool to deliberately hurt Clinton's chances at election. This statement serves to delegitimize this investigation, framing it with a suggestion of deceit, thus minimizing the scandal and Clinton's role in it.

John Oliver continued this theme through much of his discussion of Clinton's email scandal, choosing to frame the events as exacerbated by outside actors and unnecessarily dragged on. In his October 30, 2016 episode, Oliver engaged in a thorough conversation of Comey's role in the scandal, mocking the second letter sent to Congress in which he declares that he "cannot assess" the severity of Clinton's newly located emails (Oliver, 2016, October 30). Using satire to suggest that Clinton's emails are a "mystery box" that could contain "anything from nothing to Gwyneth Paltrow's head," Oliver calls Comey's rationale and expertise into question, again ignoring Clinton's role in the scandal and downplaying its seriousness.

This scandal was minimized yet again by Trevor Noah, who referenced Donna Brazil leaking a town hall question to Clinton prior to the event. In his October 18, 2016 episode, Noah said, "It's disturbing to find out that the Clinton campaign may have had access to town hall questions before the event, but be careful because when you dig further into these Hillary emails, you may find something that will bore you" (Noah, 2016, October 18). Here, rather than shifting the blame, Noah instead diminishes the importance of both the leaked town hall question and email scandal by referring to the content as boring. This comment serves to lighten Clinton's incrimination and, in a sense, cheapen the FBI investigation into the content of her emails by suggesting their benign nature.

Overall, while the hosts engaged in conversation regarding Clinton's establishment background and ties to big money, even going as far as to reference her sense of superiority and cockiness, this coverage paled in comparison to that of Trump. Even during segments targeting Clinton's scandals, much of the dialogue surrounded other actors and their influence on the public's perception of her guilt. Therefore, the hosts worked not only to demonize Donald Trump, but to actively exonerate Clinton.

While individual scandal-related events associated with Clinton did not comprise nearly as much coverage as did those of Trump, each of the hosts spent a fairly substantial amount of time comparing the two candidates throughout the campaign period. Some of these cases of comparison served to highlight the qualities of one candidate over the other, but all generally framed the election in a negative manner for viewers.

This evenhandedly negative coverage occurred in the October 4, 2016 episode of *The Late Show*, when Colbert recapped the previous night's Vice Presidential Debate, saying, "For those of you who missed the debate, I'll boil it down for you. Once upon a time, there was a man who didn't release his taxes and a woman who didn't release her emails...and FIGHT" (Colbert, 2016, October 4). This comment seems to even the playing field, as Colbert presents scandals associated with each candidate rather than showing preference to those committed by only one. In framing the Vice Presidential Debate in this way, Colbert acknowledges that Trump's and Clinton's scandals have equally dominated conversation throughout the election cycle, which has consistently maintained a contentious tone.

This sense of contention gained additional focus during *Last Week Tonight*, as Oliver recapped the election through descriptions of both candidates' personal qualities. Throughout this segment, he describes Trump as a "lying, handsy, narcissistic sociopath," and Clinton a "hawkish, Wall Street-friendly embodiment of everything that people can't stand about politics" (Oliver, 2016, October 16). Bringing to light several significant scandals associated with both candidates, including Trump's history with sexual assault and Clinton's controversial relationship with big business, he hands out an even criticism of both candidates, painting voters' options as noticeably bleak. While Oliver made a point to acknowledge both candidates'

shortcomings through these descriptions, this did not serve as a common theme across each program.

Throughout *The Late Show*'s comparison of the two major party candidates, a clear preference for Clinton emerged. During the November 1, 2016 episode, Colbert showed this partiality in his comments about Clinton, saying, "I get it, she's like eating your vegetables, nobody wants to eat broccoli, but I think we can all agree – a head of broccoli would make a better president than Donald Trump" (Colbert, 2016, November 1). Through this comparison, Colbert acknowledges that both Clinton and Trump could be considered unfavorable presidential choices. Equating Clinton to "eating your vegetables," communicates the message that a vote for her, even if lacking enthusiasm, is the healthiest choice for the public to make, given the two options. Further, Colbert's comment serves to delegitimize Trump, proving that even through an acknowledgement of both candidates' shortcomings, he is still the weakest link.

Implications

The 2016 Presidential Election has been referenced as an unprecedented event in American electoral history. With the rise of political outsiders, the first female nominee, and the numerous controversies from both major party candidates, this election represented uncharted political territory in several ways. While tensions often mount between candidates in presidential elections, the political atmosphere during the 2016 race stands out as perhaps the most contentious in recent years.

Plagued by what seemed like a constant stream of political scandals, the election season triggered a wave of commentary from both the media and public. This discourse grew increasingly negative throughout both mainstream media and less conventional programs, such as late night political comedy. Due to the high volume and continuous reveal of political scandals, this coverage dominated the news cycle as TV hosts reacted to each new news item.

As this content analysis shows, late night political comedy programs' coverage of the 2016 presidential election focused heavily on political scandals, using them to frame the election in a negative manner. In an environment deemed unprecedented in controversy, the tone and content of these programs seemed to conform to the political atmosphere, adapting to the nature of the environment. Reacting to the stream of political scandals, the hosts utilized comedic methods such as metaphor and satire to mimic the negative political climate and communicate their displeasure with the overall electoral situation.

Beyond simply reporting on the latest scandals, these humorous techniques allowed the hosts to insert their own messages, generally conveying some sense of disapproval or disgust with both the process of the election, the collective array of scandals and controversy, and, in the case of Trump, with the candidate himself. Their commentary on Trump predominantly relied on

ad hominem attacks, branching off of a particular scandal to more delve more deeply in his personal qualities. Although provoked by the topic of scandal, the hosts more actively engaged this fallacious technique, fixating their commentary on Trump's appearance, characteristics, and other tendencies. This further distracted their message from the specific news of the day and instead communicated a more general sense of disapproval for Trump as a candidate.

While the hosts' respective discourse was overwhelmingly negative in nature, couching their commentary in humor allowed them to make serious political commentary and critique while downplaying the gravity of their statements through lighthearted banter and generic convention (Lichter, Baumgartner, & Morris, 2014). By using humor as a vehicle to engage in political discourse, the political comedy genre serves as an exemplar of Neil Postman's ideas on the role of entertainment in lowering both the quality of political discourse as well as the collective critical capabilities of the viewing public.

Expressing his concern that the blending of news into entertainment would devalue traditional sources of information, Postman feared that we, as an American public, were "amusing ourselves to death" (Postman, 1985, p. 25). Traditional sources of news have increasingly moved to incorporate entertaining, sensational techniques into their broadcasts, however they have retained a journalistic tone and generic conventions, making it more difficult for audiences to evaluate and prioritize the quality of information. Political comedy, while reporting much of the same information as traditional sources, embodies Postman's vision more clearly through the direct use of humor and comic hosts. For audiences, the genre therefore serves a dual purpose to entertain and inform, a duality that Postman believed threatened overall credibility.

This danger can be seen throughout the programs studied, as the hosts used their platforms to advance strategic messages couched in humor. While the political comedy genre is primarily recognized as entertainment, audiences' expectations for amusement can become windows for persuasion as the hosts express their political stances through light-hearted comedy. The jokes delivered by each host, although intended to trigger laughter, also serve as political statements that rest on specific ideological positions. Therefore, while the audience laughs at jokes targeting Donald Trump's appearance or characteristics, they are simultaneously being exposed to serious political content and commentary.

Through the comical nature of these programs, it is easy for this sense of manipulation to go unacknowledged. At times, the hosts attempted to present a sense of balance by poking fun at both Trump and Clinton, but their biases against Trump grew increasingly evident throughout the course of the data collection period. The comedy, then, served more of a persuasive role as the hosts mounted cases against Donald Trump with each successive program. Interestingly, the data revealed that the hosts did not so much make a case for Clinton, as they did make a case against Trump, reflecting the general consensus that support for Clinton's candidacy was lackluster both from media pundits and the public as a whole.

The bias inherent in this trend serves as an illustration of Postman's concern that soft news programs promote entertainment over reason and therefore lack a sense of credibility. Although maintaining their focus on current events and election coverage, the one-sided, hypercritical nature of the hosts' discourse undermines their ability to be viewed as neutral sources of information, thus supporting Postman's position.

While these shows exist separately from more serious message-bearing shows, their underlying messages are comparable in ideological content. The nature of the messages

presented by late night political comedy hosts resembles traditional political commentary, however their entertaining features actively work to minimize this perception. By operating as hybrids of news and entertainment, these hosts distance themselves from traditional journalistic standards, which thus enables them to project their own biases with little or no consequence to their own ethos.

Further, the three hosts' biased discourse and rejection of the major party candidates serves to entirely ignore the electoral process that selected the nominees. Focusing their commentary on the candidates' various qualities that made them unfit to serve as president, the hosts engaged in media fragmentation, selectively exposing their viewers to partial information. This sort of fragmentation threatens to "lead people to increasingly insulate themselves from divergent viewpoints" and could thus "polarize the mass public into divergent ideological camps" (Arceneau & Johnson, 2010, p. 29). Therefore, while the hosts appear to be addressing the American public with their commentary, they effectively exclude an entire constituency. Their one-sided, ideologically biased remarks harp on a reality that exists exclusively for a liberally biased electorate – likely those tuning in.

The biased nature of this genre is further perpetuated by the highly saturated and politically polarized media environment in which it functions. As articulated by Goodson (2011), the evolution of news media has resulted in countless forms co-existing and competing for public attention. While many serve distinct purposes, they contribute to a media environment overflowing with information for public negotiation. Late night political programming, ideologically biased or not, exists as one such fragment of information competing for viewership with countless other television programs. Because of this sense of competition, audience members are able to hand select programs to interact with, thus increasing the chances of

engaging with like-minded hosts. Although the messages presented by Oliver, Noah, and Colbert contain a distinctly liberal bias, it is likely that their loyal viewers share these perspectives.

The intense political polarization of the American public lends itself to this theory, as deep ideological divisions work to separate the public into individualized realities. The impact of this phenomenon has been studied in the context of social media, indicating that users are more likely to engage with online communities holding beliefs similar to their own than the reverse (Quattrociocchi, Scala & Sunstein, 2016). Once separated into these distinct ideological communities, as posited by Quattrociocchi, Scala, and Sunstein (2016), these members aggregate information that confirms their individual biases and reject that which challenges them. This confined community, referred to as an echo chamber, thus reinforces members' selective exposure to information and further fuels their polarization.

If these effects are measurable in the context of social media communities, they are likely occurring among television audiences, as well. With television programs catering to both sides of the aisle, late night political comedy may serve as a sort of echo chamber that communicates and reaffirms a particular group's political position. Under this assumption, hosts' liberal biases would be shared by their viewers and therefore do less to persuade than to validate existing assumptions.

Based on this expectation, the hosts' anxiety-driven rhetoric in reference to the election would serve only to perpetuate viewers' existing apprehensions. As researchers have thoroughly studied audience-learning impacts, this sort of language is likely to have yielded some measurable effect on viewers' overall estimations of the electoral situation, and potentially their future political actions. This is an effect that could warrant further study to determine the implications of hosts inciting or perpetuating feelings of anxiety among their viewers through

rhetoric. Assuming that late night political comedy audience bases hold biases similar to those of the hosts, these language patterns may serve to further irritate audiences and impact their imminent political decisions.

The echo chamber concept illustrated by the shared biases of hosts and viewers supports Meyrowitz's position that multiple forms of media may co-exist without threatening the validity of one another. Regardless of individual merits, he posited that various sources of information could simultaneously prevail, as they will each attract diverse, niche audiences. This has certainly grown to be the case with the political comedy genre, as its audience tends to be politically oriented, drawn to comedy, and likely supporting of the hosts' left-leaning messaging.

Further, in political environments as contentious as the 2016 presidential election, viewers may be increasingly drawn to political comedy as a sort of release. Inundated with information stemming from the 24-hour news cycle, viewers may gravitate toward these programs, which offer a fresh (and amusing) take on current events. While heavily biased in their content, the shows' underlying sense of comedy may be refreshing to those holding a similarly negative perception of the election season.

By encouraging viewers to rally around certain positions, such as the deteriorating political environment, this genre may serve as a vehicle for political reform. Despite biases, political comedy programs are able to represent the views of a segment of the population, drawing audiences in through their unique style and presentation of information. In doing so, these shows hold the potential to attract widespread attention and hold public figures accountable for their actions – a critical feature of any form of media.

Much of the literature on the late night political comedy genre focuses on its audience impacts, examining learning potential and cognitive effects of political comedy. These studies

present a range of findings, some arguing for the credibility of the genre as a valid news source (Goodnow, 2011), and others arguing the reverse (Postman, 1985). Effects like additional information searching (Amarasingam, 2011), political heuristics (Amarasingam, 2011), and increased information retention through humor (Young, 2004) are discussed throughout this work, which relies on in-depth studies of audience members' political knowledge both before and after their exposure to political comedy. While these studies present conclusions regarding the presence or absence of learning, they refrain from examining what exactly the audiences are taking away from these programs.

This content analysis targeted the political comedy genre from a different angle. Rather than further contributing to the literature on audience impacts, this study targeted the hosts themselves and analyzed both their specific messaging and comedic strategies. Through a content analysis of three late night political comedy programs airing over a period of six weeks, this study found that each host utilized humor as a vehicle to present their own political biases and to persuade their viewers to adopt similar positions. By pairing this political commentary with specific comedic techniques like metaphor and satire, these efforts were accomplished in an unobvious manner and diluted with laughter. This research helps us to understand the work of the political comedy genre, pulling apart the humorous elements and commentary to evaluate the core messages being delivered. While these findings allow us to hypothesize about the genre's implications for viewers, they do not provide conclusions regarding any measurable audience persuasion.

However, based on existing findings demonstrating the biases of political comedy and its persuasive effects, future research on this topic should branch off to explore the specific ideological impacts of biased political messaging delivered through comedy. Drawing from the

comedic strategies employed by these political comedy hosts, future research could examine the effectiveness of techniques such as metaphor, parody, or satire. This would further illuminate the impact of late night political comedy on the audience and would provide insight into the level of persuasion their messages achieve. Findings such as these will prompt us to further consider the implications of the political comedy genre as well as Postman's underlying inquiry: "To whom do we complain, and when, and in what tone of voice, when serious discourse dissolves into giggles? What is the antidote to a culture's being drained by laughter?" (Postman, 1985, p. 97).

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