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# Real Fake News: The Colbert Report and Affective Polarization

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Real Fake News:  
*The Colbert Report* and Affective Polarization

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### Abstract

This Independent Study examines the relationship between political satire and affective polarization. Affective polarization is a newly growing form of political polarization wherein partisans are polarized based on mutual dislike for opposing partisans rather than ideological disagreements. Political news has been linked to this recent trend in polarization. Over the past two decades, political scientists have taken an interest in investigating the impact of political satire programs like *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report* through the same lens as traditional political news. These satirical news programs implement satire, a more complex form of comedy that can require more cognitive processing and can produce a variety of viewing effects. This project looks into how orientation of *The Colbert Report* and partisanship influences one's affective response to viewing a clip from *The Colbert Report*. Drawing from past research, I establish a dual moderating hypothesis which predicted that conservatives under the entertainment orientation and liberals under the information orientation would experience higher affective polarization. I utilize an experimental research design to test my hypotheses. Results showed that liberals did not experience different levels of affective polarization under different orientations, and that conservatives experienced a stronger affective response under the entertainment orientation.

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## Introduction

On December 18th, 2014 Stephen Colbert concluded the final episode of *The Colbert Report* and thus ended one of the most influential eras of political satire in United States history. Between both Colbert and fellow late night Comedy Central host Jon Stewart of *The Daily Show*, political satire was revitalized and gained a massive following amongst American citizens. While many popular successors have followed in the footsteps of Colbert and Stewart, the duo have remained the most influential mixers of comedy and politics in the 21st century.

Colbert and Stewart format their respective programs in a similar style to TV news programs; with both featuring the discussion of significant and newsworthy topics, but presented in a satirical way. This satirical approach to the discussion of politics has existed in the American media for decades, but never to the success of Colbert and Stewart. The popularity and influence of *The Colbert Report* and *Daily Show* have called into question the legitimacy of these programs as actual sources of news and not just entertainment programs. The success of Colbert and Stewart has led to a surge in political satire programs, like *Last Week Tonight* with John Oliver, *Full Frontal* with Samantha Bee, and the new iteration of *The Daily Show* with Trevor Noah, which have all achieved great popularity. Political satire has become a key element in the contemporary relationship between politics and media, and has provided a new lens through which the masses interact with current political issues, actors and processes.

If programs like *The Colbert Report* and *Daily Show* are to be regarded as news, then the implications of this classification must be examined in depth. Since the founding days of the United States, the media and press has served as one of, if not the, most powerful tools

for creating informed citizens. In the current era, the news media has evolved into a diverse and often times controversial organ of the modern political sphere. Real news carries with it real impacts, of which political polarization has emerged as one of the most prominent. Americans have become increasingly polarized over the past few decades, with this polarization evolving from being rooted in simple ideological disagreements to becoming rooted in negative affect for opposing partisans. Scholars have pointed to the increasingly diverse news media environment as one of the potential influencers of this polarization. This research project seeks to understand the impact that satirical news, specifically *The Colbert Report*, has on affective polarization. More specifically, I examine how an individual's orientation of *The Colbert Report* as news or entertainment in combination with their partisanship influences their affective reaction.

In my exploration of the influence of exposure to *The Colbert Report* on affective polarization, I will, in Chapter 1, consult the established body of research behind political satire, satirical news, and affective polarization. Scholars have examined a wide array of elements and effects related to these programs, but have yet to establish a connection between a viewer's orientation of satirical news and its impact on affective polarization. In Chapter 2 I will utilize this body of research to develop my theory and form three hypotheses. Chapter 3 will outline the methodology I will use in my experimental research design. Chapter 4 will feature an overview of my collected data and a breakdown of my statistical analyses. Finally, Chapter 5 will involve a discussion of my results, implications of my findings, potential explanations, and considerations for future research.



## Chapter 1: Review of the Literature

My independent study is focused on examining the influence of satirical news programs on affective polarization. Recently, scholars of the press have taken interest in examining the role of entertainment news programs, labeled as “soft news”, as a component of the American press and its influence on the American public. In the current lineup of soft news programs that have been looked at by scholars, political satire news programs, such as *The Daily Show*, *The Colbert Report*, have gained traction as legitimate sources of information and as powerful influencers on the American public. Political satirical news programs, hereby known as satirical news (SN), occupy a unique space in the media spectrum in that they are often focused on entertainment and humor, but feature discussion and elaboration on relevant political topics that are mainstays in traditional hard news.

These programs do not exist purely to be funny, McClennen and Maisel (2014) note how SN, like *The Daily Show*, emerged as a response to “the mainstream media’s dumbing down of politics” in favor of “presenting the public with information that was fun, intelligent, and committed to encouraging critical thinking”. This school of thought that SN carries real sociopolitical impact outside of being simply entertaining has gained considerable momentum over the past two decades. Scholars have examined the various facets of SN, from their content and presentation (Brewer, 2007; Fox et. al, 2011; Newman, 2010) to their audiences and viewing effects (Hmielowski et. al, 2011; LaMarre et. al, 2009; Becker, 2014; Baumgartner and Morris, 2006). With scholars taking more note on the real world effects of SN viewership, I will be investigating them with a similar lens to traditional hard news.

Polarization has been a well documented aspect of American politics for the past three decades, and has begun receiving attention amongst scholars of media. Partisan media in the United States has not only changed the landscape of the American media environment but has found to be correlated with increasingly polarized public attitudes, especially when looking at affective polarization. Compared to the oft-researched ideological and elite polarization, affective polarization holds that polarization of the public is based more on mutual dislike rather than ideological differences. While political and media scholars have frequently examined cable and network hard news as influencers on affective polarization (Iyengar and Hahn, 2009; Lau et. al, 2016; Levendusky, 2013), they have largely ignored the role political comedy and SN have played. SN dual role as a source of entertainment and information makes it so that these programs are often interpreted and oriented differently based on the viewer and the context (LeMarre et. al, 2009; Becker et. al, 2010; Feldman, 2013; Young, 2013) an aspect of the programs that should make them intriguing targets for examining their effects. Additionally, SN programs rely on various forms of humor, which have shown to have a wide array of cognitive effects in media contexts (Polk et. al, 2009; Becker, 2014; Warner et. al, 2015).

The connection between political comedy and affective polarization has, to my knowledge, not yet been established. Fortunately, there is an extensive body of research on media effects, affective polarization, political humor, and SN. This literature review will outline the pre-existing research in the mentioned areas in order to establish a theoretical framework for connecting SN and affective polarization. First, I will look at the research into affective polarization, its effects, and its causal mechanisms. Second, I will examine the research behind the content and presentation of SN and their influence on viewing effects.

Next will be an examination the the cognitive effects of satire and its role in message processing and followed by an analysis of SN audiences and their orientation and perception of political comedy. Finally, I will outline my theoretical framework and hypotheses

### **Affective Polarization and Media**

The past three decades have seen American politics become increasingly polarized in numerous ways. Much of the scholarly research on polarization over the past few decades has focused on polarization along ideological lines and on the elite level. Recently, however, there has been a surge of attention placed on polarization trends at an affective level. Partisan divides are being noticed not only through policy but also through the feelings partisans have for their opposites. A recent survey put out by the Pew Research Center found that fifteen percent of Democratic and seventeen percent of Republican respondents were unhappy with the idea of an immediate family member marrying someone of the opposing party (2014). Compared to survey results from the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, this displeasure is far higher with current Americans than past (Iyengar et. al, 2012). Americans irritation towards partisan opposites has extended to numerous facets of modern day life. Be it the way Americans conduct their spending habits or choose their friends or romantic partners, polarization on an affective level has changed the American social, cultural and political landscapes.

While affective polarization at a mass level is a relatively recent trend in American politics, its roots date back more than half a century. In 1960, Campbell et. al outlined the nature of partisan identification and its impact on political attitudes and feelings. Campbell

et. al note that while ideological identifications are strong influencers on partisan choice, affect has an equal, if not stronger, effect on partisan bonds (1960). Campbell et al found that partisanship is strongly correlated with parental partisanship, and that those who strongly identify with a political party are highly unlikely to break their partisan bond, even if the party's ideology changes. These findings, despite not discussing the role of negative affect, demonstrated the role affect plays in partisanship in 1956, a trend that has continually grown over the subsequent decades.

Based off Campbell et. al's findings, political scientists have emphasized the role affect plays in not only partisan identification, but on the actions and attitudes towards partisan opposites. From these explorations, researchers have isolated the importance of social identity, social distance, and tribalism in determining modern partisan attitudes (Iyengar and Westwood, 2015; Mason, 2014; Mason, 2013; Iyengar et al, 2012). The blending of one's political identity and social identity has dramatically increased in the past two decades, resulting in an electorate that has shown to be aggressively hostile against itself despite holding similar ideological positions on issues (Mason, 2014; Mason, 2013).

There is, however, disagreement over the role of ideology in explaining affective polarization (Webster and Abramowitz, 2017; Rogowski and Sutherland, 2016). In the context of evaluations of candidates and officeholders, Rogowski and Sutherland argue that "Citizens form affective evaluations on the basis of their ideological positions" (2016: 504). Further, Webster and Abramowitz show evidence of affective polarization spurred through polarized ideological thinking in the realm of social welfare. These disagreements over the nature of affective polarization suggest that within specific areas of politics, such as social welfare policy, ideology can play a major role in explaining polarized attitudes and feelings.

Nonetheless, there is great amount of evidence and support for affect as an explanation for mass polarization, especially within the press.

Partisan media outlets have grown rapidly over the past two decades, and have subsequently taken hold of American cable news. This rise in popularity of these partisan news programs has accompanied the rise of political polarization, causing scholars to look more closely at the effects of and motivations for watching partisan media.

In the subsequent examinations of affective polarization, scholars have repeatedly pointed to increasingly diverse and partisan media environment as a causal mechanism (Iyengar and Hahn, 2009; Lau et. al, 2016; Levendusky, 2013). Media consumers now have more choice than ever as to how and from whom they are able to receive information. This phenomenon of selective exposure has been well documented among scholars (Lau et. al, 2016; Iyengar et. al, 2012; Stroud, 2010) with heavy emphasis being placed on how viewing politically like minded media outlets influences polarization (Levedusky, 2013).

Unsurprisingly, partisan media is most watched by like-minded viewers on both sides of the spectrum. In looking at the effects of partisan media, Levendusky found that viewing like-minded media reinforced attitudes and resulted in the viewer becoming more extreme, with these effects lasting several days (2013). Reinforcing one's political beliefs provides validation for their worldview, thus causing them to more strongly hold onto their beliefs. It is worth noting, however, that these effects are not significantly present amongst moderate viewers of partisan media. Nonetheless, the ability for partisans to engage in selective exposure has allowed them to exclusively view content that supports their worldview and, oftentimes, attacks their opponents, thus helping to facilitate affective polarization.

Building off the research that has focused on the effects of viewing like-minded partisan media, scholars have looked at the effects of viewing opposite-minded partisan media and have found just as interesting results. Exposure to information that contradicts or directly attacks one's worldview and beliefs has shown to potentially create a response within the viewer that causes them to latch on to their beliefs even more. This phenomena, known as "The Backfire Effect", is still questioned amongst scholars, but has contributed to the overall body of research behind the challenging of personal opinions (Nyhan and Reifler, 2010). The effects of viewing opposite-minded media, sometimes referred to as crosscutting media, are not as strong or pronounced as the effects of viewing like-minded media (Levendusky, 2013). This lack of impact stems mostly from the findings that exposure to crosscutting media leads to viewers disregarding any information that challenges their worldview and subsequently discounting the source of this challenging information.

### **Political Satire**

For centuries, comedy has played an important role in the relationship between the political and public spheres. Comedy has taken numerous forms in democracies as a mechanism through which the public can interact with, mock, comment on, and learn about political processes. As Polk et al. state, humor has a storied history as a mean "for persuasion, to make stories more captivating, sources more likeable, or arguments more effective" (203). As one of the primary modern purveyors of political comedy, SN programs have used humor as a powerful tool to inform their discussions of political topics. Research into SN has often focused on the role various forms of humor can play in presenting

information in a satirical way, and the effects these various forms of humor have on viewers.

Humor types vary based on numerous factors, such as complexity, subtlety, context, and presentation style (Polk et. al, 2009). Humor can manifest itself in many forms in SN, the most prevalent and obvious of which is through satire. Caufield notes how modern political satire distinguishes itself amongst other forms of modern political humor stating that “conventional political humor is often geared at making the audience laugh at others, while satire is designed to make the audience laugh at itself as well as others” (Caufield, 2008: 10). The recent relevance of SN programs has led to scholarly focus being placed on examining on how these programs integrate varying forms of satire to present political information.

In looking at the properties of political satire, scholars have noted how variations in humor type and complexity can result in different interpretations of topics in which the humor is related (Becker and Haller, 2014; Becker, 2012; Polk et. al, 2009; LaMarre et. al, 2009). Polk et. al’s examination of SN isolated two forms of satire, sarcasm and irony, present in SN to study the variation of effects based on humor complexity. Viewers who were exposed to irony rated the humor as being more complex and had more difficulty developing counter-arguments as compared to viewers who were exposed to sarcasm (Polk et. al, 2009). Exposure to different humor types in SN can therefore result in a variety of cognitive effects that can influence not only the perception of the presented content, but also the extent to which the content impacts the viewer’s personal belief system.

Perceptions of satire are further differentiated by the means through which the satire is presented. A prominent example of the variation in satire presentation is the

direction of satirical humor. Self-directed and other-directed hostile humor are both frequently present in SN programs, and have each shown to produce vastly different reaction amongst viewers (Becker and Haller, 2014; Becker, 2012). When humor is self-directed it is consequently appreciated more by viewers, and the self-director of the humor is perceived more favorably. Other-directed hostile humor, however, is appreciated much less by viewers, with the target of the other-directed humor not experiencing significant unfavorable evaluations (Becker and Haller, 2014; Becker, 2012).

Looking more specifically at the incorporation of unique forms of satire in SN programs, more wide reaching effects of satire can be observed. Satire has the ability to make it so that the information presented during the programs can appear as ambiguous and, therefore, can be interpreted differently (LaMarre et. al, 2009; Becker, 2012). Stephen Colbert's *The Colbert Report* provided one of the best examples of examining ambiguous messages in political humor. On *The Colbert Report*, Colbert portrays himself as exaggerated parody version of a right wing pundit who relies heavily on utilizing a unique style of deadpan satire. This ambiguity was noted by LaMarre et al. (2009) as eliciting varied interpretation of Colbert by viewers based on ideology. Ideological conservative viewed Colbert as being a conservative making fun of liberals, whereas ideological liberal viewed Colbert as being liberal and making fun of conservatives.

Colbert's style of presentation appealed to both conservative and liberal viewers, a phenomenon that has not been noted in other SN programs. LaMarre et al pointed to the importance of biased information processing in influencing these results (2009: 214). To viewers, Colbert's intentions, besides being entertaining, are ambiguous. This ambiguity resulted in a confirmation bias effect taking place wherein ambiguous information is



processed by the receiver in a way that favors their own beliefs (2009). Furthermore, the satire in *The Colbert Report* could be regarded as both self-directed and other-directed and was thus able to elicit added mixed effects.

The interpretation of extreme forms of satire, such as with the case of Colbert, requires more judgment and information processing based on prior knowledge than traditional forms of political humor (Grey et. al, 2009; LaMarre et. al, 2009; Caufield, 2008). Satire is oftentimes a critique as much as it is a form of entertainment. As a result, the presence of humor in satire can be interpreted differently based on not only the recipient of the satire but the target and source of the satire as well.

This divisiveness in the interpretation of satire has put this distinctive form of comedy in the spotlight of the media viewing public. Satire forces its audience to pay attention, and, subsequently, influences their perception. McClennen and Maisel identify this ability to effect public opinion as being the result of “heightened distrust in mainstream news media, pervasive public exposure to professional satirical comedy, and the interaction between professional and citizen-satire” (McClennen and Maisel, 2014: 11). Satire’s increasing influence on the public has inspired both appreciation and concern amongst scholars of media and public opinion (McClennen and Maisel, 2014; Dagnes, 2012; LaMarre et. al, 2009). Like LaMarre et. al demonstrated with *The Colbert Report*, satire can lead to misinterpretations of the sincerity and meaning of messages. The inherent entertaining value of satire has also made it so that messages presented in a satirical way can be disregarded (Brewer and Cao, 2008; Prior, 2005). Nonetheless, Satire provides an alternative to the straightforward style of traditional news, and sheds new light on pressing issues in a more entertaining way.

## News or Entertainment?

Among the most heavily studied aspect of SN programs is the role they play as a legitimate source of news and information in the increasingly diverse media environment. The classification of SN programs as soft has given the impression of these programs being primarily oriented as entertaining and as not having much informative substance. In contrast to this soft classification, there has been a trend towards examining effects of SN that extend beyond just being entertaining. In order to understand the role of SN as an informative source, researchers have looked at and compared the information that SN sources present to the information in mainstream news broadcasts (Fox et. al, 2011; Brewer, 2007). In these examinations, it has been found that the majority of news stories on SN programs, specifically *The Daily Show*, are political (Brewer, 2007), and that content on *The Daily Show* is equally as substantive as content on network news (Fox et al, 2011). The content of SN, much like traditional news, can vary widely based on current events and context, but largely remains in a political context.

In addition to the substance of SN programs, researchers have also looked at the way in which the presentation style of these programs influences their role as an informative source. Since SN are not bound by traditional journalistic practices and formats, the content presentation on these shows can vary wildly. One trend that has been focused on has been the way that SN utilizes “meta-coverage” to report on current events. Compared to a straightforward reporting style of a standard news broadcast where information is presented based on the events that occur, meta-coverage involves “the coverage of the media coverage” in addition to reporting on the events themselves (Newman, 2010; Esser and D’Angelo, 2003). This technique of reporting allows the

audience of SN programs to observe the various ways events are discussed across the media spectrum, and as Newman suggests “may be able to bring political manipulation and media compliance to the forefront of public discourse” (Newman, 2010: 13).

The popularity and impact of SN programs doesn't stem simply from the content and presentation of their respective programs, although both play influential roles. Research has noted that what made *The Daily Show* and *Colbert Report* so popular is the way in which these programs interact with their audiences. Colbert, especially, gained traction through his campaigns and initiatives that encourage viewer interaction as a member of the “Colbert Nation”. Media scholar Sam Ford observed that “these initiatives demonstrate a type of activism similar to grassroots political campaigns, but operating through the elements and aesthetics of online fandom” (Ford, 2010: 81). Ford also notes how the programs exist outside the mainstream media, and how this facet combined with the audience outreach has created a cult-TV-like fanbase around the programs. (Ford, 2010). Having such dedicated and active fanbases has allowed *The Colbert Report* and *Daily Show* to become not only a news and entertainment experience, but a social experience as well.

As a result of having such a distinctive style of presentation and audience interaction in combination with relevant and substantive political content, SN programs have shown to have a wide array of effects on their audiences based on various unique components of the programs. For instance, during campaign season, US citizens turn to a variety of sources in order to make evaluations on candidates. As purveyors of political information, SN programs frequently feature coverage of campaigns and do so in a manner that breaks the mold from traditional news programs.

In looking at how political comedy influenced viewers during campaign season, Parkin found that Candidate appearances on late night comedy shows, like *The Tonight Show* or *The Late Show*, led to politically disinterested viewers becoming more interested and engaged in politics (Parkin, 2010). However, these positive effects didn't carry over to SN shows that feature discussions of political candidates. Baumgartner and Morris discovered that any coverage or featuring of political candidates, regardless of party, on *The Daily Show* led to more negative evaluations of said candidates and increased overall political cynicism (Baumgartner and Morris, 2006). These contrasting results suggest two outcomes. First, political candidate appearances and discussion in programs that employ political comedy do not have a standard effect on viewers. Second, that there is a difference in effects between SN shows and late night comedy talk shows that infrequently discuss politics.

While research has, without question, demonstrated that SN programs do produce effects on their audience, there is still debate over the extent of these effects and to what extent they influence their audiences. Amongst youth viewers, the key demographic for SN, researchers have examined how these programs can serve as a gateway tool for teaching and engaging youths in politics. In the context of an introductory level US/National Politics course, Beavers looks at the potential of using political comedy to teach youths about politics and found that a majority of students reported being more interested in politics as a result of exposure to *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report* (2011). As previously mentioned, however, Baumgartner and Morris posited that viewership of *The Daily Show* during election season resulted in increased cynicism towards political institutions and leaders and lowered political interest amongst already youth viewers (Baumgartner and

Morris, 2006). These contrasting findings imply that SN effects on political interest can be conditional on the content and context of exposure. Whereas both research designs involved exposing students in an introductory US/National political science course to political satire, the content and context of the clips shown were different. Unlike Beavers, who exposed participants to a variety of clips, Baumgartner and Morris only showed clips featuring discussions of presidential candidates in generally negative contexts.

In addition to judging satirical news' impact on political interest, research has also examined their role in facilitating learning. Seeing as SN programs do contain substantive content and factual discussion of relevant political issues, researchers have looked at how viewership of SN impact learning in comparison to traditional news. Baum posited that SN allows politically inattentive viewers, who would not otherwise view traditional news, to better engage with and learn about complex issues (Baum, 2003). Based off of Baum's findings, researchers have subsequently examined SN' impact on learning in the framework of specific, and often contentious, issue areas. For instance, Stephen Colbert's Super PAC segment on *The Colbert Report* is one of the most examined examples of how SN exposure can aid in issue knowledge, and opinion formation (Hardy et. al, 2014; Warner et. al, 2015). Warner et. al demonstrated that exposure to the Colbert Super PAC increased short term issue recall more than traditional hard news and was influential in priming viewers for further exposure to campaign finance issues (Warner et. al, 2015). Further, Hardy et. al found that not only did Colbert increase viewers perception of knowledge about super PAC's and 501(c)(4) groups, but increased their actual knowledge as well (Hardy et. al, 2014).

It is clear from the body of research that it is unreasonable to ignore the impact that SN has had on politics, media and the public. SN programs offer a new and entertaining way for which important political information can be presented to the public without sacrificing important details. These programs have shown an ability to not only influence how viewers learn about political issues and topics, but also how they process and feel about them.

### **Satirical News Audiences**

Why is it that audiences have been progressively turning their attention more towards SN programs and political comedy for their news rather than traditional mainstream news programs? A handful of researchers have focused on this question over the past decade, and have subsequently made progress in understanding the evolving media habits of the American public. As previously mentioned, the increasingly diverse media environment has resulted in new classifications for media types, of which the distinguishing between soft and hard news emerged. This diverse environment has give the public the ability to choose between entertaining and informative media, and has thus altered the ways in which the public interacts with and learns about political processes, issues and actions through media outlets.

In probing the effects of media choice, Prior (2005) posited that content preference is a strong predictor of political knowledge and turnout as media choice increases and found that those with a preference for entertainment, once they gain access to new media, became less knowledgeable about politics and were less likely to vote. As purveyors of both entertainment and information, SN programs can be oriented in various ways by their audiences. Feldman examined how the orientation of SN impacts a viewers motivated

processing of the information presented, and established that the orienting of *The Daily Show* as news, or as a mixture of news and entertainment, resulted in an increase in the amount of invested mental effort (AIME) that subsequently led to these viewers learning more. The orientation of *The Daily Show* as purely entertainment, however, resulted in low AIME and little to no learning. Additionally, Feldman found that viewers who were directed to orient *The Daily Show* as either News or Entertainment, demonstrated the same viewing effects to those who viewed the program under their inherent orientation (2013).

Looking more specifically at how a preference for SN exposure is formed, scholars have noted the factors that influence a viewer's penchant for orienting the programs as entertaining or informative, and have developed scales to measure this preference in order to predict future exposure. Young isolated a variety of youth motivations for watching SN, such as for fun and entertainment, for learning, to make news fun, and for context and background on relevant issues and events. While these results confirmed previous beliefs that youths were drawn to *The Daily Show* and *Colbert Report* because the programs are humorous and informative, they also shed new light on the youth perception of these programs as legitimate, honest, and trustworthy sources of news.

Of all the motivating factors people have for viewing SN programs, the one that is most consistent across viewing groups is, unsurprisingly, humor and entertainment (Young, 2013; Beavers; 2011; Hmielowski et, al, 2011; LaMarre et. al, 2009). Across the media spectrum, humor provides a sort of cognitive reward for viewers, engaging viewers and attracting new ones. However, political satire, as previously discussed, is a unique form of humor in it's own that can be interpreted and enjoyed in vastly different ways. In order to predict the consumption of satire, Hmielowski et al developed the affinity for political

humor (AFPH) scale, which, drawing on past research, identified four dimensions of one's AFPH: "(1) pointing out or highlighting incongruent information (2) humor contributing to a sense of superiority (3) the use of humor to relieve stress or anxiety, and (4) the ability of humor to facilitate interpersonal relationships" (2011: 101). Hmielowski et al's results from testing the AFPH demonstrated the scale as being a strong predictor of exposure to SN, and established social factors as being influential moderators for viewership.

When looking at the motivations one has for watching a program, it's also important to consider the reasons one would for avoiding said program. In addition to identifying motivation factors, Young also demonstrated a drawback of SN programs as being that they avoided by people low in political knowledge who have trouble understanding the content and interpreting the satire (2013). Perceived bias has additionally shown to be another strong indicator of SN avoidance. When bias is perceived in a news program, the content is often disregarded and given less credibility. In an analysis of cable news viewership, it was found that perceptions of bias were consistent along partisan lines, with both conservatives and liberals rating news programs that challenged their views as being biased.

Interestingly enough, *The Daily Show* was rated by both sides of the political spectrum as being more biased than Fox News and CNN. Coe et. al suggested that this finding was reflective of the viewer expectation for SN programs to contain less neutrality in the discussion of political matters (2008).

The body of research on audience perceptions of, and motivation for watching SN validates the uniqueness of these programs within the broad media spectrum. SN provides various avenues through which audiences can learn, laugh, and/or think differently about



political issues and processes. The ability for audiences to decide how to justify and orient their viewership of SN makes these programs an extremely enticing subject for research.

## **Chapter 2: Theoretical Framework**

This literature review has examined the effects of satirical news viewership, the utilization and complexities of satire, the orientation and perception of satirical news, and the role of media in facilitating affective polarization. Despite a great depth of research into satirical news and media effects, there has not yet been an attempt to establish a connection between satirical news viewership and affective polarization. My research project will contribute to the overall body of research by asking: *How does orientated viewership of The Colbert Report influence affective polarization?*

SN programs can be perceived in various ways due to their use of satire, which requires the use of more mental effort, in combination with their substantive and timely political content. Like traditional news shows, SN programs can be used as sources for information by some viewers, but other viewers may have different goals and motivation for SN exposure, which subsequently influences viewing effects.

Feldman demonstrated the difference in viewing effects and AIME in SN based on viewer orientation of the programs as news, entertainment or a mix of both; and that these orientations can be predicted based on partisan affiliation. Additional research has pointed out further factors that help to predict and explain satirical news exposure and orientation, such as the Hmielowski et al's Affinity for Political Humor Scale and Young's isolation of SN viewing motivations amongst youths. Seeing as this research is interested in affective polarization, it's important to take broad partisan media habits into account. Conservative media viewers have demonstrated to have low trust in most media bodies, and thus typically refrain from receiving news from a variety of sources. Liberals display the

opposite habits, trusting in more media sources and thus consuming more. Using these findings on SN exposure and partisan media habits, I form my first hypotheses:

*H<sub>1</sub>: Ideologically liberal viewers of satirical news will be more likely than conservatives to orient *The Colbert Report* as informative and as more credible pre-exposure*

*H<sub>1a</sub>: Ideologically liberal and young (18-25 y/o) viewers will be more likely than conservatives and older viewers to orient *The Colbert Report* as informative and as more credible pre-exposure*

The orientation of a program pre-exposure is expected to influence a viewers AIME and motivated processing when watching a satirical news programs. However, the content of the program itself has shown to be just as influential on the viewing effects of SN programs, especially based on the partisanship of the viewer. LaMarre et. al found that partisan affiliation influenced how *The Colbert Report* was interpreted by viewers. As mentioned previously, *The Colbert Report* utilizes a unique form of satire that makes the content and presentation of information more ambiguous to viewers. Both liberals and conservatives viewed Colbert as supporting their respective ideologies despite Colbert's intentions of mocking right-wing pundits. LaMarre et al noted that participants were not directed to watch *The Colbert Report* with any entertainment or information learning goal, but that most participants presumably watched the clip for entertainment purposes. Despite Colbert's ambiguous satire requiring more AIME in order to understand his intentions, both conservative and liberal participants found him to be funny and entertaining.

By viewing Colbert as supporting their respective ideologies in an entertainment or information-oriented mindset, it can be hypothesized that conservatives and liberals will experience similar effects attune to those of like-minded media exposure. The literature on affective polarization and media habits demonstrates that viewing like minded partisan

media can produce negative affect amongst viewers (Levendusky, 2013). Iyengar et al also demonstrated that viewing media which negatively portrays opposing partisans, in the case of their study this media was negative campaign ads, resulted in a negative affective response (2012). Furthermore, Colbert often uses meta-coverage in his segments to provide context on ongoing partisan debates. This meta-coverage draws from partisan news channels like Fox News or MSNBC, to provide insight on how either conservatives or liberal pundits are discussing oftentimes controversial political topics. The use of these clips may in fact add onto a viewers experiencing of like-minded media effects if the clips are presented without Colbert explicitly contradicting their content.

Colbert's persona on *The Colbert Report* is interpreted, based on partisanship, as either a support or mockery of right wing pundits and conservative ideologies. Drawing from my previous hypotheses, Feldman's findings on how orientated viewing affects AIME, and LaMarre's findings on biased partisan processing of *The Colbert Report*, I expect both partisanship and viewer orientation of SN to play a dual moderating role in influencing satirical news exposure and affective polarization.

The inaccurate interpretation of Colbert as a genuine conservative, in combination with the use of meta-coverage, and a low amount of AIME will result in Conservatives experiencing like-minded media viewing effects and consequently experiencing negative affect. Thus, my conservative exposure hypothesis is:

*H<sub>2</sub>: Conservatives who view The Colbert Report under entertainment-orientation will experience increased affective polarization*

On the other side, I hypothesized that Liberal viewers would be more likely to orient the program as news and as informative. Therefore, Liberal viewers will have a higher AIME and take Colbert's satire of right wing pundits more seriously. By investing more mental

effort and subsequently understanding Colbert's satire, liberal viewers will experience like-minded media effects and become more affectively polarized. Thus, my liberal exposure hypothesis is:

*H<sub>3</sub>: Liberals who view The Colbert Report under information-orientation will experience increased affective polarization*

### **Chapter 3: Methodology**

This Independent Study examines how oriented viewership of *The Colbert Report* influences affective polarization. The main independent variable in this study is exposure to *The Colbert Report (TCR)*, which utilizes complex and ambiguous satire that causes partisans to engage in a form of motivated processing wherein they interpret Colbert as supporting their respective ideologies. The main dependent variable in this study is affective polarization which is defined as polarization rooted in mutual dislike and hatred of opposing partisans rather than ideological disagreements. There are two moderating variables in this study, the first of which is partisanship and the second of which is orientated viewership. Feldman found that SN programs can be oriented as news, entertainment, or a mixture of both, and that the way SN is orientated impacts the effects of the program.

**Table 3.1- Variables H2/H3**

<b>Independent Variable</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Exposure to <i>TCR</i></li> </ul>
<b>Moderating Variables</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Partisanship</li> <li>• Orientation of <i>TCR</i></li> </ul>
<b>Dependent Variable</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Affective Polarization</li> </ul>

Based on the bodies of research behind my variables, I have developed three hypotheses to predict the orientation of *The Colbert Report* and the extent of individual-level affective polarization amongst liberals and conservatives based on orientation of *The Colbert Report*. My hypotheses are as followed:

*H<sub>1</sub>: Ideologically liberal viewers of satirical news will be more likely than conservatives to orient The Colbert Report as informative and as more credible pre-exposure*

H<sub>1a</sub>: *Ideologically liberal and young (18-25 y/o) viewers will be more likely than conservatives and older viewers to orient The Colbert Report as informative and as more credible pre-exposure*

H<sub>2</sub>: *Conservatives who view The Colbert Report under entertainment-orientation will experience increased affective polarization*

H<sub>3</sub>: *Liberals who view The Colbert Report under information-orientation will experience increased affective polarization*

**Table 3.2: Hypotheses H2/H3**

	<u>Conservative Viewer</u>	<u>Liberal Viewer</u>
<u>Entertainment-Orientation</u>	Increased Affective Polarization	Little to No Affective Response
<u>Information-Orientation</u>	Little to No Affective Response	Increased Affective Polarization

**Experimental Design**

In order to test these hypotheses, this study will implement an experimental research design. When studying media effects and public behavior, such as with my Independent Study, experimental research designs provide one of the best methods to obtain results. Compared to other research designs, Experimental designs have high internal validity, meaning that cause and effect can better be isolated (McDermott, 2002; Druckman et. al, 2006). In in the case of my independent study, I am looking to isolate how orientated viewership of *The Colbert Report* causes an affective polarization effect. Experimental designs also allow for systemic modifications and control of conditions and variables, permitting the research conductor to better tailor their design to their research (McDermott, 2002). Further, experimental designs are repeatable, allowing for results to be retried under different external conditions in order to verify or challenge results

(Druckman, 2006). Experimental designs are therefore the best means to draw causal conclusions and, as a result, have been relied upon for much of the previous research into Satirical News (Feldman, 2013; LaMarre et. al, 2009; Baumgartner and Morris, 2006)

Despite having a great deal of advantages, experimental designs do have drawbacks that are worth noting. First, experimental designs have low external validity, meaning that results cannot be generalized to a larger population. Experimental designs must therefore include an as diverse as possible test group in order to have more conclusive results. Second, experimental designs can create artificial environments that may interfere with results (McDermott, 2002; Druckman, 2006). Exposure to *TCR* in my design differs greatly from standard exposure to *TCR*, creating a synthetic viewing experience. Additionally, while experimental designs allow for a great amount of control of variables within the study they do not allow for the control of external variables (McDermott, 2002). For my online survey I will not be able to account for the setting, mood, health and other external factors that may influence the results from individual participants. In order to address this issue, my design will draw from a large sample to eliminate the impact that external variables may have on an individual participant.

### **Independent Variable**

In order to study the impact of SN orientation on affective polarization, participants in my research design must be exposed to a SN program, specifically *The Colbert Report*. As previously discussed, *TCR* employs a unique and extreme form of satire that makes Colbert's messages more ambiguous to partisans. This study operationalizes ambiguous satire through exposing participants to a three-minute clip from *TCR*. The clip I have chosen for exposure involves Colbert's incorporating his ambiguous satire into a



commentary about the partisan debate on Presidential vacations (comedycentral.com, 2014) Colbert draws upon segments from Fox News programs to contextualize the debate, but never directly contradicts or attacks the information presented by the right wing pundits. Further, the controversy presented in this clip deals strictly with President Barack Obama, whom Colbert mocks for “slacking off on destroying America”. The overall tone of the clip fits within *TCR*'s style of ambiguous satire that was observed by LaMarre et al as being interpreted by partisans as promoting their respective ideologies.

### **Moderating Variables**

Prior to their exposure to the Colbert clip, participants will be asked to identify their partisanship and ideology along a seven-point scale. The moderating variable of partisanship is not manipulated in this experiment and is operationalized based on how participants self-identify. My other moderating variable, Orientation of *TCR*, is both measured and manipulated in this study. In the pre-test survey, participants will be asked how they orient *TCR* based on a five-point scale ranging from “Strictly News” to “Strictly Entertainment”. After reporting their orientations, participants will be randomly assigned to one of three pre-exposure directives that serve to manipulate their viewing of the clip. These directives borrow from Feldman’s methodology that sought to understand how SN orientation impacted learning and AIME (2013). The variable is further manipulated by directing participants to prepare to be questioned regarding a specific orientation-related aspect of the clip (in this case either knowledge or enjoyment).

The three directives are as follows:

**Table 3.3- Pre-Exposure Directives**

<b>Entertainment Directive</b>	<i>“Please watch this entertaining clip from The Colbert Report, be prepared to evaluate Colbert’s performance after the clip”</i>
<b>News Directive</b>	<i>“Please watch this informative clip from The Colbert Report, be prepared to take a knowledge test after the clip”</i>
<b>No Directive</b>	<i>“Please watch this clip from The Colbert Report”</i>

Following exposure to the clip under the orientation-directives participants will be asked to answer questions about the content of the program and to evaluate Colbert as a presenter. These questions seek to gauge the effectiveness of the pre-exposure directives on learning from and enjoyment of the clip in order to understand the impact on AIME and the dependent variable. The post test questions are as followed:

**Table 3.4- Knowledge Test**

<b>1. Where was the Obama vacationing when he asked an ambassador to have a dinner party?</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Key West</li> <li>2. London</li> <li>3. Rome</li> <li>4. Beijing</li> </ol>
<b>2. What event does Fox News critique Obama for ignoring while on Vacation?</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Tax Bill Vote</li> <li>2. Supreme Court Ruling</li> <li>3. US/Mexico Border Dispute</li> <li>4. International Leader Summit in Europe</li> </ol>

**Table 3.5: Entertainment Evaluation**

<b>1. Please rate how entertaining you found the clip to be</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Very Entertaining</li> <li>2. Mildly Entertaining</li> <li>3. Neither Entertaining or Unentertaining</li> <li>4. Not very entertaining</li> <li>5. Not entertaining at all</li> </ol>
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<b>2. Please rate how funny you found Stephen Colbert to be</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Very Funny</li> <li>2. Mildly Funny</li> <li>3. Neither Funny or Unfunny</li> <li>4. Not very Funny</li> <li>5. Not Funny at all</li> </ol>
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### Dependent Variable:

The dependent variable in this study—Affective Polarization—is measured in two categories, favorability and social distance, based on Iyengar et. al’s operationalization’s (2012). Favorability is operationalized through three “feeling thermometers” on President Obama (“How do you feel about the actions of President Obama?”) The Fox News Hosts featured in the Clip (“How do you feel about the critique from Fox News Hosts?”), and Colbert himself (“How do you feel about Colbert’s coverage of this debate?”). Each feeling thermometer will involve participants rating their feeling towards the three subjects on a 1-100 scale. Social distance is operationalized by asking participants to report their attitudes towards partisan related social situations. The social distance measures are as follows:

**Table 3.6- Social Distance**

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<b>1. I would be comfortable with my child or a close family member marrying someone from an opposing political party?</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Very Comfortable</li> <li>2. Comfortable</li> <li>3. Neither Comfortable nor Uncomfortable</li> <li>4. Uncomfortable</li> <li>5. Very Uncomfortable</li> </ol>
<b>2. When establishing friendships, I take into account the partisanship of potential friends</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Strongly Agree</li> <li>b. Agree</li> <li>c. Neither Agree nor Disagree</li> <li>d. Disagree</li> <li>e. Strongly Disagree</li> </ol>

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## Controls

In order to control for outside factors that may impact my results, I asked a series of control questions. These questions borrow from LaMarre et. al's measures which ask about participants Age, Race, Gender, Home State, Income, Education, and their past exposure to *The Colbert Report*. The operationalization's of these measures are as follows:

**Table 3.7- Controls**

<b>What is your Race?</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. White</li> <li>2. Black</li> <li>3. American Indian or Alaska Native</li> <li>4. Asian</li> <li>5. Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander</li> <li>6. Other please specify</li> </ol>
<b>What is your Gender?</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Male</li> <li>2. Female</li> <li>3. Transgender</li> <li>4. Other</li> <li>5. No answer</li> </ol>
<b>What is your total household income before taxes during the past 12 months?</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Less than \$25,000</li> <li>2. \$25,000 to \$34,999</li> <li>3. \$35,000 to \$49,999</li> <li>4. \$50,000 to \$74,999</li> <li>5. \$75,000 to \$99,999</li> <li>6. \$100,000 to \$149,999</li> <li>7. \$150,000 or more</li> </ol>
<b>What is the highest level of school you have completed or the highest degree you have Received?</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Less than High School</li> <li>2. High school graduate - high school diploma or equivalent (for example: GED),</li> <li>3. Some college but no degree, Associate degree (for example: Occupational/vocational program or Academic program),</li> <li>4. Bachelor's degree (for example: BA, AB, BS),</li> <li>5. Master's degree (for example: MA, MS, MEng, MEd, MSW, MBA),</li> </ol>

	6. Professional School degree (for example: MD, DDS, DVM, LLB, JD), Doctorate degree (for example: PhD, EdD),
	7. Other, please specify
<b>What is your Home State?</b>	Ak-Wy
<b>How old are you?</b>	Fill in the Blank
<b>Choose which option best describes your past exposure to <i>The Colbert Report</i> or other Satirical News programs</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Frequently</li> <li>2. Often</li> <li>3. Sometimes</li> <li>4. Rarely</li> <li>5. Never</li> </ol>

## Procedure

In order to test my hypotheses, this experimental research design that will rely on the use of the Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk) and a student population at The College of Wooster. MTurk is a “marketplace for work that requires human intelligence” and works through compensating MTurk users for completing various tasks, which in the case of my Independent Study would be a survey. MTurk provides the best means to gather a large and diverse sample in a brief amount of time. The demographics of a small liberal arts college, like the College of Wooster, are similar to the viewing demographics of *The Colbert Report* and should provide sufficient data directly from the audience of *TCR*.

Survey participants were provided with a link to a Qualtrics survey, and were subsequently shown a consent form informing them of the direct and indirect benefits of completing the survey and that they may choose to drop out at any time. Further, participants were informed that only American users over the age of 18 will be permitted to partake in the study. If participants agreed to the terms and conditions they were directed to the survey. First, Participants were asked to complete a short pre-test survey

that collected data about the previously mentioned control variables in addition to their partisanship, ideology and self-reported orientation of *TCR*. After completing the pre-test survey, participants were asked to view the clip from *TCR* and were randomly assigned to view said clip under the previously discussed orientation directives. Following their viewing of the clip, participants were asked to complete a knowledge test, an evaluation of how entertaining they found Colbert, and a test to measure their affective polarization. Finally, participants were debriefed and, for MTurk users, were compensated \$0.75 upon completion of the survey.

### **Analysis**

In order to analyze the collected data, I will be running a difference of means test across conditions to see the differences in affective polarization based on orientation and partisanship. Additionally, results from this difference of means test for the treatments groups will be compared to those from the control group.

## **Chapter 4: Results and Analysis**

In this chapter I will first summarize the results from my survey, which measured how a viewer's exposure to *The Colbert Report* under different orientations influences their affective polarization. Second, I will outline my statistical analysis methods using SPSS and present my findings. Finally, I will discuss the findings from my analyses and discuss their implications. Data analysis and discussion will be centered around my research question and the four hypotheses I developed in my theoretical framework chapter. My first two hypotheses held that liberal (H1), and more specifically young and liberal (H1a), would be more likely to orient *TCR* as news. My second hypothesis posited that conservatives who viewed the clip under the entertainment orientation would demonstrate higher affective polarization (H2); while my third hypothesis posited that liberals who viewed the clip under the information orientation would demonstrate higher affective polarization (H3). Statistical analysis was done using SPSS. Difference of means tests were conducted to test my four hypotheses and research question.

### **Summarization of Data**

This section will involve a summarization of my data collection process, and an overview of the descriptive statistics. Through the MTurk marketplace this research project was able to recruit 352 MTurk workers who were provided a link to the survey and were awarded \$0.75 upon survey completion. All 352 participants viewed the clip and completed the survey, but a technical error resulted in 9 participants not filling out the partisanship and ideology pre-test survey questions.

### *Independent Variable*

The independent variables in my first hypothesis—age and ideology—were measured in the pre-test survey. 165 participants identified themselves as being Moderately-Very Liberal, and 47 fell within the 18-25 age demographic. In total, 28 participants were both between 18-25 and identified as moderately-very liberal. There were no measurements used to collect info about the independent variable—exposure to *TCR*—in the second and third hypotheses. Rather all participants were shown the same clip at the same point in the survey.

### *Moderating Variables*

The two moderating variables—Orientation of *TCR* (hereby M1) and Partisanship/Ideology (hereby M2)—for my second and third hypotheses were operationalized in two ways. In order to operationalize M1 participants were first asked in the pre-test survey to provide their self-reported orientation of *TCR* on a 5-point scale ranging from strictly news to strictly entertainment (Mean=3.26, SD=0.9). This measure of orientation was also used to operationalize the dependent variable for the first hypothesis. M1 was further operationalized through the random assignment of participants to either one of the two treatment groups, that received the information or entertainment viewing directive, or to the control group, which received no viewing directive. Randomization of participants to the pre-test directives were allocated as follows: 107 Entertainment Directive (30%), 118 Information Directive (34%), and 127 No Directive (36%).

The operationalization of M2 was done through asking participants to self-report their partisanship (Mean=4.5, SD=1.71) and ideology (Mean=4.49, SD=1.75) in the pre-test



survey. As mentioned previously, 9 participants were unable to respond to these two questions, resulting in 343 partisan and ideology answers being collected. For partisanship, 89 participants reported as being Moderate Republican-Strong Republican, 173 reported as being Moderate Democrat-Strong Democrat, and 81 reported as Independent. For ideology, splits were similar, with 85 reporting as Moderately-Very Conservative, 165 as Moderately-Very Liberal, and 93 as moderate.

### *Dependent Variable*

For the first hypothesis, the previously discussed M1 operationalization was used for the dependent variable—orientation of *The Colbert Report (TCR)*. The dependent variable— affective polarization—for the second and third hypotheses, was also operationalized in two ways, scenario response and feeling thermometers, following participant exposure to *TCR*. For the scenario responses, participants were asked two social distance questions related to the impact of partisanship on friendships and marriages. The two social distance questions were recoded in SPSS into one standard social distance affective measure ( $M=2.51$ ,  $SD=1.02$ ) operationalized from 1-5, with 5 representing a higher affective response. For the feeling thermometers, participants were asked to rate their feeling towards the actions of President Obama ( $Mean=61.47$ ,  $SD=29.4$ ), the critique from the Fox News host ( $Mean=29.39$ ,  $SD=28.59$ ), and the coverage of the debate by Colbert ( $Mean=53.94$ ,  $SD=30.19$ ).

## Hypothesis Testing

In this section, I will conduct analyses to test each of my four hypotheses. Difference of means tests were conducted to compare my variables across conditions..

*H<sub>1</sub>: Ideologically liberal viewers of satirical news will be more likely than conservatives to orient The Colbert Report as informative pre-exposure*

Using the pre-test measures, I compared the self-reported orientation means between conservative and liberal ideologies. Prior exposure to SN was also taken into account as an indicator of familiarity in programs like *TCR*.

	Ideology	N	Mean	SD	Significance
Exposure to The Colbert Report	Con	89	3.08	1.047	.109
	Lib	173	2.86	1.071	
Orientation of The Colbert Report	Con	89	3.51	1.067	.004
	Lib	173	3.16	0.83	

Results confirmed my hypothesis, and showed that liberals had more exposure and significantly oriented *TCR* more towards news than entertainment.

*H<sub>1a</sub>: Ideologically liberal and young (18-25 y/o) viewers will be more likely than conservatives and older viewers to orient The Colbert Report as informative pre-exposure*

Another difference of means test was conducted to test this hypothesis, but with the addition of the age measure. The exposure to and orientation of *TCR* of participants who qualified as both young (18-25) and liberal were measured against all other participants.

	Young-Liberal	N	Mean	SD	Significance
Exposure to The Colbert Report	Yes	28	2.79	1.031	.227
	No	324	3.03	1.042	
Orientation of The Colbert Report	Yes	28	3.00	.76980	.105
	No	324	3.29	.91552	

Results confirmed my hypothesis, with young and liberal demonstrating higher levels of exposure and a higher news orientation compared to all other participants.

*H<sub>2</sub>: Conservatives who view The Colbert Report under entertainment-orientation will experience increased affective polarization*

Utilizing the pre-test ideology, randomly assigned viewing directives, and post-test affective measures, a comparison of means test was conducted amongst conservative participants across the pre-test directive conditions.

Condition		Social Distance	Obama	Fox News	Colbert
Ent	Mean	2.2656	34.7187	50.9062	36.0938
	N	32	32	32	32
	SD	.98361	28.79990	22.12043	23.67162
Info	Mean	2.5517	34.6207	52.2069	46.7241
	N	29	29	29	29
	SD	.91948	24.65681	29.44411	33.28438
Control	Mean	2.7500	44.2857	59.2143	56.8214
	N	28	28	28	28
	SD	.73912	36.88406	31.84146	30.00994
Total	Mean	2.5112	37.6966	53.9438	46.0787
	N	89	89	89	89
	SD	.90446	30.38406	27.79362	29.98872

Conservatives demonstrated unique results across conditions. An independent samples t-test was conducted between the entertainment and information groups, with results displaying similar affective responses and no significant differences. Significant differences

were most apparent when comparing responses in the Control group to the Entertainment group.

	Condition	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Significance
Colbert Thermo	Ent	32	36.0938	23.67162	.004
	Control	28	56.8214	30.00994	
Social Distance	Ent	32	2.2656	.98361	.037
	Control	28	2.7500	.73912	

For both the Colbert Thermometer measure and the combined Social Distance measure, Conservative respondents showed significantly higher affective responses under the Entertainment directive compared to the Control. These results are consistent with my hypothesis that conservatives would experience higher affective polarization under the entertainment orientation condition.

*H<sub>3</sub>: Liberals who view The Colbert Report under information-orientation will experience increased affective polarization*

Using the same pre-test measure as the H<sub>2</sub> test, another difference of means test was conducted with only liberal participants across viewing orientation conditions.

Condition		Social Distance	Obama	Fox News	Colbert
Ent	Mean	2.6700	74.7600	16.9800	61.4800
	N	50	50	50	50
	SD	1.09549	23.59225	20.01784	25.92709
Info	Mean	2.7660	77.3830	16.7660	59.7021
	N	47	47	47	47
	SD	.98825	18.84554	21.37981	29.65887
Control	Mean	2.8309	77.8676	17.0147	60.7059
	N	68	68	68	68
	SD	1.10835	22.17562	22.09038	29.42081
Total	Mean	2.7636	76.7879	16.9333	60.6545
	N	165	165	165	165

	SD	1.06720	21.64846	21.14962	28.31372
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Liberals showed uniform affective responses across conditions, with no condition having any significantly distinct results. Liberals were expectedly cold towards the critique by Fox News featured in the clip, but did not show a strong affective response to the social distance affective measures. A comparison of means test was also conducted across the pre-test self-reported orientation conditions, with liberals showing almost identical results.

Results were not consistent with my hypothesis. While Liberals showed minor signs of affective polarization, specifically in their thermometer rating of the Fox News Hosts, their affective responses were not significantly different under any of the conditions, much less the information condition. Compared to Conservatives, Liberals showed higher levels of affective polarization for the social distance measures and the thermometer rating for the Fox News coverage. The latter result was unsurprising, but the social distance revelation was not entirely expected. While the Liberal social distance affective measure (M=2.73, SD=1.05) indicated minor comfortability with the presented scenarios, the Conservative mean (M=2.51, SD=0.90) was indicated more comfortability with the difference between the two group means approaching statistical significance ( $p=0.87$ ).

## **Chapter 5: Conclusion**

The goal of this research project is to understand the relationship between orientation of satirical news and affective polarization. A plethora of research into the content, presentation, and audiences of satirical news, in addition to research into media and polarization was consulted to form three hypotheses. These hypotheses were tested using an experimental research design involving a survey sent out on the Amazon MTurk marketplace. Participants in the survey were shown the same clip from *The Colbert Report* but were randomly assigned to one of three pre-exposure viewing directives that sought to prime their orientation to the clip. Conservatives who viewed the clip under the entertainment orientation were expected to show higher affective polarization and liberals who viewed the clip under the information orientation, were hypothesized to show higher levels of affective polarization.

### **Discussion of Results**

As hypothesized, liberals, and more so young liberals, had higher levels of exposure to satirical news and oriented *The Colbert Report* more towards news than entertainment. The primary viewing demographics for satirical news programs are younger, more liberal, people, so these results are unsurprising. Liberals showed intriguing results in my analysis of their affective response to the *TCR* clip under the three conditions. Liberals were expected to show a higher affective response under the information orientation, but ended up having almost identical affective responses across all three conditions. A potential explanation for the lack of variety in the liberal participants affective response is that they had much more prior exposure to *TCR* and were not influenced by the pre-test directives

due to their having pre-conceived orientation of the program. If liberals were shown a clip from a less well known satirical news program, they may be more likely to show a variety in affective responses. Another possible explanation is that, due to having higher self-reported past exposure to *TCR*, Liberals were aware of the intention of Colbert's satire, and did not experience similar effects to those who saw his satire as more ambiguous, thus leading to more uniform results.

Wide variation in affective responses was most apparent amongst conservative participants. Conservatives were expectedly cold towards Obama and warm towards Fox News, but thermometer ratings nonetheless fluctuated greatly across conditions. The Entertainment and Information groups demonstrated similar, but not uniform, results across the affective measures; however, the control group results differed greatly from the treatment groups. The most apparent variation in affective response was present in the thermometer rating of Colbert. As previously discussed, the entertainment vs control group comparison of means test showed significant a difference in the Conservative rating of Colbert. Under no pre-test directive, conservatives rated Colbert, in addition to Obama and Fox News, much higher than Conservatives who were given the entertainment or information pre-test directives.

It is possible that under any pre-test directive, regardless of if it is entertainment or information, Conservatives had a higher AIME. This higher level of AIME resulted in Conservatives correctly interpreting Colbert as mocking conservative pundits and thus resulted in them rating him negatively. Conservatives in the control group had a lower AIME and viewed Colbert as being a genuine conservative and thus experiences like-minded media effects. The like-minded media effects held true for the conservative control

group's response to the social distance measure, which was significantly higher compared to the entertainment and information groups. These findings partially support my hypothesis that conservatives with a lower AIME will experience higher affective polarization, but are also inconsistent because I hypothesized that the entertainment orientation would lead to AIME amongst conservatives. Conservatives nonetheless demonstrated higher affective polarization under the entertainment condition in the thermometer ratings for Obama and Colbert.

### **Considerations**

This research project provides a template future research could rely upon to better gauge audience responses to satirical news. Future research should create hypotheses regarding the affective responses of Independents and Moderates. Independents were not considered because they were not expected to show strong affective responses and did not have direct opposing partisans; however, a sizable portion of my research population self-identified as independent or moderate. Although they do not possess a direct political opponent, Independents/Moderates could still provide insightful information of the effects of exposure to political satire.

Additionally, future research could utilize different forms of political satire to gauge how responses differ. A plethora of new political satire programs have emerged in the footsteps of Colbert and Jon Stewart that have yet to be researched in-depth. Satire has shown to produce a variety of unique responses, therefore by broadening the spectrum of researched political satire programs we will have a better understanding on the political implications of satire. Future research could also rely upon different measures of affective



polarization, such as open-ended responses to prompts or a wider array of social distance questions.

## **Implications**

Building off past research, this project helped to shed more light on the cognitive responses to complex satire, causes of affective polarization, and the impact of partisanship. Colbert's style of satire proved to be ambiguous based on partisanship of the viewer, thus resulting in varied interpretations and responses to his messages. SN's standing in the media sphere places it on a fine line between news and entertainment, a factor which allows its viewers to orient the program as they wish. As a result of being able to be viewed under different orientations, the effects of SN programs are more varied based upon orientation.

In looking at which SN viewing effects are most influenced by partisanship and orientation, I focused most on affective polarization as it is an extremely influential contemporary political issue that has been associated with the viewing of political media. Specifically, partisan media has proven to influence affective polarization; however, when the partisan bias of a political media source is more ambiguous, ulterior viewing factors begin to play important roles in the deciphering of these media sources and the responses they produce. By controlling the pre-exposure orientation of different partisans, I was able to demonstrate how Colbert's style of political satire could produce a wide array of affective responses, especially amongst conservatives.

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### Appendix A: Survey

Thank you for your interest in this study! If you decide to participate, you will be asked to read view a short clip and to answer several questions. All in all, the study should take between 6-7 minutes to complete.

The data collected for the study will be used to write a scholarly paper, which may be published in an academic journal. There are no risks associated with participation in this research. You will be paid \$0.75 for completing this study. To receive your payment, be sure answer all survey questions and to copy the validation code you receive at the end of the study and to submit it in MTurk.

By advancing to the next screen, you consent to participate in the study and you indicate that you have read and understood the above information.

Q1 How old are you?

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Q2 What is your Race?

White (1)

Black (2)

American Indian or Alaska Native (3)

Asian (4)

Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander (5)

Other (6) \_\_\_\_\_

---

Q3 What is your gender?

- Male (1)
  - Female (2)
  - Transgender (3)
  - Other (4)
  - No Answer (5)
- 

Q5 What is your total household income before taxes during the past 12 months?

- Less Than \$25,000 (1)
  - \$25,000 - \$34,999 (2)
  - \$35,000 - \$49,999 (3)
  - \$50,000 - \$74,999 (4)
  - \$75,000 - \$99,999 (5)
  - \$100,000 - \$149,999 (6)
  - More than \$150,000 (7)
-

Q6 What is the highest level of school you have completed or the highest degree you have received?

- Less than High School (1)
  - High school graduate - high school diploma or equivalent (for example: GED), (2)
  - Some college but no degree, Associate degree (for example: Occupational/vocational program or Academic program), (3)
  - Bachelor's degree (for example: BA, AB, BS), (4)
  - Master's degree (for example: MA, MS, MEng, MEd, MSW, MBA), (5)
  - Professional School degree (for example: MD, DDS, DVM, LLB, JD), Doctorate degree (for example: PhD, EdD), (6)
- 

Q13 In which state do you currently reside?

▼ Alabama (1) ... I do not reside in the United States (53)

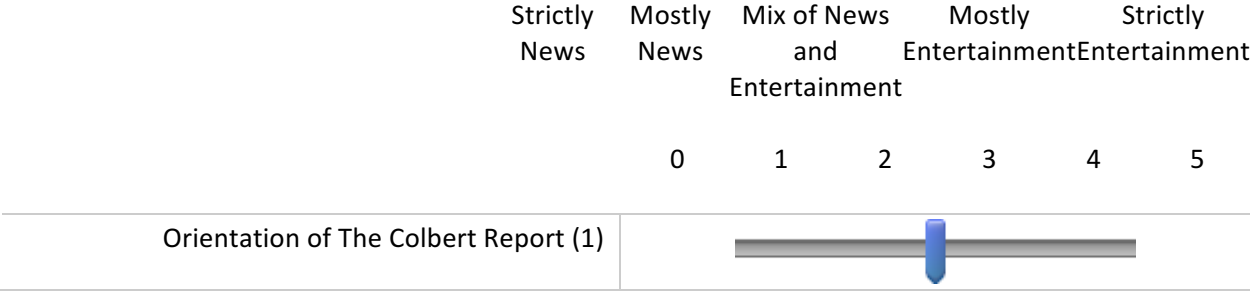
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Q14 Which option best describes your past exposure to The Colbert Report or other satirical news programs like The Daily Show, or Last Week Tonight?

- Frequently (1)
  - Quite Often (2)
  - Sometimes (3)
  - Rarely (4)
  - Never (5)
-



Q15 Please indicate how your view The Colbert Report in terms of being either a news or entertainment program.



Q31 Which of the following best describes your partisan identification?

- Strong Republican (1)
- Republican (2)
- Weak Republican (3)
- Independent (4)
- Weak Democrat (5)
- Democrat (6)
- Strong Democrat (7)

Q32 Which of the following best describes your political ideology?

- Very Conservative (1)
- Conservative (2)
- Moderately Conservative (3)
- Moderate (4)
- Moderately Liberal (5)
- Liberal (6)
- Very Liberal (7)

**Directive 1:** Please watch this entertaining clip from The Colbert Report, be prepared to evaluate Colbert's performance after the clip

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**Directive 2:** Please watch this informative clip from The Colbert Report, be prepared to take a knowledge test after the clip

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**Directive 3:** Please watch this clip from The Colbert Report

Q17 Where was the Obama vacationing when he asked an ambassador to have a dinner party?

- Key West (1)
  - London (2)
  - Rome (3)
  - Beijing (4)
-

Q18 What event does Fox News critique Obama for ignoring while on vacation?

- Tax Bill Vote (1)
  - Supreme Court Ruling (2)
  - US/Mexico Border Dispute (3)
  - International Leader Summit in Europe (4)
- 

Q20 Please rate how funny you found Stephen Colbert to be

- Very Funny (1)
  - Mildly Funny (2)
  - Neither Funny or Unfunny (3)
  - Not very Funny (4)
  - Not Funny at all (5)
- 

Q21 Please rate how entertaining you found the clip to be

- Very Entertaining (1)
- Mildly Entertaining (2)
- Neither Entertaining or Unentertaining (3)
- Not very entertaining (4)
- Not entertaining at all (5)

Q23 Please respond to the following scenarios

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Q24 I would be comfortable with my child or a close family member marrying someone from an opposing political party

- Strongly agree (1)
  - Somewhat agree (2)
  - Neither agree nor disagree (3)
  - Somewhat disagree (4)
  - Strongly disagree (5)
- 

Q25 When establishing friendships, I take into account the partisanship of potential friends

- Strongly agree (1)
- Somewhat agree (2)
- Neither agree nor disagree (3)
- Somewhat disagree (4)
- Strongly disagree (5)

Q26 Please rate your feelings about the following prompts on a 1-100 scale along the thermometer, with 100 being a strong positive feeling and 0 being a strong negative feeling

---

Q27 How do you feel about....

0 10 20 30 40 50 60 70 80 90 100

