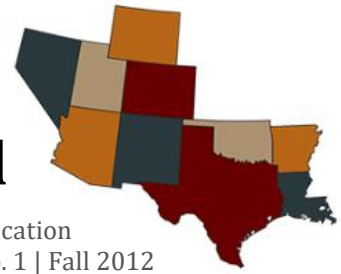


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## Does Humor Matter? An Analysis of How Hard News versus Comedy News Impact the Agenda-Setting Effects

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Although hundreds of studies have investigated public opinion formation through agenda-setting research, many scholars have not examined how atypical news programs, such as comedy news, might impact the transfer of issue salience from the media's agenda to the public's agenda. With the increasingly popularity of these programs, scholars need to examine if comedy news, such as *The Daily Show* with Jon Stewart and *The Colbert Report* with Stephen Colbert, impact agenda setting effects, and how that might compare to typical hard news programs, such as those seen on CNN, MSNBC, or Fox News. In an experiment, this study tested how individuals who received the same information only presented differently, namely either hard news or comedy news, reacted to the different presentation styles; and how those different presentation styles impacted individuals' acceptance of the media's agenda, taking into account their existing attitudes. Results indicated that when individuals agreed with the information presented in the news story, the hard news was more successful in the transfer of issue salience than the comedy news; however, when individuals disagreed with the information, the comedy news was more successful in the transfer of issue salience than the hard news. Overall, the results indicate typical hard news does not have a monopoly on the agenda-setting process because comedy news can set the agenda of audience members under certain conditions.

*Key Words: Agenda Setting, Public Opinion, Attitudes, Presentation Styles, The Daily Show with Jon Stewart, The Colbert Report with Stephen Colbert*

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Setting Effects

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Abstract

Although hundreds of studies have investigated public opinion formation through agenda-setting research, many scholars have not examined how atypical news programs, such as comedy news, might impact the transfer of issue salience from the media's agenda to the public's agenda. With the increasingly popularity of these programs, scholars need to examine if comedy news, such as *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* and *The Colbert Report* with Stephen Colbert, impact agenda-setting effects, and how that might compare to typical hard news programs, such as those seen on CNN, MSNBC, or Fox News. In an experiment, this study tested how individuals who received the same information only presented differently, namely either hard news or comedy news, reacted to the different presentation styles; and how those different presentation styles impacted individuals' acceptance of the media's agenda, taking into account their existing attitudes. Results indicated that when individuals agreed with the information presented in the news story, the hard news was more successful in the transfer of issue salience than the comedy news; however, when individuals disagreed with the information, the comedy news was more successful in the transfer of issue salience than the hard news. Overall, the results indicate typical hard news does not have a monopoly on the agenda-setting process because comedy news can set the agenda of audience members under certain conditions.

Key Words: Agenda Setting, Public Opinion, Attitudes, Presentation Styles, *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*, *The Colbert Report* with Stephen Colbert

## Does Humor Matter? An Analysis of How Hard News versus Comedy News Impact the Agenda-Setting Effects

McCombs and Shaw (1972) coined the term agenda setting to explain how the news media impact individuals' perceptions of the most important issue in the nation through the transferring of issue salience from the media's agenda to the public's agenda. Hundreds of studies have found empirical evidence to support the agenda-setting hypothesis; but most research has investigated agenda setting by focusing on how the typical news media impact the transfer of issue salience from the media's agenda to the public's agenda.

However, scholars have seen an increase in information presented in atypical programs rather than the typical hard news programs. Research found an increasing number of individuals turned to comedy news, such as *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* or *The Colbert Report* with Stephen Colbert, for political information rather than hard news, such as CNN or MSNBC (Kohut, 2007). Few agenda-setting studies have investigated how different presentation styles, such as comedy news, transfer issue salience from the media's agenda to the public's agenda. Even fewer still have directly compared the agenda-setting effects of typical hard news versus comedy news. In this study participants received the same information presented as either hard news or comedy news to directly compare the agenda-setting effects of both. To further agenda-setting research the study also investigated how the presentation style, hard news versus comedy news, interacted with individuals' existing attitudes to impact the agenda-setting effects.

### **Literature Review**

Bernard Cohen (1963) argued that the news media might not tell individuals what to think, but the news media have been stunningly successful in telling individuals what to think about—a theory that became known as agenda setting (McCombs, 2004). Research into agenda

setting has continued since the seminal study by McCombs and Shaw (1972). From their observations made in this study, the authors concluded that news stories “constitute much of the information upon which a voting decision has to be made. Most of what people know comes to them ‘second’ or ‘third’ hand from the mass media or from other people” (p. 176). In other words, when the news media spotlight certain issues, individuals cite those issues as more important problems facing the nation rather than other issues that may not be spotlighted in the news media. For example, if the news media increase coverage of economic concerns, individuals cite economic concerns as more important problems facing the nation more than another issues not discussed in the news media. However, individuals do not react to every issue in the same manner in that many factors impact individuals’ acceptance of the media’s agenda (McCombs, 2004; Dearing & Rogers, 1996). Even though many factors might impact whether the media set the agenda, plethora of studies have found that the news media do have an impact on the salience of certain issues in the public arena.

Scholars have speculated one explanation for this effect may be that the news media make these issues salient in memory; therefore, the issues are more accessible (Dearing & Rogers, 1996; McCombs, 2004). When the issue is accessible in memory, individuals may have better recall of that issue. Because individuals recall that issue more readily, individuals will cite the issue when asked what they believe is the most important problem facing the nation. Drew and Weaver (2006) found support for accessibility being a cognitive mechanism in the agenda-setting process in their study of the 2004 presidential election. However, Miller (2007) argued against agenda setting being just an accessibility issue, calling for experiments to determine what other cognitive mechanisms might relate to this process. Besides accessibility, Miller determined the negativity of the article influenced the agenda-setting effects in that the more

negative the media presented an issue; the more likely individuals cited that issue as a major problem facing the nation. Therefore, although accessibility is considered a key cognitive mechanism to explain the transfer of issue salience from the media's agenda to the public's agenda, other cognitive mechanisms might relate. Since how negatively the news media present an issue relates to agenda setting, presentation style of the information might impact the transfer of issue salience. Presenting the information differently than typical news programs might relate to agenda-setting effects in that atypical programs might impact the transfer of issue salience and might impact the agenda-setting effects differently than typical news programs.

And scholars have found that atypical presentation styles shape the public's agenda. In other words, the news media do not have a monopoly on the agenda-setting process. Other types of programs impact the agenda-setting effects including sitcoms (Dearing & Rogers, 1996) and talk shows (Weaver, 1994). Many scholars, though, have not investigated comedy news programs specifically to determine how they impact agenda-setting effects. So, the study looked to research on comedy programs generally to determine how individuals might accept the information contained within comedy news programs. The more individuals accept the information within a program, the more likely they would think the information important, and the more likely the information would have an agenda-setting effect. Dearing and Rogers (1996) found support for this when they argued the Harvard Alcohol Project successfully placed the issue of drinking and driving into the public's agenda. The Harvard Alcohol Project focused on the dangers of driving drunk and the idea of the designated driving program, placing storylines related to this issue in popular 1980s comedy programs. After the increased attention, individuals use the designated driving program more. Therefore, individuals do accept the agenda set forth in atypical programs, including comedy programs.

Research, though, has shown mixed results when comparing how persuasive comedy programs could be with their humorous messages as compared to other programs that contain serious messages, such as news programs. If the comedy programs are more persuasive, scholars might assume comedy news programs may be similar because both rely on presenting information in a humorous context. The more persuasive the message, the more likely the message is accessible in memory. Therefore, when comedy news programs cite certain issues as prevalent in society, individuals cite those issues more as problems facing the nation.

When discussing the persuasiveness of comedy programs, Zillmann posits that comedy programs may, in fact, be more persuasive than other forms of information because comedy has the ability to “diminish aversions, possibly removing them” (2000, p. 15). By diminishing or removing aversion, individuals may feel more positive toward the information contained within the comedy program; therefore, the comedy program can be very persuasive. Scholars have attempted to explain this by using different theories, such as dual processing models — elaboration likelihood model, or heuristic-systematic model — to help explain why comedy can be more effective than other forms of information in impacting individuals’ thoughts and behaviors (Petty, Schumann, Richman, & Strathman, 1993; Raney, 2006; Shrum, 2002). Petty and Cacioppo (1984a, 1984b) speculated that individuals tend to either process information from a message more carefully, or they process the message less carefully, based on personality and other differences. If the message contains strong arguments, individuals using a *central* processing route are more likely to evaluate and to accept the information contained in the message. If the message contains weak arguments, individuals using this central route are more likely to counter argue against the information contained in the message; therefore, the message will not be persuasive. In contrast, individuals who are prone to less careful processing use a

*peripheral* processing route, rather than a central route, to process information from a message. In other words, individuals use shortcuts to process the information, such as noting the number of arguments, rather than evaluating the strength of the arguments. If the message contains more arguments, regardless of argument strength, individuals using the peripheral route are more likely to accept and to be persuaded by the information contained in the message.

Slater and Rouner (2002) posited when the message is entertaining, individuals use a central route to process information, because these individuals feel more involved in the message itself. Although individuals use the central route, individuals often fail to counter argue against the comedy program because they are enjoying that program, and this makes the information more persuasive (Slater, 2002; Slater & Rouner, 2002). Shrum (2002) agreed that individuals fail to counter argue against comedy programs, but he posited that individuals use the peripheral route instead of the central route. These scholars agreed, though, that individuals fail to counter argue against comedy programs. By failing to counter argue against the information, comedy news programs may be more persuasive. If the information is more persuasive, the information might impact the agenda-setting process because the information is more accessible in memory.

Some scholars, however, do not agree that comedy programs, which contain humorous messages, might be more persuasive than other programs, which contain serious messages. Although individuals turn to comedy for enjoyment (Zillmann, 2000), programs containing humor are not necessarily more persuasive than programs containing serious messages (Nabi, Moyer-Guse & Byrne, 2007). Although individuals fail to counter argue against the humorous message, they discount the information more, making the information less influential in the end. Nabi et al. argued that humor “attracts attention but distracts from the relevant message content” (p. 30). If those same individuals discount the message because it is humorous, then the message



does not persuade individuals, even though little counter arguing is occurring. Individuals exposed to humorous information from a comedy news program may discount the information more as compared to individuals exposed to serious information from a hard news program. The discounted information would not be accessible in memory, and the comedy news program would not have more impact on the transfer of issue salience as compared to the hard news program. However, scholars have argued existing attitudes play a role in the persuasiveness of the message, so the study looked at research into attitudes.

### **Attitudes**

Petty and Krosnick (1995) explained that attitudes are individuals' beliefs that may or may not impact individuals' behavior. Attitudes, therefore, play a key role in message acceptance depending on whether individuals agree or disagree with the message. Scholars have argued that individuals exposed to information that they agreed with, the message often strengthens their attitude because the information is indicative that their attitude is correct. On the other hand, individuals exposed to information they disagreed with, the message often strengthens their attitude because they argue against that information to retain their existing attitude because they view information they disagree with as problematic or faulty (Anderson, Lepper, & Ross, 1980; Bizer & Petty, 2005; Lord, Ross, & Lepper, 1979).

This reaction individuals have toward the information based on existing attitudes relates to agenda setting in that when individuals watch news programs, they often evaluate the information either positively or negatively based on their existing attitudes. That evaluation has a powerful effect on attitudes because "the greater the number of unfavorable reactions, the lower level of the attitude change" (Lord et al., 1979, p. 854). When individuals counter argue against the news programs, they are less likely to accept the media's agenda. In contrast, it is

likely if individuals see the media message as reinforcing their attitudes; they will have a favorable response to the message and be more likely to accept the media's agenda. Few scholars, though, have examined how the presentation of the information, whether presented as comedy news or hard news, might relate to existing attitudes to impact the agenda-setting effects.

### **Hypotheses and Research Questions**

Given the literature, individuals should accept the media's agenda more when they received information about certain issues as compared to those who did not receive the issues, regardless of whether they received the information as hard news or comedy news. However, it is difficult to say definitively whether comedy news impacts its audience as much as or more than hard news. Also, the literature does not indicate how presentation style of the information might interact with individuals' attitudes to impact the agenda-setting effects. Since research has shown both hard news and comedy news impact agenda-setting effects, the following hypotheses will theorize this. Since little research is available to draw definitive predictions, the following research questions will compare the presentation style of the information, namely whether the information is presented as hard news versus comedy news, as well as the relationships between presentation style, and existing attitudes on agenda-setting effects.

**H1:** Individuals exposed to an issue presented as hard news will cite that issue as one of the most important problems facing the nation as compared to those who did not receive the issue.

**H2:** Individuals exposed to an issue presented as comedy news will cite that issue as one of the most important problems facing the nation as compared to those who did not receive the issue.

**RQ1:** How does the presentation style of the information, hard news versus comedy news, impact whether individuals exposed to an issue will cite that issue as one of the most important problems facing the nation?

**RQ2:** How do the presentation style of the information, hard news versus comedy news, and individual's existing attitudes impact whether individuals exposed to an issue will cite that issue as one of the most important problems facing the nation?

### **Method**

A between-subject experiment with a control group was developed that used a 2 (presentation style) x 2 (pre-existing attitude) to determine how the presentation of the information impacted the salience of the issue. To determine experimental validity, a pilot test ( $n = 40$ ) was completed with college-age participants recruited from a public university. Participants read one version of the news story, either the hard news or comedy news version, followed by answering questions about their level of enjoyment and how newsworthy they found the information, based on questions asked by Zillmann, Taylor, and Lewis (1998). The pilot test showed individuals viewed the comedy news story ( $M = 25.22$ ) as more entertaining than the hard news story ( $M = 13.59$ ,  $t$ -test (38df) =  $-3.667$ ,  $p < .001$ ); so the researcher hired a professional radio announcer to read the printed version of the story into a radio package to control for the modality of the information.

For the main experiment, individuals were recruited from the same public university as those participants in the pilot test. Individuals first completed the pre-questionnaire to determine each individual's attitudes toward issues that, unbeknownst to them, they might be exposed to later in the session—health care, immigration, and offshore drilling. Individuals were randomly assigned to listen to a radio address. After hearing the radio program, individuals completed a

Sudoku puzzle as a distraction. Individuals then completed a post questionnaire including the agenda-setting question regarding what major issues were facing America. After answering all questions, individuals received a debriefing form, thanked for their participation, and excused.

### **Stimulus Material**

Individuals heard the radio program formatted as a typical news program or as the comedy news program. The comedy news program included the same information as in the typical news program but with jokes added, such as those that might air on *The Daily Show*. The stories included humorous statements, such as in the immigration story, where the announcer said “he also reminds people that America was founded and was built by immigrants, which reminds us that illegal immigration is nothing new.” In the comedy version, he concluded “In fact, I believe the Indians had a special name for it. They called it 'white people.’”

**Story content.** Individuals in the control condition only heard two stories ( $n = 78$ ) — abstinence-only classes and violent video games. Participants in the experimental condition ( $n = 72$ ) received an additional issue story. Each of the issue stories dealt with a fictitious senator, Joseph Beale, I-Wyo., who would propose a new bill in Congress. The first issue dealt with the proposal to stop Medicaid health care benefits ( $n = 23$ ). The second issue dealt with the proposal to create the Illegal Immigration Enforcement Agency, ( $n = 26$ ). The third issue dealt with the proposal to begin more offshore drilling, ( $n = 23$ ).

### **Primary Variables**

**Independent variables.** The experiment had two main independent variables, presentation style and attitude congruency. Individuals either received the information presented as hard news ( $n = 77$ ) or comedy news ( $n = 73$ ). Individuals also noted their agreement or disagreement with particular statements on an 11-point semantic differential from 1, which was

strongly disagree, to 11, which was strongly agree. Individuals' attitudes toward health care were determined based on the statement: "The government should provide health care to all citizens in the United States." Individuals' attitudes toward immigrants were determined based on the statement: "I believe that the United States should welcome immigrants into the country, even those entering the country illegally." Individuals' attitudes toward offshore drilling were determined based on the statement: "The government should allow more offshore drilling." Individuals' attitudes were coded, so the higher individuals scored the more consistent their attitude was toward the proposal being indicated by the fictitious senator. All of the continuous independent variables, including attitude, were centered for the analysis (Aiken & West, 1991).

**Dependent variables.** Scholars use the "most important problem" question often to show an agenda-setting effect. The questions indicate whether an issue presented becomes accessible in memory, so to determine whether the presentation style impacted the agenda-setting effect, individuals' listed three important issues facing the nation. The issues used in the stimulus material were issues already in the media agenda at the time of the study to determine if focusing on those certain issues would transfer from the media's agenda to the public's agenda. Responses from individuals were coded by three graduate students who were blind to the experiment. To indicate whether the coders responded to the open-ended questions similarly, the data were analyzed using Krippendorff's alpha. The alpha levels associated with the coders' analysis were above .80, meaning the measures were coded reliably (first issue  $\alpha = 1.00$ ; second issue  $\alpha = .96$ ; and third issue  $\alpha = 1.00$ ).

**Control variables.** Several demographic variables were analyzed as control variables; however, only political party affiliation impacted the dependent variable. Affiliation was coded as two separate dummy variables. In one dummy variable Republicans were coded as 1 and all

other political party affiliations were coded as 0, while in the second dummy variable, Democrats were coded as 1 and all other political party affiliations were coded as 0. The other control variables did little to explain any of the variance and were eliminated from further analysis.

## Results

### Demographics

A majority of the participants (84.7%,  $n = 127$ ) indicated they were Caucasian, with only a small percentage, 5.3% ( $n = 8$ ) and 4.7% ( $n = 7$ ), indicating they were African American, and Hispanic or Latino, respectively. A majority of the individuals (82.6%,  $n = 123$  and 93.3%,  $n = 140$ ) also indicated they were female and between 20 to 22 years old respectively. About 44.0% ( $n = 66$ ) of the individuals indicated they were Democrats, while 28.2% ( $n = 42$ ) indicated they were Republicans, and 20.7% ( $n = 31$ ) indicated they were Independent. Individuals appeared neutral in their political leaning, according to a question based on a 5-point scale ranging from a possible 1 = strongly conservative to 5 = strongly liberal,  $M = 3.17$ ,  $SD = 1.04$ .

Although the study relied on college students to participate in the experiment, the study purposely used this convenient sample because these types of participants are more likely to expose themselves to comedy news programs such as *The Daily Show* or *The Colbert Report* as compared to hard news programs on CNN. In this case, use of a homogenous college-age sample assisted in the overall examination of the hypotheses and research questions. Diddi and LaRose (2006) argued that some research has to focus on college students, or as the authors refer to them as members of the “Internet generation.” Since the experiment included streaming audio, online questionnaires, and a Sudoku puzzle obtained online, using college students who have access to the Internet and often use the Internet for their class-work made the results more generalizable to the Internet population.

### Manipulation Check

Zillmann et al. comedy measures used from the pilot test were used in the experiment to ensure individuals thought the comedy stories were more entertaining than the hard news stories. Overall, individuals exposed to the comedy news ( $M = 5.83$ ,  $SD = 2.60$ ) found the stories more entertaining than those exposed to the hard news,  $M = 3.39$ ,  $SD = 1.65$ ,  $t(70) = -4.76$ ,  $p < .001$ . Each of the issues was analyzed separately. Individuals who received the immigration story found the comedy news ( $M = 6.70$ ,  $SD = 2.44$ ) more entertaining than the hard news,  $M = 2.50$ ,  $SD = 1.29$ ,  $t(24) = -5.71$ ,  $p > .001$ . Individuals who received the health care story found no difference between the hard news ( $M = 3.96$ ,  $SD = 1.48$ ) and comedy news ( $M = 4.96$ ,  $SD = 2.25$ ) when it came to the comedy scale,  $t(21) = .10$ ,  $p = .220$ . Individuals who received the offshore drilling story also found no difference between the hard news ( $M = 4.11$ ,  $SD = 1.85$ ) and comedy news ( $M = 5.82$ ,  $SD = 2.90$ ) when it came to the comedy scale,  $t(21) = -1.57$ ,  $p = .130$ . But because the data appeared to be trending in that direction, all three variables were kept in the analysis to test the hypotheses and research questions.

### Main Experimental Findings

To answer the hypotheses, a Chi-square test was performed on all three issues combined, then all three issues separate to determine if those who received one issue was more likely to cite that issue as one of the most important facing the nation as compared to the other two issues. Two analyses were performed – one on those who received hard news and one on those who received comedy news. Individuals in the hard news condition were more likely to cite the issue when they received that issue than those who did not receive the issue,  $\chi^2(76) = 6.87$ ,  $p < .01$ . When looking at the individual issues, individuals in the health care or offshore drilling conditions were more likely to cite the issue when they received the hard news,  $\chi^2(45) = 5.01$ ,  $p$

$< .05$  and  $\chi^2(45) = 7.25, p < .01$  respectively. However, individuals in the immigration condition were not more likely to cite the issue when they received the hard news,  $\chi^2(25) = .81, p = .368$ . Therefore, the results indicated partial support for the first hypothesis in that individuals in the hard news condition were more likely to cite the issue they received as a major problem when they received either health care or offshore drilling story.

Similar anomalies also occurred when testing the second hypothesis. Individuals in the comedy news condition were not more likely to cite the issue they received than those who did not receive the issue when investigating all issues combined,  $\chi^2(72) = .71, p = .401$ . When looking at each issue separately, individuals in the health care or offshore drilling condition were not more likely to cite the issue when they received the comedy news,  $\chi^2(71) = 1.71, p = .191$  and  $\chi^2(72) = .85, p = .358$  respectively. However, individuals in the immigration condition were more likely to cite the issue when they received the comedy news,  $\chi^2(72) = 5.63, p < .05$ . Therefore, once again the results indicated partial support for the second hypothesis that individuals in the comedy condition would cite the issue they received more than individuals in the control condition when they received the immigration story.

Since individuals in the immigration condition reacted differently than the remaining two issues, more analyses were completed by investigating the health care and offshore drilling issues combined, and the immigration condition separate. To answer the research questions, binary logistic linear regression analyses were performed to evaluate how well the key variables predicted the likelihood of individuals citing an issue as the most important problem in the nation. To test the individuals in the health care and offshore drilling condition, demographic variables (political party affiliation) were entered in the first block of the regression model. In



the second block, the main effects of presentation style and attitude were entered. In the third block, the interaction was entered between presentation style and attitude.

In this analysis, presentation style did appear to predict the dependent variable. Individuals who received either health care or offshore drilling cited that issue as a major problem facing the nation when they were in the hard news condition. Although the results were not statistically significant, the model (see Table 1) was trending in that direction ( $\chi^2(41) = 9.61$ ,  $p = .087$ ) with the presentation of the information appearing to be nearly significant,  $B = 1.40$ ,  $p = .058$ . Therefore, hard news appeared to have more impact on the agenda-setting process when individuals received the health care or offshore drilling news stories. The model correctly classified 67.4 percent and successfully addressed the first research question. Individuals existing attitude failed to interact with presentation of the information to impact the agenda-setting effects. Therefore, the regressions addressed the second research question. These findings were only for those who received the health care or offshore drilling stories.

Those in the immigration condition reacted to the presentation differently, as well as reacted differently to the interaction between the presentation of the information and individuals' existing attitudes. When immigration was analyzed (see Table 2), the control variables were eliminated from the analysis for immigration alone because of the small sample size ( $n = 26$ ) and the probability of too many variables in the model might saturate it. Therefore, the main effects were entered into the first block and the interaction was entered in the second block.

Neither presentation style nor attitude congruency was significant main predictors in this model. Since the presentation style failed to predict the dependent variable, the results indicated individuals reacted similarly to the hard news and comedy news, answering the first research question. However, for those who received the immigration story, an interaction appeared

between presentation style and attitude congruency. Individuals who received the comedy version were just as likely to cite immigration when they received that issue, regardless of whether they agreed or disagreed with the information. Individuals in the hard news condition were more likely to cite the issue when they agreed with the information. When they disagreed with the information, they were less likely to cite immigration as a major problem when they received the hard news version (see Table 1). The full model correctly classified 76.9% of the cases and successfully addressed the second research question.

### **Discussion**

The results indicated both presentation styles, namely the comedy news and the hard news, had an agenda-setting effect. However, individuals reacted to the issues differently showing partial support for the two hypotheses. Individuals who received the hard news story regarding either issue of health care or offshore drilling cited those issues that they received more than individuals who did not receive those issues; but, individuals who received the comedy news story regarding either issue did not cite those issues more than those who did not receive the issues. On the other hand, individuals who received the comedy news story regarding the issue of immigration cited that issue more than those individuals who did not receive that issue; while those who received the hard news story regarding this issue did not cite that issue more than those who did not receive the issue.

Similar patterns emerged when answering the two research questions in that individuals reacted to the issues differently. When comparing the two presentation styles of comedy news and hard news, regardless of existing attitudes, individuals who received the health care or offshore drilling stories were more susceptible to agenda-setting effects when they received the hard news story as compared to the comedy news story. Individuals who received the

immigration comedy news story exhibited more agenda-setting effects. When examining the interaction between presentation styles and individuals' existing attitudes, individuals who received the immigration hard news story exhibited less agenda-setting effects when they disagreed with the proposal being proposed by the fictitious senator in the story but exhibited more acceptance of the media's agenda when they agreed with the proposal. Individuals who received the health care or offshore drilling stories failed to react differently to the presentation styles based on their existing attitudes.

Therefore, the study showed both presentation styles had an impact on transferring of issue salience from the media's agenda to the public's agenda. However, the results followed other research, which has shown individuals do not react to the media's agenda similarly. Just because the media focus on certain issues, those issues do not automatically transfer to the public's agenda (McCombs, 2004). Therefore, this explains why individuals in this experiment reacted differently to the three issue stories of health care, immigration, or offshore drilling.

One reason individuals reacted differently to the issues might be based on the comedy value inherent in the stories. Individuals who received the immigration story found the comedy news story more entertaining than those who received the hard news story. The same could not be said for individuals who received the health care or offshore drilling story. Individuals found no difference between the two presentation styles. In other words, individuals who received the health care or offshore drilling stories found the hard news story as entertaining as the comedy news story. Therefore, individuals who received the immigration story were more entertained by the comedy news story as compared to individuals who received the health care or offshore drilling stories. Because of the entertaining value inherent in the comedy news version, the immigration issue might have been more accessible in memory when presented in a humorous

context. However, when the hard news story was considered as entertaining as the comedy news story, the health care and offshore drilling issues might have been more accessible in memory when presented in a serious context. That may be a reason for the difference in how individuals responded to the issues.

Reconsidering the extant literature, scholars have argued that individuals must consider an issue important for them to accept the media's agenda; but individuals do not see all issues as being important (Dearing & Rogers, 1996; McCombs, 2004). With the health care and offshore drilling stories, individuals did not find the comedy news version important. When they received the story making fun of the issue, they discounted the issue as being a major problem. Individuals in the hard news condition found the information in the news story to be of utmost concern. Researchers have argued that individuals might discount information presented in a humorous way (Nabi, et. al., 2007). The results indicated that individuals apparently discounted the issues as being major concern only when the issues were presented in the humorous way as compared to presenting in the serious way.

The opposite results occurred for the individuals who received the immigration issue story. They felt the issue was important when they received the comedy news story. They apparently did not discount the issue. Individuals in the hard news condition failed to find the issue important. Slater (2002) contends that individuals often fail to counter argue against information presented in an entertaining manner. When they receive less entertaining information, individuals often counter argue against the information. The results here follow suit, in that individuals may not have counter argued against the information presented in the comedy news story; however, they may have counter argued against the information presented in the hard news story.

The interaction between presentation style and existing attitudes better explains this idea of counter arguing against the information. For individuals who received the immigration story, their existing attitudes had little impact in their acceptance of the information when they received the comedy news story. In other words, they accepted the issue as being important regardless of if they agreed or disagreed with the proposal being proposed by the fictitious senator. Slater (2002) contends that individuals fail to counter argue against the information when they feel entertained by the information. Entertainment programs, such as comedy news programs, could be persuasive because of this lack of counter arguing. However, when individuals received the hard news story regarding the immigration issue, they counter argued against the information when they disagreed with the proposal being proposed by the fictitious senator. Since they disagreed with the proposal in the news, they argued against the issue being a major concern. When they agreed with the proposal, individuals had no need to counter argue against the information. Therefore, they considered the issue important.

Overall, the study shows some promising findings for future research. Although the results could not be generalizable to the overall population, the demographic variables showed the sample appeared similar to the population, at least with respect to participants' political ideologies. More participants indicated they considered themselves Democrats and Independents, and "middle of the road" when it came to their political leanings, which is similar to the population (Kohut, 2007). Unfortunately, the sample had more females than males than what is found in the population. However, research has shown both males and females turn to comedy news programs for information equally; so although the study had more females, the results should still indicate important findings overall for agenda-setting research.

Despite the promising results of the study, there were several limitations. Because of the different findings regarding the different issues, more research should investigate why this occurred. Was this because of how entertaining they found the information? Or are there other reasons for individuals reacting differently to the issues? Another limitation may be the smaller sample size in the experimental condition ( $n = 72$ ), as compared to the control condition ( $n = 78$ ). Experiments often have fewer participants in them than other types of research, and the significant findings, despite the small sample size, shows some very promising results.

### **Conclusion**

Scholars have seen a rise in audiences using soft news programs, such as talk shows, or comedy news programs, such as *The Daily Show* or *The Colbert Report*, to inform them of the importance of issues in the news. The news media struggle with this, as they lose audiences to more entertaining programs; therefore, the news media have attempted to incorporate comedy into their typical news programs. Scholars have seen different typical hard news networks incorporating humor into their delivery of the news, including media giant CNN, whose anchor, Anderson Cooper, attempts humor in his *AC360* program with his “Ridiculist” segment that has focused on some person or group acting “ridiculous.” But traditional journalists need to take heed because if individuals find the reporters’ information not funny, they may discount it.

However, individuals could accept the importance of issues even when issues are presented in a humorous way. Journalists do not have a monopoly on informing individuals about the current political environment, at least when considering the younger generation. Journalists need to realize that people want to be entertained, as well as informed. The news of yesteryear no longer appeals to the younger generation. Although *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report* are considered fake news, younger individuals still consider them news. For

some issues, journalists may want to incorporate humor into their reporting to draw larger audiences because individuals may find the information more important than the typical hard news story if they find the information entertaining. However, research needs to investigate how older individuals might react to humorous information as compared to younger individuals. Younger individuals appear to react to comedy news programs, but older individuals might be more likely to discount the information presented in a humorous way since they often don't turn to programs like *The Daily Show* or *The Colbert Report*.

More research also is needed to figure out why individuals respond to these issues differently to better determine how the media should present certain issues to indicate to the populous the important nature of those issues. Future studies could investigate if individuals perceive presentation style differently based on what issue they received. Initial analyses in this study found that individuals in the immigration condition reacted differently to the information than those in the health care or offshore drilling condition. Future research could investigate this more fully by asking more questions directly related to the actual issue participants received to determine why they responded differently.

Despite the different findings among the three issues, the study showed an overall relationship between presentation style and individuals' acceptance of the media's agenda. Scholars need to do more research to investigate this relationship more fully, since the results revealed that individuals did not react similarly to every issue. Are there certain issues that people consider inappropriate for someone to joke about and, therefore, hard news would be more successful at influencing public opinion? Are there certain issues in which comedy would yield more of an impact on the agenda-setting effects? Are there certain issues in which hard news would yield more of an impact on the agenda-setting effects? Are there certain issues in

which comedy news would yield more of an impact on the agenda-setting effects? And why do individuals react differently to issues based on how the issues were presented? While this study found support for the idea that presentation style does impact agenda setting, future researchers in the field should explore more fully why this occurs, as well as how individuals react differently to issues.

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## Tables

Table 1

*Logistic Regression Analysis for Variables Predicting Participants Mentioning Health Care or Offshore Drilling Issue as the Most Important Problem When They Received That Issue*

Independent Variables	Model Statistics								
	Model 1			Model 2			Model 3		
	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	<i>e<sup>B</sup></i>	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	<i>e<sup>B</sup></i>	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	<i>e<sup>B</sup></i>
Block 1									
Republican	-1.61 <sup>a</sup>	.86	.20	-1.52 <sup>a</sup>	.90	.22	-1.71 <sup>a</sup>	.98	.18
Democrats	-.67 <sup>a</sup>	.38	.51	-.77 <sup>a</sup>	.43	.46	-.86 <sup>*</sup>	.47	.42
Constant	.65	.58	1.92						
$\chi^2$ (df)		4.62 (2)							
Percentage Correct		65.2%							
Block 2									
Presentation				1.14 <sup>a</sup>	.67	3.12	1.40 <sup>a</sup>	.74	1.05
Attitude				-.11	.16	.90	.09	.22	1.10
Constant				-.00	.72	1.00			
$\chi^2$ (df)						3.06 (2)			
Percentage Correct						60.9%			
Block 3									
Presentation * Attitude							-.39	.30	.68
Constant							-.13	.78	.88
$\chi^2$ (df)								1.93 (1)	
Percentage Correct								67.4%	

Note: Block 1: Nagelkerke  $R^2 = .13$ . Block 2: Nagelkerke  $R^2 = .21$ . Block 3: Nagelkerke  $R^2 = .25$ . Republican (0 = other, 1 = Republicans), Democrat (0 = other, 1 = Democrat), Presentation (0 = hard news, 1 = comedy news), Attitude (centered) (-5.65 = disagree, 5.35 = agree). Dependent variable is did the participant cite the issue that they received as the most important problem (0 = no, 1 = yes). \* $p < .05$ , <sup>a</sup> $p < .10$ . ( $n = 46$ ).

Table 2

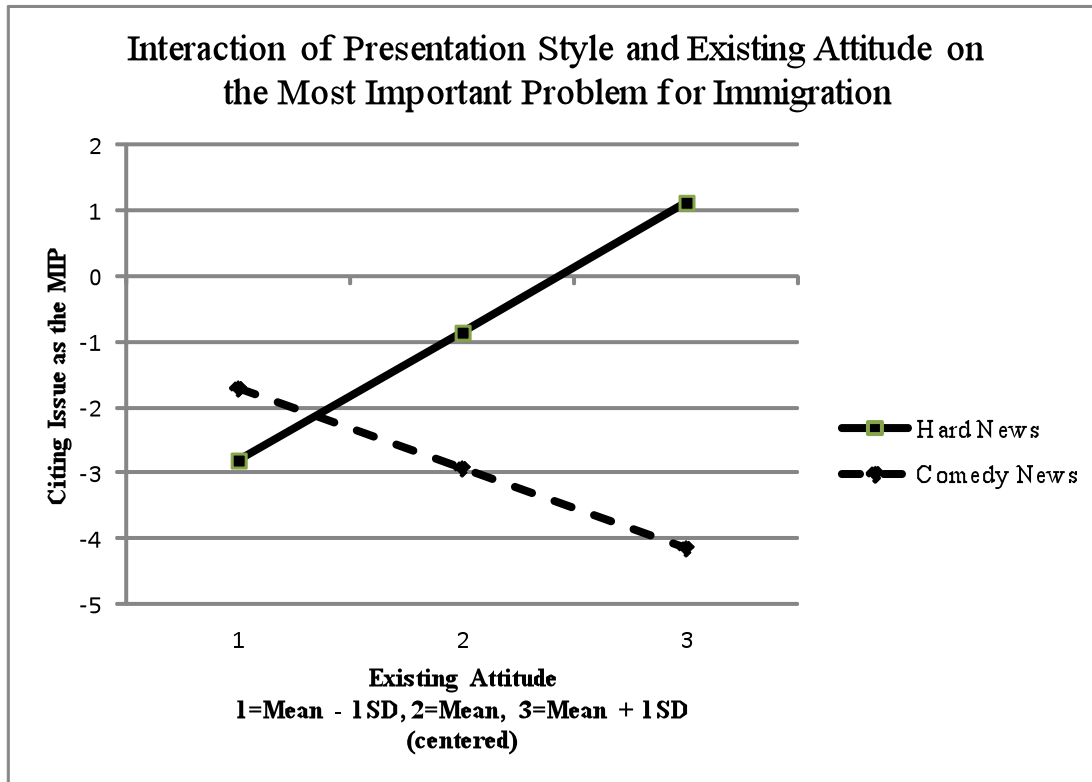
*Logistic Regression Analysis for Variables Predicting Participants Mentioning**Immigration as the Most Important Problem When They Received That Issue*

Independent Variables	Model Statistics					
	Model 1			Model 2		
	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	<i>e<sup>B</sup></i>	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	<i>e<sup>B</sup></i>
<b>Block 1</b>						
Presentation	-.69	.94	.50	-1.82	1.31	.16
Attitude	.09	.17	1.09	-.68	.43	1.97
Constant	-.68	.68	.51			
$\chi^2$ (df)		1.11 (2)				
Percentage Correct		73.1%				
<b>Block 2</b>						
Presentation * Attitude				1.10*	.53	.33
Constant				-.13	.76	.88
$\chi^2$ (df)					6.54 (1)	
Percentage Correct					76.9%	

Note: Block 1: Nagelkerke  $R^2 = .06$ . Block 2: Nagelkerke  $R^2 = .37$ . Republican (0 = other, 1 = Republicans), Democrat (0 = other, 1 = Democrat), Newspaper (0 = other, 1 = newspaper), TV/Radio (0 = other, 1 = TV/Radio), Internet (0 = other, 1 = Internet), Presentation (0 = hard news, 1 = comedy news), Attitude (centered) (-3.65 = disagree, 5.35 = agree). Dependent variable is did the participant cite immigration that they received as the most important problem (centered) (0 = no, 1 = yes). \* $p < .05$ , <sup>a</sup> $p < .10$ . ( $n = 26$ ).

Figure

Figure 1



*Figure 1.* The graph shows the simple slope of the interaction between presentation style and existing attitudes for individuals who received immigration and indicated that specific issue as the most important problem facing the nation. The Y-axis shows the attitude congruency measures, which were based on three points—the mean, one standard deviation below the mean, and one standard deviation above the mean. The X-axis shows the likelihood of citing immigration as the most important problem.