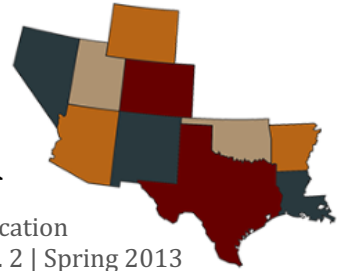


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To Laugh or Not to Laugh: How Comedy News Versus Hard News Interacts with Individuals' Levels of Political Cynicism and Political Efficacy to Impact the Agenda- Setting Effects

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Keywords: agenda setting, experiment, hard news, comedy news, political cynicism, political efficacy

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RUNNING HEAD: To Laugh or Not to Laugh

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Abstract:

This experiment investigated how the same information presented as either hard news or comedy news interacted with individuals' levels of cynicism and levels of efficacy to impact the agenda-setting effects. The results indicated individuals who received the comedy news story and had increased levels of cynicism accepted the media's agenda more than those who received the same information presented as hard news. However, individuals who received the hard news story and had increased levels of efficacy were more likely to cite the issue they received as compared to those who received the same information presented as comedy news.

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Although scholars have tested how media messages impact political cynicism and political efficacy, less have examined how individuals' existing levels of cynicism and levels of efficacy impact the transfer of issue salience from the media's agenda to the public's agenda, most notably through first-level agenda setting. More importantly, since individuals consume news in more atypical formats, such as comedy news programs, scholars must ascertain how presentation of news might interact with individuals' levels of cynicism and levels of efficacy to impact the agenda-setting effect. In an experiment, this study created two radio news programs containing the same information but presented in two different ways: hard news, similar to information they might hear on CNN, or comedy news, similar to information they might hear on *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*. The purpose of this study is to determine how the presentation of information might impact agenda-setting effects taking into account individuals' existing levels of cynicism and levels of efficacy. Even though comedy news programs often are on television, the study used radio programs to control for certain variables, such as the attractiveness of the individuals giving the information. The radio addresses were similar to comedy news programs on television in that individuals could at least hear the information.

Literature Review

Scholars have investigated the transfer of issue salience from the media's agenda to the public's agenda in hundreds of studies. McCombs and Shaw (1972) first coined the phrase "agenda setting" in their seminal study to explain how when news media focus on certain issues, individuals cite those issues more as one of the most important problems facing the nation. In other words, when the media focus on an issue, such as the economy, individuals cite the

economy as a major issue facing the nation. Most studies have shown that typical hard news would impact the transfer of issue salience from the media's agenda to the public's agenda, showing how the media has an agenda-setting effect on individual's perceptions of most important problems facing the nation (Dearing & Rogers, 1996; McCombs, 2004). However, even if the media focus on certain issues, those issues might not become salient in individuals' minds. Individual characteristics influence the agenda-setting effects (Weaver, 1980; Hill, 1985; Weaver, Zhu, & Willnat, 1992; Yagade & Dozier, 1990; Miller & Wanta, 1996; McCombs, 2004). Even though individuals fail to react to issues similarly, scholars have shown how atypical programs such as sitcoms (Dearing & Rogers, 1996) or soft news programs (Weaver, 1994; Kowalewski, 2011) impacted the transfer of issue salience.

Scholars typically conceptualize comedy news programs as "soft news," distinguishable from "hard news" by Baum (2003) thusly: "(W)hereas traditional news programs report the news in order to *inform* the audience, at least in some significant measure, the soft news media seek almost exclusively to *entertain* the audience." Comedy news programs such as Comedy Central's *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report* have emerged as an important source of political news and commentary, particularly for younger audiences (Young & Tisinger, 2006). Besides being important to younger audiences, Anderson, Danis and Stohl (2009) argued that programs like *The Daily Show* had an impact on public opinion formation. These programs are part of a rich tradition of political satire and parody in Britain and the United States, which manifested itself in new form in Britain in the late 1950s and early 1960s in comedy broadcast news programs such as *That Was The Week That Was* during what one author has deemed the "satire boom," inexorably changing the way citizens viewed politics and news (Wagg, 2002).

While “soft news” programs aim primarily to entertain, Baum suggested that substantive information about news and politics can be “piggybacked” on to other information presented for comedy value. This is not to suggest, however, that news presented in a comedy fashion is light on substance. A study examining broadcast political coverage before the 2004 elections found that, while *The Daily Show* focused more on comedy than substance, it had just as much substance as the major news networks during the same time (Fox, Koloen & Sahin, 2007). Therefore, although these programs might be called “soft news,” their substance should impact agenda-setting effect.

Even though both the hard news and soft news programs should impact agenda-setting effects, scholars have diverging opinions about which might relate more to the transfer of issue salience. By presenting the information in a comedic way, the information might be more readily accepted by the audience. One reason the information might be more readily accepted by the audience could be explained because individuals failed to critically argue against the information like they might with typical hard news (Lyttle, 2001; Young, 2008). As Baumgartner and Morris (2008) noted in a study on the *Colbert Report*'s impact on young viewers, “comedy makes it less likely that the receiver will critically question the message accompanying it, making it more likely that the individual will agree with the message” (p. 625). Zillmann (2000) posited that individuals fail to critically argue against comedy programs because these types of programs remove aversion. In other words, individuals do not feel averse to the information because of the presentation.

However, Zillmann and others have argued although comedy programs decrease individuals' feelings of aversion, the information contained in these programs are not necessarily accepted by individuals more as compared to serious messages. Nabi, Moyer-Guse and Byrne

(2007) suggest that although they might enjoy the information more, individuals discounted the information as well, meaning it would not be more accepted by the audience. However, it might not be as easy to compare comedy news to hard news. The issue appears to play a role in whether individuals accept the media's agenda (Kowalewski, 2011). In this study comparing salience of hard news and comedy news, results indicated for certain issues, individuals accepted the agenda more when the information was presented as hard news while, for another issue, individuals accepted the agenda more when information was presented as comedy news. The study looked at how individuals reacted to health care, immigration, and offshore drilling. The findings indicated that individuals reacted to the health care and offshore drilling stories similarly, in that the hard news version had more impact on the agenda-setting effects. However, individuals who received immigration story reacted more to the comedy news version as compared to the hard news version. Therefore, the issue could impact the acceptance of the information, similarly to the presentation of the information.

Acceptance of the information relates to agenda setting in that the more individuals accept information presented in programs, the more likely the information is accessible in memory. The more accessible the issue is in memory, the more likely individuals will cite the issue when thinking about the most important problem facing the nation (Scheufele, 2000; Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007). So if individuals accept the information presented, the information should be more readily accessible in memory and have more impact on agenda-setting effects. If individuals discount the information, the information should not be so readily accessible in memory, and have less impact on the agenda-setting effects.

Cynicism and Efficacy and the News

Scholars have investigated many aspects of agenda setting, including how it might relate to political knowledge *directly* but with political cynicism and political efficacy *indirectly*. Iyengar and Kinder (1986, 1987) argue that individuals who have less political knowledge are victims of the media's agenda because "Americans come to know their president primarily through images that come flickering across their television screen" (1986, p. 136). Iyengar and Kinder have theorized that individuals were victims of the news media. New research, though, has countered this idea, finding individuals with more political knowledge accept the media's agenda more readily than individuals with less political knowledge (Miller & Krosnick, 2000). Political knowledge often relates closely with political cynicism and political efficacy (Cappella & Jamieson, 1997). Cappella and Jamieson have defined political cynicism as related to how much trust individuals have in government. They have posited political efficacy as related to individuals' feelings that they understand and have a say in politics. The more political knowledge individuals have, the more they trust government; therefore, they have less political cynicism. The more political knowledge individuals have, the more they feel they understand politics; therefore, they have more political efficacy.

Cappella and Jamieson (1997) argue that political efficacy and political cynicism are created through exposure to the news media because "people learn about the motives of political actors through the media and their representations of political actors" (p. 145). But the media themselves impact cynicism and efficacy. Pinkleton et al. (2012) suggest that satisfaction with media influences whether political cynicism correlates with apathy and disaffection with the political process. Less satisfaction with media leads to increased cynicism and decreased engagement. Satisfaction with media may instead correlate with "skepticism," which is less problematic than cynicism because it allows for at least low levels of internal and external

efficacy. Scholars contend though as individuals become more cynical about government, they have decreased efficacy.

And political cynicism has increased over the past half century, reflected by recent polls showing a record-low 13 percent approval rating for Congress (Rowley, 2012) and 81 percent disapproval of the way the country was being governed (Saad, 2011). Cappella and Jamieson (1997) attributed this “spiral of cynicism” to traditional “hard news” presentation about politics, which increasingly have used strategic frames for political news that trigger cynicism in individuals. Strategic frames often discuss politics in terms of strategy, including using game metaphors. By ridiculing and satirizing politicians and the political process, comedy news programs may be contributing to political cynicism as well. Indeed, cynicism may be even greater among those who consume comedy news as compared to those who tend to watch more typical hard news programs (Fu et al., 2011). So if cynicism has increased as a result of comedy news, scholars could assume efficacy has decreased.

However, research has showed the opposite. In their discussion of “The Daily Show Effect,” Baumgartner and Morris (2006) found that the show had a mixed effect regarding political cynicism and political efficacy. *Daily Show* viewing was associated with a lack of trust both in the political process and in the news media. This lack of trust typically corresponds to decreased political “external efficacy,” that is, belief that the government is responsive to citizens. (p. 352). This has long been thought to correlate with a drop in political involvement (Baum, 2003), a sign that citizens who had less confidence in political systems and institutions were less likely to engage with those institutions and participate in the process (Pinkleton, Austin & Fortman, 1998). However, Baumgartner and Morris posited comedy news may actually enhance “internal efficacy,” the extent to which citizens feel they have the information they need

to participate effectively in the political process. Hoffman and Thomson (2009) further explained viewing of comedy-based news programs by young audiences has been connected with positive impact on their civic participation. This would suggest that the traditional relationship between cynicism and efficacy is worthy of further study, especially in light of comedy news.

Many scholars have shown how hard news and comedy news programs impact cynicism and efficacy. However, more research should focus on how individuals' levels of political cynicism and levels of political efficacy might impact individuals' perceptions of information, especially if individuals receive the information with different presentation styles. In other words, how would the presentation of the information, namely whether they received hard news or comedy news, interact with individuals' existing levels of cynicism and levels of efficacy to impact individuals' acceptance of media messages?

Hypotheses and Research Questions

Individuals accept information contained in media messages, regardless of how the information is presented. Since research has shown presenting information as either hard news or comedy news would impact agenda-setting effects, the following hypothesis theorizes this:

H: Individuals exposed to an issue will cite that issue as one of the most important problems facing the nation as compared to those who did not receive the issue, regardless of whether individuals received the issue presented as typical hard news or comedy news.

However, research has shown individuals accept information presented humorously for certain issues but appear to discount information presented humorously for other issues. Also, research has not investigated how the presentation of the information interacts with individuals'

levels of cynicism or levels of efficacy to impact agenda-setting effects. Since little research could draw definitive predictions, the following research questions compare the presentation style of the information, or whether individuals received information presented as hard news or comedy news, on agenda-setting effects, as well as how that interacted with individuals' levels of cynicism and levels of efficacy to impact the transfer of issue salience.

RQ1: How do the presentation styles of the information hard news or 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 or comedy news, interact with individual's existing levels of cynicism and levels of efficacy to impact whether individuals exposed to an issue will cite that issue as one of the most important problems facing the nation?

Method

Scholars have used experimental design to test whether individuals accept the media's agenda (Iyengar & Kinder, 1987; Golan & Wanta, 2001; McCombs, 2004). In this 3 by 2 experimental design, participants (n = 192) received one of three issues stories presented as either hard news or comedy news. The study chose three issues of health care, immigration, and offshore drilling because all three issues had been prevalent in the media at the time of the study. Often, agenda setting takes time to transfer the salience of issues from the media's agenda to the public's agenda (McCombs, 2004). Therefore, by using issues already prevalent in the media's agenda meant more success in transferring the salience of those issues to participants' agendas.

Participants first answered questions regarding their level of cynicism, level of efficacy, and demographic questions. Participants then were randomly assigned to listen to a simulated

radio address with one of the three issues embedded into it along with two buffer stories, all presented as either hard news or comedy news. Following exposure to the stimulus material, participants completed a Sudoku distraction before answering what issues they felt were the most important problem facing the nation.

Agenda setting is not about mere exposure to the information, but the transfer of issues from the media's agenda to the public's agenda. To control for mere exposure, participants completed a distraction of doing a Sudoku puzzle so that when they answered the agenda-setting questions, they had not necessarily been thinking about the radio address they just heard.

Participants were recruited both from a private university and the local community where the private university was located in to get participants from different age groups, with slightly more than half, 52.1%, younger participants (ages 18 to 24), and almost half, 47.9%, older participants (ages 25 and older). Participants indicated on self-report measures that they were slightly conservative ($M = 2.68$, $SD = 1.08$) with the item ranging from 1 = strongly conservative to 5 = strongly liberal. More than half the participants indicated they were female (73.4%, $n = 141$), and Caucasian (83.3%, $n = 160$).

Stimulus Material

Participants received one of three issue stories presented as either hard news or comedy news. The study used stimulus material created specifically for this experiment with fake news stories presented as real news stories. Participants were not told about the fake nature of the news stories until after the experiment concluded. All participants heard a radio address with the two buffer stories about abstinence-only programs and violent video games but were randomly

assigned to hear one of the three issue stories – health care, immigration, and offshore drilling.

A professional radio announcer was used for the radio address. The study used a radio address to present the information to control for modality of the information. If the study had used real television shows, the experiment would have had issues with previous exposure to such programs. By using a radio announcer who lived in another state, the study could control for issues of previous exposure.

Both the hard news and comedy news stories contained the same information. The three issue stories centered on a fictitious newly-elected U.S. Senator who planned to propose a new law when he went to Washington, D.C. For participants who heard the health care issue story, they heard about the senator's planned proposal to require businesses to provide health care. For participants who heard the immigration issue story, they heard about the senator's planned proposal to create an agency to find and to deport illegal immigrants. For participants who heard the offshore drilling story, they heard about the senator's planned proposal to allow more drilling in the Gulf of Mexico.

Participants heard the same information, only the comedy news stories contained humorous statements interjected into the news stories. All of the humorous statements were taken from comments made on *The Daily Show*, *The Colbert Report*, and The Onion, an online fake news website. The comments were taken from these sources when the comment made fun of the issues themselves. For example, in the health care story, both the hard news and the comedy news story had the comment, "Medicaid health care benefits are available to certain low-income individuals and families who fit into an eligibility group." In the comedy news story, a comment was taken from The Onion to add the humorous statement, "Not that it's needed, when McDonald's meat is now the primary source of antibiotics for children."

When participants watch *The Daily Show* or *The Colbert Report*, they normally know they are watching a comedy news program. To control for this, participants heard the comedy radio address with humorous statements interjected from the beginning, so they would understand the radio address was humorous in nature. The radio address began with the announcer giving the call numbers of the radio station in the hard news version. However, in the comedy news version, after the radio announcer gave the call numbers, he said, “Of all the 24-hour radio streams out of Wyoming, we’re one of them.” The participants then heard one of the buffer stories before the issue story, to ensure they understood the nature of the broadcast.

Variables

Independent variables. Participants received one of three issue stories of health care ($n = 61$), immigration ($n = 70$), or offshore drilling ($n = 61$). Participants received versions of the stories presented as either hard news ($n = 97$) or comedy news ($n = 95$) in a simulated radio address. Participants also answered 12 statements others scholars have used to gauge people’s levels of cynicism and levels of efficacy (Jamieson & Cappella, 1996). The 12 statements were asked before exposure to the stimulus material to control for the stimulus material impacting individuals’ levels of cynicism and levels of efficacy. Many studies used political cynicism and political efficacy as dependent measures, but this study used these measures as independent variables. When the measures were factor analyzed using Principal Component Factoring ($KMO = .797$), two factors emerged. The cynicism scale was created by averaging the eight statements: most politicians do not tell the truth; most politicians are trustworthy (reverse coded); people like me don’t have a say in what the government does; I think that politicians do not listen to people like me; the government is run by a few big interests looking out for themselves; politicians lose touch with people after they are elected; politicians are only interested in people’s votes, not their

opinions; and politicians only care about themselves or special interests ($\alpha = .863$). The higher number meant participants had more political cynicism. The efficacy scale was created by averaging the four statements: at times, politics can be so complex that people like me don't understand what is going on (reverse coded); I think that I am better informed about politics than others; Voting is an effective way to have an influence; and my vote makes a difference ($\alpha = .683$). The higher number meant participants had more political efficacy.

Dependent variables. To show an agenda-setting effect, the study asked participants to list what top three problems were facing the nation. The most important problem (MIP) question has been used by many scholars to gauge an agenda-setting effect (Dearing & Rogers, 1996; McCombs, 2004). Scholars have looked at what issues individuals listed as the MIP, and compared those responses to what issues were prevalent in the news media. If individuals listed issues prevalent in the news media; then scholars have posited an agenda-setting effect occurred. Therefore, this study used the same measures. Two undergraduate students blind to the participants' condition coded those open-ended responses. The coders looked at whether participants listed health care, immigration, or offshore drilling as one of the three top issues facing the nation. Using Krippendorff alpha the coders' responses appeared to be reliably coded, above .80 ($\alpha = 1.00$).

Control variables. The study asked participants several questions for classifications purposes to take into account many demographic variables to control for those factors in final analysis. All of the continuous variables, including the demographic variables and the levels of cynicism and levels of efficacy, were centered for all analysis (Aiken & West, 1991). All continuous variables were centered because the study looked at interaction terms. By centering

the continuous variables, the data were more interpretable. Also, centering the continuous variables help control for issues of multicollinearity.

Participants indicated their level of education and their level of income based off a 5-point scale, ranging from lower levels of education or income to higher levels of education or income. Several variables were dichotomous, or dummy coded, included gender (0 = male, 1 = female), race (0 = other, 1 = Caucasians), considers themselves Republican (0 = other, 1 = Republican), and considers themselves Democrats (0 = other, 1 = Democrat). The study also gauged participants' age by asking what year the participants were born in, then taking the year minus the current year to determine an age for every participant. Participants also indicated their political strength and leaning (1 = strongly conservative, 5 = strongly liberal).

Results

Manipulation Check

All stimulus material underwent analysis to ensure participants viewed the comedy news as more entertaining than the hard news. The study used Zillmann, Taylor, and Lewis' (1998) entertainment scale to determine entertainment value associated with the stimulus material. The entertainment scale was created by averaging the four statements: The information was: amusing, hilarious, enjoyable, and entertaining ($\alpha = .93$). Participants found the comedy news version as more entertaining than the hard news version for all three issues: health care comedy news ($M = 6.58, SD = 2.55$) and hard news ($M = 3.94, SD = 1.90$), ($t(59) = -4.60, p < .001$); immigration comedy news ($M = 5.82, SD = 2.55$) and hard news ($M = 3.24, SD = 1.79$), ($t(68) = -4.91, p < .001$); and offshore drilling comedy news ($M = 4.92, SD = 2.40$) and hard news ($M = 2.65, SD = 1.16$), $t(59) = -4.68, p < .001$.

Main Analysis

To answer the hypothesis, Chi-square tests were performed on all three issues separately since agenda-setting researchers have shown individuals respond to issues differently based on many factors. When looking at the individual issues regardless of how the information was presented, individuals cited the issue they received more than those who did not receive the issue – health care ($\chi^2(192) = 7.960, p < .01$), immigration ($\chi^2(192) = 10.240, p < .01$), and offshore drilling, $\chi^2(192) = 18.309, p < .001$. The findings also indicated that those who received the information presented as hard news cited the issue they received more than those who did not receive the issue - health care ($\chi^2(192) = 6.787, p < .05$), immigration ($\chi^2(192) = 4.372, p < .05$), and offshore drilling, $\chi^2(192) = 8.062, p < .01$. In other words, when individuals received the issue, they cited the issue more than those who did not receive the issue, regardless of how the information was presented and for the information presented as hard news. Finally the findings indicated that those who received the information presented as comedy news cited the issue they received more than those who did not receive the issue, but only for immigration ($\chi^2(192) = 5.973, p < .05$), and offshore drilling, $\chi^2(192) = 10.227, p < .01$. However, those who received the health care story presented as comedy news did not cite the issue significantly more than those who did not receive the issue, $\chi^2(192) = 1.889, p = .190$. The results indicated those who received the health care story presented as comedy news did cite it more than those who did not, but the results were not statistically significant (see Table 1). Overall, though, the results found support for the hypothesis in that when individuals received information regardless of presentation as well as when presented as hard news or comedy news, they accepted the media's agenda, citing the issue they received more as compared to those who did not receive the issue. Only the three issue stories showed an agenda-setting effect. The two buffer stories of abstinence-only programs and violent video games failed to show an agenda-setting effect,

indicating that mere exposure was not the reason for the findings; but the results showed an agenda-setting effect.

Interaction

The data underwent a binary logistic linear regression analysis to evaluate how the key variables predicted the likelihood of individuals citing an issue as the most important problem in the nation, taking into account the interaction between how the information was presented and individuals' levels of cynicism or levels of efficacy. In the first block of the regression model, the control variables were entered. In the second block the main effects of presentation style and levels of cynicism or levels of efficacy were entered. A significant finding in the second block would answer the first research question regarding which presentation style might have more impact on the transfer of issue salience. In the third block the interaction was entered between presentation style and levels of cynicism or levels of efficacy. A significant interaction in the third block would answer the second research question about whether presentation style interacted with levels of cynicism or levels of efficacy to impact agenda-setting effects.

All three issues were analyzed separately, but the findings indicated individuals who received the health care and offshore drilling stories reacted similarly as compared to individuals who received the immigration story. The results indicated that individuals who received the health care or offshore drilling stories cited the issue they received more when they received the information presented as hard news as compared to the comedy news; however, the results were not statistically significant. The results indicated that individuals who received the immigration story cited that issue more when they received the information presented as comedy news as compared to hard news; but, again, the results were not statistically significant. Therefore, the results indicated individuals reacted differently to the issues based on how the information was

presented, answering the first research question, in that for certain issues, individuals reacted to the information presented as hard news; but for other issues, individuals reacted to the information presented as comedy news.

Since individuals reacted similarly to the health care and offshore drilling stories, more analysis was completed by combining health care and offshore drilling to answer the second research question. The findings indicated that when the two issues were combined, the study had statistically significant findings for interactions between how the information was presented and both individuals' levels of cynicism and levels of efficacy.

In this analysis, how the information was presented appeared to interact with individuals levels of cynicism to predict the dependent variable (see Table 1). The results indicated that when individuals received the information presented as comedy news and had higher levels of cynicism, they cited the issue of health care and offshore drilling more when they received those issues as compared to those who received the hard news version (see Figure 1). However, individuals who had a lower level of cynicism cited the issue they received more when they received the information presented as hard news as compared to those who received the comedy news. The findings indicated the model correctly classified 68% of the cases.

In the analysis, how the information was presented also appeared to interact with individuals levels of efficacy to predict the dependent variable (see Table 2). The results indicated that when individuals received the information presented as hard news and had higher levels of efficacy, they cited the issue of health care and offshore drilling more when they received those issues as compared to those who received the information presented as comedy news (see Figure 2). Individuals with a lower level of efficacy cited the issue they received more

when they received the information presented as comedy news as compared to those in the hard news condition. The findings indicated the model correctly classified 68.9% of the cases.

Discussion

The results indicated support for the hypothesis, in that when individuals' were exposed to certain issues, they cited those issues more than those who did not receive the issue. The results followed what other scholars have found in that when the media discuss certain issues, those issues become salient in the public's mind (Dearing & Rogers, 1996; McCombs, 2004). When not taking into consideration the presentation of the information individuals received, all three issues showed an agenda-setting effect in that those who received health care, immigration, or offshore drilling cited the issue they received more than those who did not. All three issues were prevalent in the media prior to the experiment, so the results are significant because it showed those who received these issues cited the issue they received more as compared to those who did not receive the issue. And no agenda-setting effects were found for the two buffer stories, indicating that the findings were not the result of mere exposure.

When taking into account how the information was presented, the study found interesting results. Those who received the hard news stories cited the issue they received more regardless of whether they received health care, immigration, or offshore drilling. However, the same could not be said for the information presented as the comedy news. Those who received the information presented as comedy news for either immigration or offshore drilling cited those issues more than individuals who did not receive those issues. However, those who received the health care story did not cite the issue more when they received the information presented as comedy news as compared to those who did not receive the issue. The issue may have been that the health care issue was extremely prevalent at the time the experiment was completed. During

the time of the experiment, individuals were exposed to the issue of health care because Congress had just past the health care changes initiated by President Barack Obama. Because of the prevalence of the issue in the news media, those who received the story presented as comedy news might not have felt the issue was as important as those who received the story presented as hard news. Scholars have indicated that individuals must consider an issue as important for them to think about the issue as one of the most important problems facing the nation (McCombs, 2004; Miller & Krosnick, 2007).

The findings also followed extant literature indicating individuals react differently to different issues. Agenda-setting scholars have argued that mere exposure does not lead to an agenda-setting effect. In fact, many factors impact the agenda-setting effects (Weaver, 1980; Hill, 1985; Weaver, Zhu, & Willnat, 1992; Yagade & Dozier, 1990; Miller & Wanta, 1996). In this case, the findings indicated that individuals cited health care or offshore drilling more as issues facing the nation when they received the information presented as hard news as compared to comedy news. However, individuals cited immigration more as issues facing the nation when they received the information presented as comedy news as compared to hard news. One plausible explanation is that participants may have found the comedy immigration story particularly humorous, thus impacting their response. Another explanation is participants may not have liked the radio announcer making light of the health care or offshore drilling issues, meaning they discounted the issues as important when they received the comedy news versions.

Overall, the study had significant findings in that both hard news and comedy news could impact the transfer of issue salience from the media's agenda to the public's agenda. Individuals apparently felt the issues were important, regardless of how the information was presented. In other words, even though the comedy news presented the information with humorous comments

interjected into it, individuals still felt the issue important. Programs like *The Daily Show* or *The Colbert Report* often showcase important issues, even though they do so with comedy embedded. This experiment presented the information differently than the Comedy Central programs, by giving individuals radio addresses, so the findings cannot be extended completely to *The Daily Show*, *The Colbert Report*, or other television programs that use humor but contain information. However, the study has shown that just because individuals exposed to this information might feel entertained, they still could feel the issues are important. Comedy news does not necessarily mean individuals discount the information. Rather, individuals accept the importance of issues because the issues are being discussed, taking cues from the media discussing those issues, regardless of the presentation of the information.

The results indicated interesting findings when investigating presentation of health care and offshore drilling news stories and how that interacted with levels of cynicism and levels of efficacy to impact the agenda-setting effects. When individuals received the information presented as comedy news and had a higher level of cynicism, they cited the issue as more prevalent as compared to those who received the information presented as hard news. Those who received the information presented as hard news and had a lower level of cynicism cited the issue as more prevalent as compared to those who received the comedy news. As Pinkleton et al. (2001) posited, not all cynicism is alike. In fact, the scholars argued some cynicism might actually be healthy skepticism, in that individuals question the information they receive. In this case, those with higher level of cynicism might like their news presented in a comedy manner, in that they find the comedy to patronize and to satirize the politicians. By doing so, they react to the information in a more positive way, by accepting the issue as a major problem in the nation as compared to those who received the hard news version. They might have felt the comedy

news showcased both the importance of the issue, as well as showcased how humorous politicians could be. But those with lower levels of cynicism might react to the information presented as hard news because they feel the comedy news story does not indicate the issue as a major problem. They discounted the comedy version (Nabi, Moyer-Guse & Byrne, 2007).

The findings indicated those who received the information presented as hard news and had higher levels of efficacy accepted the media's agenda more than those who received the information presented as comedy news. However, those who received the information presented as comedy news and had lower levels of efficacy cited the issue as a major problem facing the nation more than those who received the information presented as hard news. Individuals who received the information presented as hard news who felt they had higher levels of efficacy might have seen the story they received as confirmation of the importance of that issue. However, those who felt they had lower levels of efficacy might have seen the issue as important when they received the information presented as comedy news because they figured even though the comedy news made fun of the issue, the issue was still important. Oftentimes, comedy news programs that made fun of certain issues satirize major issues of importance as compared to issues of less importance. Individuals might have taken more cues from the news media in responding to what issues might be important when they felt they had less political efficacy. Besides, by making fun of the issue, the comedy news might have made individuals who felt they had less political efficacy feel better about not having as much political understanding.

Despite the promising results, the study had some limitations. First, the political efficacy measure appeared to have a smaller alpha associated with it. Although the study used measures other scholars had tested to gauge political efficacy, the results found that the measures were not as reliable as those other studies. Maybe the political efficacy measure was slightly lower

because the study tested existing political efficacy prior to exposure to the news stories, and not how exposure to the stimulus impacted the political efficacy. Another issue was the reliance on research questions rather than hypotheses. However, other scholars have found differing results when investigating how presentation of the information impacts acceptance of the message, with some arguing individuals accept humorous messages more readily while others have argued individuals discount humorous messages. The findings here are similar to other studies that have directly compared hard news to comedy news (Kowalewski, 2011; Anderson et al., 2009).

Conclusion

Despite the limitations, the study showed promising results in how individuals react to hard news versus comedy news and how the presentation interacts with individuals' existing levels of cynicism and levels of efficacy to impact agenda setting. Future studies need to investigate this relationship further by gauging how actual exposure to real comedy news might impact agenda-setting effects. The problems relate to the fact that scholars cannot control for many variables when showing actual programs, but maybe using two different issues focused on in one program might further agenda-setting research. In all, though, the results showed hard news and comedy news could impact the transfer of issue salience from the media's agenda to the public's agenda. More research needs to investigate how atypical programs shape the issues individuals consider major problems facing the nation.

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Data Tables*Table 1: Cross tabulation of Participants Who Received Issue with Whether They Mentioned the Issue as a MIP*

		Did they mention the Issue		χ^2
		No	Yes	
Did they receive the issue?				
Both Presentation Style				
Health care	No	78 (68.9)	53 (62.1)	7.960**
	Yes	23 (32.1)	38 (28.9)	
Immigration	No	108 (99.8)	14 (22.2)	10.240**
	Yes	49 (57.2)	21 (12.8)	
Offshore Drilling	No	109 (96.9)	22 (34.1)	18.309***
	Yes	33 (45.1)	28 (15.9)	
Hard News				
Health care	No	40 (34.0)	26 (32.0)	6.787*
	Yes	10 (16.0)	21 (15.0)	
Immigration	No	53 (49.1)	8 (11.9)	4.372*
	Yes	25 (28.9)	11 (7.1)	
Offshore Drilling	No	56 (50.4)	11 (16.6)	8.062**
	Yes	17 (22.6)	13 (7.4)	
Comedy News				
Health care	No	38 (34.9)	27 (30.1)	1.889
	Yes	13 (16.1)	17 (13.9)	
Immigration	No	55 (50.7)	6 (10.3)	5.973*
	Yes	24 (28.3)	10 (5.7)	
Offshore Drilling	No	53 (46.5)	11 (17.5)	10.227**
	Yes	16 (22.5)	15 (8.5)	

Note: *** $p < .001$; ** $p < .01$; * $p < .05$. Adjusted standardized residuals appear in parentheses

below group frequencies.

Table 2: Logistic Regression Analysis for Variables Predicting Participants Mentioning Either Health Care or Offshore Drilling as the Most Important Problem When They Received That Issue Interacted with Level of Cynicisms

Independent Variables	Model Statistics								
	Model 1			Model 2			Model 3		
	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	<i>e^B</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	<i>e^B</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	<i>e^B</i>
Block 1									
Grade	-.531	.305	.588	-.561	.311	.570	-.646*	.321	.524
Income	.087	.151	1.091	.126	.157	1.134	.128	.160	1.136
Gender	-.125	.460	.883	-.108	.462	.898	-.110	.469	.896
Race	.213	.587	1.238	.325	.595	1.384	.387	.605	1.473
Republican	.698	.556	1.575	.758	.563	2.134	.884	.583	2.420
Democrat	.878	.598	2.405	1.016	.612	2.761	1.063	.629	2.896
Strength	.249	.235	1.282	.277	.240	1.319	.304	.246	1.356
Age	.007	.017	1.007	.005	.017	1.005	.009	.018	1.009
Constant	-.380	1.055	.684						
χ^2 (df)		5.833(8)							
Percentage Correct		64.8%							
Block 2									
Presentation				-.165	.389	.848	-.141	.397	.869
Cynicism				.181	.125	1.199	-.100	.189	.905
Constant				-.478	1.085	.620			
χ^2 (df)					4.620 (8)				
Percentage Correct					63.9%				
Block 3									
Presentation * Cynicism							.518*	.259	1.679
Constant							-.588	1.106	.555
χ^2 (df)								10.877 (8)	
Percentage Correct								68.0%	

Note: Block 1: Nagelkerke $R^2 = .083$. Block 2: Nagelkerke $R^2 = .107$. Block 3: Nagelkerke $R^2 = .149$. Coding as follows: Grade (-2 = lower level of education, 1 = higher level of education); Income (-3 = lower level of income, 1 = higher level of income); Gender (0 = male, 1 = female); Race (0 = other, 1 = white); Republican (0 = other, 1 = Republicans); Democrat (0 = other, 1 = Democrat); Political Strength (-1.68 = very conservative, 2.32 = very liberal); Age (-15.34 = younger, 50.66 = older); Presentation

(0 = hard news, 1 = comedy news); Cynicism (-3.86 = less cynical, 4.51 = more cynical). Dependent variable is whether participants mentioned issue they received (0 = no, 1 = yes). All continuous variables centered. * $p < .05$ ($n = 192$).

Table 3: Logistic Regression Analysis for Variables Predicting Participants Mentioning Either Health Care or Offshore Drilling as the Most Important Problem When They Received That Issue Interacted with Level of Efficacy

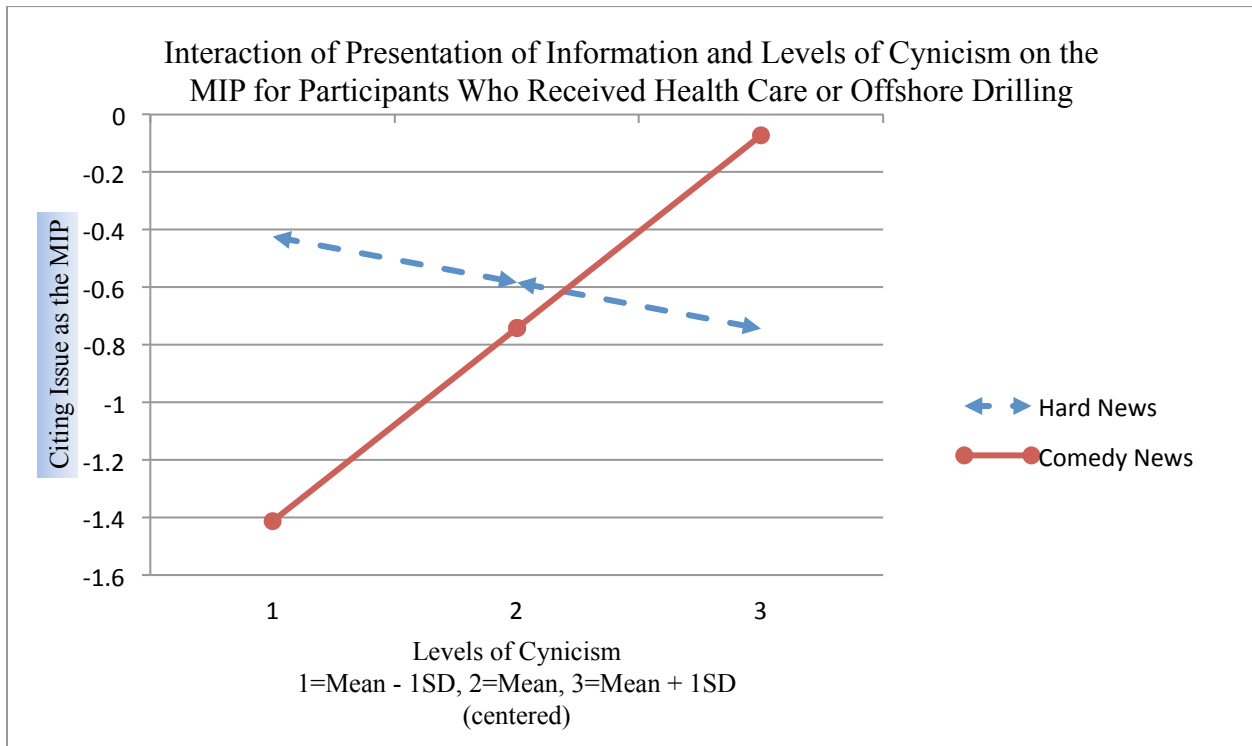
Independent Variables	Model Statistics								
	Model 1			Model 2			Model 3		
	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	<i>e^B</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	<i>e^B</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	<i>e^B</i>
Block 1									
Grade	-.531	.305	.588	-.586	.317	.557	-.697*	.337	.498
Income	.087	.151	1.091	.098	.159	1.103	.140	.167	1.151
Gender	-.125	.460	.883	-.350	.481	.705	-.174	.499	.841
Race	.213	.587	1.238	.405	.608	1.499	.337	.619	1.400
Republican	.698	.556	2.010	.984	.600	2.675	.949	.621	2.583
Democrat	.878	.598	2.405	1.308*	.640	3.699	1.257*	.659	3.516
Strength	.249	.235	1.282	.187	.248	1.206	.229	.255	1.258
Age	.007	.017	1.007	.019	.018	1.019	.023	.019	1.023
Constant	-.380	1.055	.684						
χ^2 (df)		5.833 (8)							
Percentage Correct		64.8%							
Block 2									
Presentation				-.205	.399	.814	-.193	.413	.825
Efficacy				-.325*	.122	.722	.020	.176	1.021
Constant				-.313	1.100	.731			
χ^2 (df)						11.895 (8)			
Percentage Correct						67.2%			
Block 3									
Presentation * Efficacy							-.641*	.244	.527
Constant							-.525	1.137	.592
χ^2 (df)								4.912 (8)	
Percentage Correct								68.9%	

Note: Block 1: Nagelkerke $R^2 = .083$. Block 2: Nagelkerke $R^2 = .163$. Block 3: Nagelkerke $R^2 = .234$. Coding as follows: Grade (-2 = lower level of education, 1 = higher level of education); Income (-3 = lower level of income, 1 = higher level of income); Gender (0 = male, 1 = female); Race (0 = other, 1 = white); Republican (0 = other, 1 = Republicans); Democrat (0 = other, 1 =

Democrat); Political Strength (-1.68 = very conservative, 2.32 = very liberal); Age (-15.34 = younger, 50.66 = older); Presentation (0 = hard news, 1 = comedy news); Efficacy (-5.05 = less efficacy, 4.45 = more efficacy). Dependent variable is whether participants mentioned issue they received (0 = no, 1 = yes). * $p < .05$ ($n = 192$).

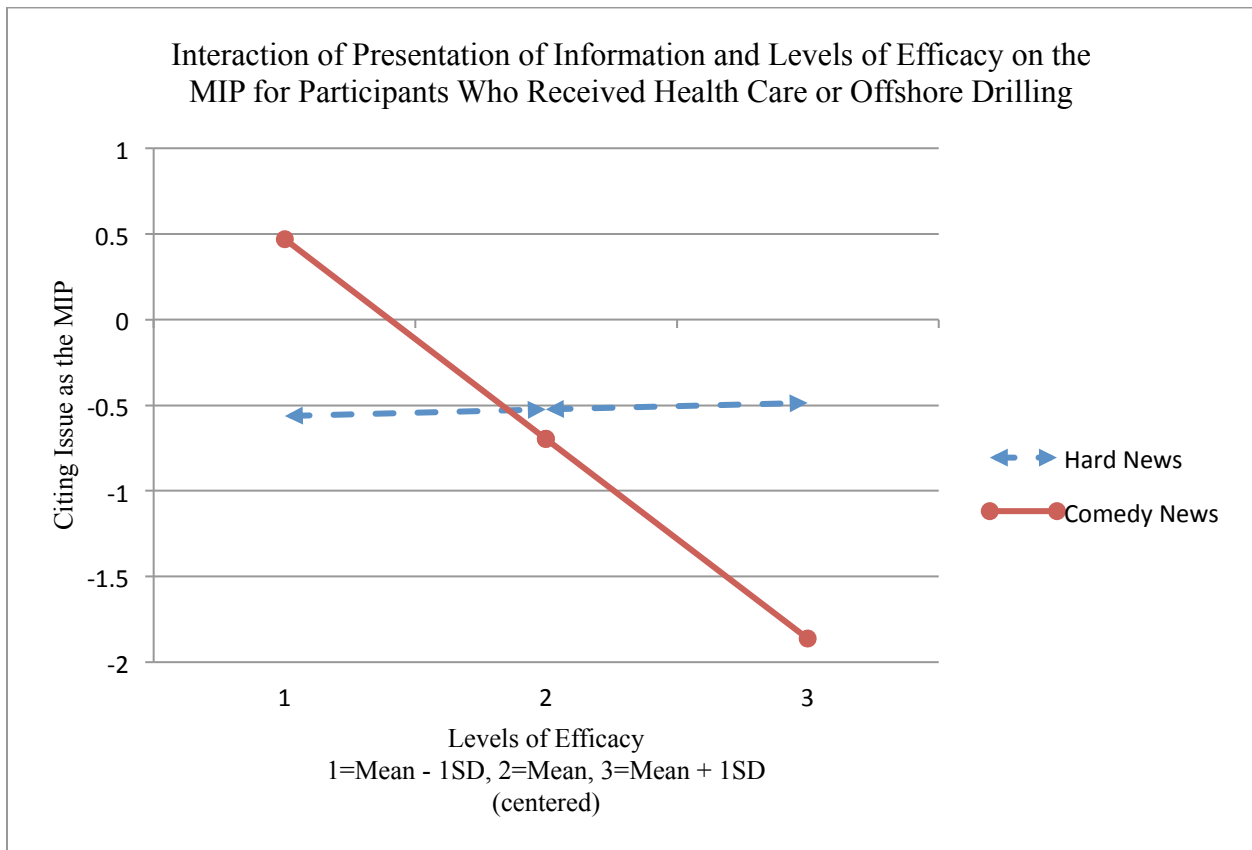
Figures

Figure 1



The interaction between presentation style and level of cynicism for individuals who received health care or offshore drilling and indicated that specific issue as the most important problem facing the nation. The graph shows the simple slope. The Y-axis shows the level of cynicism, 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 health care or offshore drilling as the most important problem.

Figure 2



The interaction between presentation style and level of efficacy for individuals who received health care or offshore drilling and indicated that specific issue as the most important problem facing the nation. The graph shows the simple slope. The Y-axis shows the level of efficacy, 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 health care or offshore drilling as the most important problem.