

Late Night and Political Polarization

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Introduction

Comedy has always been a big part of my life. For all my life, I have been pretty obsessed with all forms of comedy. Movies, sitcoms, stand-up, you name it. It's not just watching comedy though, it's studying it—see, I'm what you would call a comedy nerd. For instance, just last semester, when I had to write a fifteen page paper on theology, I wrote about comedy in the Jewish tradition. You'd think I would've been tired of writing about it after that, but I guess not. I am a communication studies major at LMU because studying media was the closest thing I could find to studying humor. Communication is my major, but I also have a minor in political science. Comedy and politics might seem like antithetical topics, but the two converge at one point: sociopolitical satire and humor, the vast majority of which occurs on network television between the hours of 11:30 PM and 2:00 AM, more commonly known as “late night.”

Background/Previous Work

In the past few decades, late night has evolved into a new form of media, blurring the lines between news and comedy. There was a boom of research that came out in the latter half of the first decade of the century, particularly when Jon Stewart's “The Daily Show” on Comedy Central began to pick up more and more viewers (Baumgartner & Morris, 2006, pp. 341-367). This research dealt with a variety of themes, mostly centralized on the idea that the show and its other late night counterparts were having substantial effects on their viewers knowledge and opinion of politics and other world issues. Jon Stewart has repeatedly said that his show was meant purely for comedic purposes and not to be taken seriously, as it was the original form of “fake news,” although we've come to understand that term in a slightly different way today

(Stewart 2020). While many people think Donald Trump coined the term, “The Daily Show” and its descriptors were using it long before Trump became a political figure. In 2009, a Time poll asked participants online who they thought was the most trusted journalist in America, following the death of Walter Cronkite. Their answer: Jon Stewart. Yes, stand-up comedian and literal fake news anchor, Jon Stewart (Riggio, 2009).

The media and late night landscapes have changed quite a bit since the early 2000s though, especially considering the whole country has changed drastically. Jon Stewart is no longer the host of “The Daily Show,” and Trevor Noah, Stewart’s replacement, is not the only late night comedian who focuses on politics now. Hosts Stephen Colbert (CBS), Seth Meyers (NBC), Samantha Bee (TBS), and John Oliver (HBO) have cemented their places in the new late night environment with biting political satire every night or every week. More people are watching late night on social media sites such as Youtube and Snapchat than ever before, which seems to suggest that late night is no longer late at night at all (Bianculli, 2016). And the main difference, never before has all of the comedy, all of the satire, all of the disgust been directed at one person. In his most recent stand-up comedy special, host of “Late Night” Seth Meyers compared being a late night host during the Trump presidency to being a grave digger during the middle ages (Meyers, 2019).

On top of all this, our country is being split in two. I’m writing this proposal just after what has been called the most important presidential election in the history of America. It looks as though Joe Biden will become the next president of the United States, but even if he does, our problems won’t be solved. People everywhere are worried that a second civil war could break out any day now. Trump is notorious for hating the media and its portrayal of him; such outlets that he considers his enemy are CNN, MSNBC, ABC News, CBS News, and—the original fake

news—late night television. While the president may have not created the divide in this country, he has undoubtedly widened the aisle, so much so that it seems impossible to reach the other side now, even by yelling at the tops of our lungs (Tyson, 2018).

Conclusion

Late night is an important piece of this puzzle and I believe that it will only get more important as this country attempts to heal its wounds. It has already been shown that late night has profound impacts on its viewers, but I want to know how this field is playing a role in the growing divide of American politics and the American people. As we slowly step into each new day going forward, anxiety will be at an all-time high, with people worried about civil unrest all over the country and a pandemic that doesn't have an end in sight. They will turn to comedy for comfort and to the news for information. They will turn to late night. Will this medium, a medium that is known for blurring the lines, be able to bring our country back together with laughter and blur the line once again between the left and the right? Or will it further widen the gap by alienating conservative Americans?

Methods

I plan to conduct a research experiment to study the effects of sociopolitical satire and humor, specifically in the field of late night television, on partisanship and political polarization in America. This research experiment will consist of three distinct sections, all aimed at answering the research question. First, I will conduct a diachronic media effects study on late-night, followed by a general survey of late-night viewers and non-viewers, and supplemented by in-person, recorded interviews of late-night audience members in New York City.

In the first experiment, I will collect a randomized sample population of voting age Americans and have them complete an online pre-test consisting of identification questions (such as age, gender, and political affiliation) and a series of likert scale statements regarding their attitudes towards political issues and figures. For example, a participant may be shown the statement, “I was satisfied with the overall presidential administration under Donald Trump,” and asked how much they agree with it on a scale of one to five. A few days later, I will ask the participants to watch a collection of clips from popular politically-centered late-night shows. A few days after that, I will ask those that watched the video to take another likert scale survey (post-test) that has the same content as the pre-test with different wording.

In my second study, I will administer a survey to another large sample population to ask general questions about their political preferences, attitude towards the past and current political environments, and how much late-night television they watch, to see if any patterns of correlation can be found. For the third part of my research, I plan to go to New York City to interview live audience members of “The Daily Show with Trevor Noah,” “Late Night with Seth Meyers,” and “Saturday Night Live” after the COVID-19 pandemic is over. These audience members are likely to be avid late-night viewers, and I’d like to hear what they think about the topic of late-night and political polarization, as well as their general views towards people with different political views as them. If possible, I would also like to interview the hosts or cast members of these shows to learn their opinions, but this is not likely and requires a good bit of connections, timing, and luck.

Expected Results

My hypothesis is that the harsh insults from late night hosts and ridiculing parodies from skit players will have a positive effect on polarization, that is to say, they will increase the divide.

While I do believe this is probable, I am also optimistic for a second outcome, possibly more important than the first. Late night could have the power to use comedy to help usher in a new era in American politics. Trump voters may relate more to the things that comedians like Noah or Meyers or Oliver are saying as opposed news from seemingly liberal journalists like Rachel Maddow or Anderson Cooper or Chris Cuomo. The country could unite over a bit of joy and poked fun at our political system. It sounds like a fever dream, but here me out. The country is undeniably sick, and they say laughter... is the best medicine.

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Timeline and Budget

This timeline is operating under the assumption that I will be approved to conduct this research project by the Summer of 2021; dates can be adjusted if it is later than that. I will create my likert-scale tests and surveys in June 2021, and have them sent out to the random sample population in July and August. I will collect and organize the data as it comes in, and have it completely organized by the end of August. Since most late night shows do not film over summer, I will go to New York in September or October, where school allows, to conduct my in-person interviews. When I get back, I will review my interviews, and analyze all of the data I collected. I will ask any needed follow-up questions to any of the survey participants in October when I am back from my trip. I will write up my findings into a research paper in November and December, ideally before Winter break. In Spring 2022, I will have the paper peer-reviewed and finalized. I am proposing a budget of \$2,200 for this research project. Roughly \$500 will go towards creating the surveys and collecting a randomized sample population to send it out to. Another \$300 will go towards equipment to record my interviews of late-night audience members. \$1400 will be allocated to travel expenses, including flights, hotels, and meals.