

HEARING IT FROM JON STEWART: THE IMPACT OF THE DAILY SHOW ON PUBLIC ATTENTIVENESS TO POLITICS

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the impact of *The Daily Show* with Jon Stewart, an American political comedy show, on public attentiveness to politics. I found that watching the show was positively related to following the issues that were covered with relative frequency by the program (e.g., the Afghanistan War in 2002 and news about the presidential candidates in 2004) among politically inattentive viewers. As viewers' political attentiveness increased, however, the magnitude of the positive relationship decreased. These findings, in light of those from previous research on the show, call for further investigations of the potential effect of the program and others of its ilk on the U.S. democratic system.

Americans have witnessed an ever-expanding media marketplace in recent years, with the number of television channels that the average household received increasing 80 percent just between 1995 and 2000 (Bednarski, 2001). The increase in program choices makes it easier for people to find preferred media content today than it was in the 1970s, when three networks dominated the television market (Mutz, 2004; Prior, 2007). As a result, politically apathetic citizens are no longer forced to choose between watching network news and turning off the television in early evening. Rather, they can tune into entertainment shows whenever they want. Those who are interested in politics, in contrast, can spend their time watching news and public affairs programs. Hence, the current media environment in the U.S. may have led to a widening gap between apolitical people and news junkies in following politics (Prior, 2007).

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The choice between news and entertainment, however, is not necessarily a zero-sum game. Given that some entertainment programs touch on political issues and that traditional news shows are increasingly driven by entertainment values to appeal to viewers, it is not surprising that some television programs now blend entertainment and news; such programs have been dubbed “infotainment” (e.g., Delli Carpini & Williams, 2001) or “soft news” shows (e.g., Patterson, 2000; Baum, 2003). In recent years, scholars (e.g., Hollander, 1995, 2005; Patterson, 2000; Pfau, Cho, & Chong, 2001; Baum, 2003; Young, 2004b; Brewer & Cao, 2006; Moy, Xenos, & Hess, 2005, 2006; Glynn, Huges, Reineke, Hardy, & Shanahan, 2007) have increasingly recognized the potential for such programs to influence people. With the notable exception of Baum’s (2003) work, however, scant research has been conducted to determine how such programs may influence public attentiveness to politics. The existing research on the topic has largely focused on the overall impact of such shows—including programs that cover politics occasionally (e.g., *The Oprah Winfrey Show* and *Entertainment Tonight*) and those doing so regularly (e.g., *The Tonight Show with Jay Leno* and *The Late Show with David Letterman*)—on audience members’ attentiveness to foreign policy crises (Baum, 2003). Hence, it is not clear what specific kinds of programs account for the observed effects and whether the effects generalize to other political topics (e.g., elections).

With this in mind, the present study examines the impact of *The Daily Show*—an American political comedy show that covers politics on a regular basis—on public attentiveness to political issues. The show is a half-hour television program hosted by Jon Stewart. It airs Monday through Thursday on the Comedy Central cable network in the U.S. An edited version of the program titled *The Daily Show: Global Edition* is also produced for international audiences; it started airing on CNN International and other overseas networks in September 2002.

The show, self-described as a fake news program, draws on recent news stories to satirize politicians and traditional news media. Jon Stewart, who adopts a news anchorman persona, takes on the traditional satirist’s role of “skeptical and bemused observer” (Knight, 2004, p. 3). For instance, on October 2, 2008 he mocked the absurdity of senators’ remarks at a press conference after the passage of the \$700 billion financial rescue plan. During the conference, senators claimed that they should be proud of themselves because it had been unprecedented for Democrats and Republicans to reach across the aisle to pass a bill at this close proximity to a presidential election (i.e., 1 month prior to the 2008 election). After showing a clip of the conference, Jon Stewart pretended to be deeply moved, saying “to see all of us... here... doing... the thing we are supposed to do all the time... to see us do that once... it’s... we really do suck normally”. The program also offers comic interpretations of current issues via exchanges between

Jon Stewart and correspondents who adopt absurd and/or humorously exaggerated stands on the issues. The show ends with a guest interview, often with a political figure.

The format of *The Daily Show* is derived from the structure of late-night talk shows (e.g., *The Tonight Show* and *The Late Show*) that starts with host's monolog, moves to sketch comedy, and then concludes with guest interviews (Timberg, 2002; Baym, 2005). The show reconstructs each of these elements, and at the same time, blends humor with a more serious consideration of politics relative to its precedents.

In recent years, the show has come to occupy a prominent place on the landscape of political communication in the U.S. According to a survey conducted in 2007 (Pew Research Center, 2007), 16 percent of Americans claimed to regularly watch the show or its spin-off *The Colbert Report*. The numbers were comparable to major news programs (17 percent for *The O'Reilly Factor* and 14 percent for *NewsHour* with Jim Lehrer). The same survey also found that the show's host, Jon Stewart, ranked fourth on the list of most admired journalists. Given the increasing popularity of the show and other shows of its ilk, it is important to understand to what extent the show is able to attract politically inattentive viewers with humor and then direct their attention to political issues.

Drawing on recent research into the nature (Niven, Lichter, & Amundson, 2003; Young, 2004a) and effects of late-night talk shows and *The Daily Show* (e.g., Hollander, 1995, 2005; Baum, 2003; Young, 2004b; Moy *et al.*, 2005, 2006; Brewer & Cao, 2006; Feldman & Young, 2006; Glynn *et al.*, 2007) as well as theories of low-information rationality (Downs, 1957; Popkin, 1994), I argue that *The Daily Show* can induce viewers who normally do not follow politics to pay attention to political issues mentioned by the program.

LATE-NIGHT TALK SHOWS

Some studies have suggested that people tune into soft news programs such as late-night talk shows for their entertainment value rather than their informative value (e.g., Baum, 2003; Prior, 2003).¹ In line with this, Jay Leno described the mission of his show as follows "Of course ratings are a top priority . . . We are not sending a political message one way or another . . . If people get anything out of it, that's fine, but that's not why we're here. We're not *Hardball* . . ." (Niemberg, 2001, p. 47).

Even so, late-night talk shows contain political information. For example, politicians and political issues are very often the targets of late-night jokes

¹ One may argue that this claim is inconsistent with findings from a Pew Research Center survey (2004a) showing that 9 percent of Americans (and 13 percent of young people under the age of 30) claimed to learn about the 2004 presidential campaign from late-night talk shows. However, claiming to learn from such programs does not necessarily mean tuning into the shows for information. In other words, it is possible that one watches late-night talk shows for entertainment and goes away with some political information.

(Niven *et al.*, 2003; Young, 2004a). A content analysis of the monologs of *The Tonight Show* and *The Late Show* during the 2004 presidential campaign found that 24 percent of the jokes made by Leno concerned at least one political issue; the percentage for Letterman was 21. Moreover, it has become a standard procedure for presidential hopefuls to appear on such programs in election seasons to communicate with voters whom they would not otherwise be able to reach (Baum, 2005). Both Senator Barack Obama and Senator John McCain, for instance, made the rounds on late-night talk shows during the 2008 presidential campaign.

Given the amount of political information presented by late-night talk shows, a growing body of literature has examined the political impact of such shows. Some studies have suggested that these programs can influence voters' evaluations of presidential candidates. For example, exposure to late-night talk shows was found to conditionally influence presidential candidates' trait ratings (Young, 2004b). Likewise, watching former president George W. Bush's interview on *The Late Show* may have influenced viewers' evaluation of him (Moy *et al.*, 2006).

To date, however, researchers have not reached consensus on whether or not late-night talk shows can increase public knowledge about politics. On one hand, exposure to candidate appearances on late-night talk shows or political comedy shows was found to be positively associated with campaign knowledge (Brewer & Cao, 2006). On the other hand, exposure to such programs as a whole was found to be unrelated to political knowledge (*e.g.*, Prior, 2003; see also Hollander, 2005). These findings suggest that what viewers watch on these programs (*e.g.*, candidate interviews versus other content) may determine whether or not they learn from the programs.

Beyond this, the evidence concerning the effect of late-night talk shows on mass political behavior is also far from conclusive. Moy and her colleagues (2005), for instance, found that watching late-night talk shows was positively associated with engagement in some types of political activities (*e.g.*, political discussions and campaign activities). The investigation conducted by Kwak Wang and Guggenheim (2004), on the other hand, suggested that relying on these shows for political information may reduce political efficacy, political trust and turnout among young people. Hence, the effect of late-night talk shows on political participation may vary depending upon the types of political activities and demographic groups under examination.

THE DAILY SHOW AND ITS POLITICAL IMPACT

Like the hosts of late-night talk shows, Jon Stewart has claimed at various occasions that it would be absurd to take the program too seriously because

the show “is comedy, not even pretending to be information . . .” (Milibank, 2000, p. C1). The show does not attempt to swing people’s opinions, either; as Jon Stewart told Bill O’Reilly, “I feel like, you know, we don’t have an agenda of influence” (Fox News Network, 2004).

Despite of these claims, 34 percent of jokes in the show’s headlines touched on at least one political issue during the 2004 presidential campaign (Young, 2004b). The show also provided similar amount of substantive information as networks’ nightly newscasts in covering presidential debates and political conventions in 2004, though the former contained more humor than the latter (Fox, Koloben, & Sahin, 2007). Even in nonelection years, the show devotes a substantial amount of coverage to public affairs (Brewer & Marquardt, 2007).

The popularity and nature of *The Daily Show* have evoked scholarly interest in its political impact (e.g., Jones, 2005; Baym, 2005, 2007; Baumgartner & Morris, 2006; Holbert, Lambe, Dudo, & Carlton, 2007; Warner, 2007). An experiment, for example, found that jokes made at the expense of political candidates by Jon Stewart lowered ratings of presidential candidates and increased cynicism toward the electoral system among young people (Baumgartner & Morris, 2006). Exposure to political comedy shows such as *The Daily Show* was also found to be positively associated with campaign knowledge among young people and those with higher education (Hollander, 2005; Cao, 2008). Moreover, watching such programs may also stimulate political participation (Cao & Brewer, 2008).

What influence, then, might *The Daily Show* have on public attentiveness to political issues? Thus far, we know little about it. Following Baum (2003) and Kinchla (1980), I define attentiveness as being able to recognize and selectively process information about a topic. Thus, attentiveness to a political issue implies that individuals not only possess sufficient information to recognize its existence, but also expose themselves to additional information about it. Given the finite attention resources citizens possess, attending to one issue usually requires ignoring other issues as a trade-off (Kinchla, 1980). It is of importance to distinguish attentiveness and interest. People can pay attention to an issue because it is emotionally exciting or entertaining even if they do not care about the issue itself. In contrast, being interested in an issue implies a concern about the issue. Thus, it is possible for people to attend to an issue without being interested in it.

As theories of low-information rationality (Downs, 1957; Popkin, 1994) have posited, rational citizens can glean free political information as a byproduct of their nonpolitical lives—for example, through watching television programs for entertainment. They rely on such free information because the effort spent in collecting large amounts of political information is not justified by the small chance that an individual may influence political outcomes.

Building on this idea, Baum (2003) has argued that soft news programs may affect viewers' attention to politics by "piggybacking" political information on top of their entertainment content. As a result, even apolitical viewers can receive some exposure to political information. In other words, attending to political information is "a free bonus, or an incidental by-product" of watching soft news shows for entertainment (Baum, 2003, p. 30). To be sure, exposure to political information is unlikely to be incidental for viewers of *The Daily Show* because they should expect the show to present political information. This does not necessarily mean, however, that the program does not appeal to politically apathetic people. Politically inattentive individuals may still appreciate the show's entertainment value and be exposed to political information as a by-product of being entertained.

Moreover, encountering information about public issues on *The Daily Show* may also lead viewers to attend to additional information about the topics, as the gateway hypothesis has suggested (Baum, 2003). According to this hypothesis, being exposed to information about an issue on soft news programs allows viewers to develop a cursory understanding of the issue—which, in turn, reduces the costs of paying attention to additional information about the topic. Encountering political information on these shows provides a context in which people can understand an issue, thereby making the issue less confusing and more compelling. Extended to *The Daily Show*, this logic suggests that receiving information about a political issue on the program can increase viewers' attentiveness to additional information about the topic because they will find the topic entertaining and easy to understand. In line with this, Feldman and Young's (2006) time-series analyses revealed that attentiveness to television news about the 2004 presidential campaign increased at a greater rate among late-night talk show and *Daily Show* viewers than among nonviewers. Note that paying attention to additional information about an issue does not necessarily mean actively seeking information on the issue; one may simply pay more attention to the coverage about the issue upon encountering it.

The number of times that one is exposed to information about an issue may also influence how much attention a person pays to the issue. Repeated exposure to information about a topic should increase the amount of attention given to the topic (e.g., Mackenzie, 1986). This is because each exposure provides another opportunity to attend to the topic. In line with this, research has shown that message repetition increases message recall and the amount of thought one gives to the message (e.g., Rethans, Swasy, & Marks, 1986; Cacioppo & Petty, 1989). Hence, exposure to *The Daily Show* should direct viewers' attention to issues covered with relative frequency by it but not to those rarely mentioned.

More importantly, exposure to *The Daily Show* should increase apolitical viewers' attention to issues covered with relative frequency by the program

because their attention may be directed to issues that they would not otherwise follow. To be clear, apolitical viewers may attend to the issues covered by the show without having a general interest in politics. Politically inattentive viewers of the program, for instance, may follow news about a particular candidate after seeing that candidate be mocked by Jon Stewart simply because they find the stories entertaining and not because they are interested in politics per se. To be sure, current research into the profile of *Daily Show* viewers has shown that they are typically interested in and knowledgeable about politics (e.g., Young, 2004a; Young & Tisinger, 2006). This, however, does not mean that the program only appeals to political junkies. As shown in the account that follows, it attracts a considerable number of people who are not inclined to follow politics and, therefore, has the potential to direct their attention to public affairs. With all these in mind, this study tests the following hypothesis:

H1: Watching *The Daily Show* will be associated with greater attentiveness among apolitical viewers to political issues that are covered with relative frequency by the program; this positive relationship should decrease as viewers' attentiveness to politics increases.

To test the effect of *The Daily Show* on viewers' attentiveness to political issues, this study examines the relationship between watching the program and attentiveness to the Afghanistan War in 2002 and news about the presidential candidates in 2004.

Searches of the show in the database of the Video Monitoring Services of America (VMSA) from January 1 through April 25, 2002, revealed that of all the political issues listed in the 2002 Pew Media Consumption Survey (Pew Research Center, 2002), the Afghanistan War was mentioned most often by Jon Stewart.² To be sure, the VMSA provides only brief segment summaries rather than detailed transcripts. Hence, the numbers presented here are based upon incomplete information about the show's content and, thus, merely suggestive. According to the VMSA, the word "Afghanistan" appeared in 11 out of 64 episodes of the show. Meanwhile, the network evening news programs averaged 26 mentions of the topic in the same time period.³ After taking into the account the fact that *The Daily Show* airs four times a week, whereas the evening news 7 days a week, the number of episodes of the former that touched on the war is equivalent to 74 percent of the average for the evening newscasts. Given that the Afghanistan War was covered more frequently by

² The VMSA database was available through the Lexis-Nexis before December 6, 2007. The 2002 survey started on April 26, so I selected April 25 as the end date of the searches. The issues listed on the 2002 survey included the Afghanistan War (covered in 11 episodes), "defending against terrorist attacks in the U.S." (6), the conflict between the Palestinians and the Israelis (2), "the Pope and American cardinals meeting in Rome" (1), "the Secretary of State's recent visit to the Middle East" (0), "the attempted overthrow of the president of Venezuela" (0), and the French presidential election (0).

³ This is the average number of newscasts mentioning "Afghanistan" from the three networks of ABC, CBS, and NBC.

The Daily Show than other issues listed in the Pew survey, I expected watching the program to increase attentiveness to the war among apolitical viewers; this positive impact should have decreased as viewers' attentiveness to politics increased. In contrast, watching the show should not have affected attentiveness to issues never mentioned by the program, such as the Secretary of State's visit to the Middle East.

Of all the topics tapped by the 2004 Pew Media Consumption Survey (Pew Research Center, 2004b), news about the presidential candidates was covered most often by *The Daily Show*.⁴ A search of "Kerry" or "Bush" in the VMSA database from January 1 through April 18, 2004 returned 43 out of 60 episodes of the show, equivalent to 164 percent of the average for the network evening newscasts.⁵ Though a more complete search for coverage of presidential candidates should include all the candidates competing in the Democratic primaries, I did not do so because the search of "Kerry" or "Bush" had already suggested that news about the presidential candidates was more frequently covered by the show than any other issues listed in the Pew survey. Including other candidates in the search would not provide additional information on which issue was covered more often than others. Based upon the search results, I expected that watching the show would induce greater attentiveness to stories about the candidates among politically inattentive audience members and that the magnitude of this effect would decrease as viewer's political attentiveness increased. As before, viewing the program should not have increased viewers' attention to topics that were rarely covered by the show—for example, high gasoline prices (mentioned only in one episode). By rarely, I mean that an issue was mentioned only a couple times over the period of time under study.

I chose to test the effect of *The Daily Show* on attentiveness to the Afghanistan War and news about the presidential candidates because they were more frequently covered by the show than other issues during a given period of time. Someone may argue that the coverage of the war was not frequent in an absolute sense (*i.e.*, 11 out of 64 episodes) especially given that presidential candidates were covered in 43 out of 60 episodes. I make no claim, however, about how frequently an issue needed to be covered in order to increase apolitical viewers' attention. Nor do I compare the frequency of issues being covered during different time periods (*e.g.*, the war in 2002 versus the stories about presidential candidates in 2004) because they did not compete for viewers' attention at the same time. Instead, I merely use the two issues to test the relationship between watching the show and

⁴ The survey started on April 19, 2004 so I selected April 18 as the end date of the searches. In the 2004 survey, the issues included news about the 2004 presidential candidates (43), the Iraq War (21), gay marriage (6), the 9/11 commission's hearings (2), and the high gasoline price (1).

⁵ During this time period, the network evening news, on average, covered the candidate(s) in 46 broadcasts.

attentiveness to issues that were covered with relative frequency by it over a given period of time. To demonstrate that the positive effect of the show on attentiveness to political issues was limited to the issues that were covered with relative frequency by the show, I also estimate the relationship between watching the show and attentiveness to issues that were never or rarely mentioned by the program (*i.e.*, Secretary of State's visit to the Middle East in 2002 and the high gasoline price in 2004).

METHODS

DATA

This study drew on two national telephone surveys sponsored by the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, and conducted by the Princeton Survey Research Associates. Survey respondents were selected from a national population of adults through probability sampling. One survey ($N=1551$) took place from April 26 to May 12, 2002; the other ($N=1493$) was conducted from April 19 to May 12, 2004. Given that only one form of the questionnaire—form A—in each survey included the measure of exposure to *The Daily Show*, the sample size reported here was that for form A of the questionnaire. Survey response rates—obtained from Pew Research Center—were 37 percent for 2002 and 34 percent for 2004. Pew's method for calculating the response rates resembled AAPOR's RR₃. The two datasets were the only datasets that I could identify that included measures for all of the key constructs of interest.

MEASURES

Independent variable. Exposure to *The Daily Show* was measured by asking how often respondents watched the show. "Regularly" or "sometimes" watching was coded as 2 (11 percent of respondents in 2002 and 15 percent in 2004), "hardly ever" watching as 1 (8 percent and 10 percent), and "never" watching as 0 (81 and 76 percent). The categories of regularly and sometimes were combined watching because only 2 percent of respondents in 2002 and 3 percent in 2004 reported regularly watching the program. In any event, combining or separating the two categories did not change the findings of this study.

Dependent variables. Attentiveness to the Afghanistan War and news about the 2004 presidential candidates were measured by questions asking respondents how closely they happened to follow "...the U.S. military effort in Afghanistan" (2002) or "...news about the candidates for the 2004 presidential election" (2004). Responses to each item included "very closely" (coded as 3; 40 percent of respondents for the Afghanistan war and 33 percent for the

2004 presidential candidates), “fairly closely” (2; 40 and 35 percent), “not too closely” (1; 12 and 18 percent), and “not closely at all” (0; 7 and 14 percent).

Attentiveness to the Secretary of State’s visit to the Middle East and the high gasoline price were captured by the questions similar to those measuring attentiveness to the Afghanistan War and news about the presidential candidates except that they asked about following “...the Secretary of State’s recent visit to the Middle East” (2002) or “...the high price of gasoline these days” (2004). As before, “very closely” was coded as 3 (27 percent of respondents for the visit; 45 percent for the gas price), “fairly closely” as 2 (34 and 31 percent), “not too closely” as 1 (20 and 16 percent), and “not closely at all” as 0 (20 and 8 percent).

Moderating variable. Attentiveness to politics was measured by two questions that asked respondents how closely they followed “...news about political figures and events in Washington” and “...international affairs”. Responses to each question were captured on a four-point scale with 0 indicating “not at all closely”, 1 “not very closely”, 2 “somewhat closely,” and 3 “very closely”. I created an index of attentiveness to politics by summing each respondent’s score for these two items and dividing by 2 (*Cronbach’s* $\alpha = .75$; $M = 1.78$; $SD = 0.84$ in 2002; *Cronbach’s* $\alpha = .74$; $M = 1.86$; $SD = 0.84$ in 2004). I also created an interaction term by multiplying exposure to *The Daily Show* by attentiveness to politics after centering each of them.

Control variables. Exposure to traditional news was measured by a series of questions that captured self-reported exposure to a range of traditional news sources. The questions asked how often respondents were exposed to nightly network news, cable news networks, local television news, C-SPAN, *The News Hour with Jim Lehrer*, National Public Radio, news magazines, and political magazines. The responses were captured on four-point scales with 0 indicating “never”, 1 “hardly ever”, 2 “sometimes”, and 3 “regularly”. I summed across these items and divided by 8 to create a traditional news exposure index (*Cronbach’s* $\alpha = .63$; $M = 1.21$; $SD = 0.53$ in 2002; *Cronbach’s* $\alpha = .61$; $M = 1.25$; $SD = 0.53$ in 2004). Exposure to online news was measured by a question asking how frequently the respondent went online to get news. The responses were captured on a six-category scale with 0 indicating “no/never” or having no access to a computer and/or the Internet at all and 5 indicating “every day” ($M = 1.94$; $SD = 1.96$ in 2002; $M = 2.11$; $SD = 1.98$ in 2004).

Political knowledge was measured by knowledge items in each survey. Each respondent in the 2002 survey was randomly assigned to answer one of the following three questions: What is “...the name of the current vice president of the United states,” “...the name of the current Secretary of State,” or “...the name of current Secretary of Defense?” Correct answers were coded as 1 and other answers as 0. Each 2002 respondent was also asked the name of the new European money and to report when the state of Israel

was established. Again, correct answers were coded as 1 and other answers as 0. Scores were averaged to form an index of political knowledge (*Kuder-Richardson* = .63; $M = 0.48$; $SD = 0.38$). In 2004, three questions asked respondents the name of the majority party in the U.S. House of Representatives, the terrorist organization that was responsible for the September 11 attack, and the number of U.S. soldiers killed in the Iraq War. Once again, correct answers were coded as 1 and other answers as 0. Scores were averaged to create an index (*Kuder-Richardson* = .45; $M = 0.62$; $SD = 0.33$). Though knowledge questions in the two surveys measured different kinds of political knowledge (e.g., knowledge about American politics and foreign affairs), it should tap into the same underlying construct—political knowledge—because people who are informed about one aspect of politics are also more likely to know other aspects of politics (Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996).

Voting in past elections was captured by asking how often respondents voted in past elections. The responses included “always” (coded as 4; 44 percent of respondents in 2002, and 47 percent in 2004), “nearly always” (3; 27 and 25 percent), “part of the time” (2; 11 and 10 percent), “seldom” (1; 10 and 10 percent), and “never” (0; 8 and 8 percent).

Strength of partisanship was measured on a three-point scale. Self-identification as either a Democrat or a Republican was coded as 2 (64 percent of respondents in 2002 and 66 percent in 2004), leaning toward the Democratic Party or Republican Party as 1 (20 and 20 percent), and other responses as 0 (16 and 14 percent).

Demographic variables included gender (1 if male, 43 percent of respondents in 2002 and 45 percent in 2004; 0 if female), race (1 if white, 82 and 83 percent; 0 if nonwhite), age (in years; for 2002, $M = 47.36$; $SD = 18.16$; for 2004, $M = 47.73$; $SD = 17.62$), education (measured on a seven-category scale with 1 indicating the lowest education level; for 2002, $M = 4.50$; $SD = 1.64$; for 2004, $M = 4.59$; $SD = 1.63$), and income (measured on an eight-category scale in 2002 and a nine-category scale in 2004 with 1 indicating the lowest income level; for 2002, $M = 4.69$; $SD = 2.10$; for 2004, $M = 4.95$; $SD = 2.26$).

ANALYTICAL PROCEDURE AND RESULTS

To set the stage for testing the interactive effect of exposure to *The Daily Show* and political attentiveness on attending to issues covered by the show, I first examined what percentage of the show’s viewers did—and did not—follow politics. Given that the measure of attending to politics ranged from 0 to 3, respondents were divided into three groups: those with a low level (1 or below), medium level (between 1 and 2, including 2), or high level (>2) of attentiveness. As Table 1 shows, 20 percent of *Daily Show* viewers in each

TABLE 1 Levels of attending to politics among people with different levels of exposure to *The Daily Show*

| | <i>Exposure to The Daily Show</i> | | | | | |
|---|-----------------------------------|---------------|---------------------------------|--------------|---------------|---------------------------------|
| | 2002 | | | 2004 | | |
| | <i>Never</i> | <i>Hardly</i> | <i>Sometimes/ Regularly</i> | <i>Never</i> | <i>Hardly</i> | <i>Sometimes/ Regularly</i> |
| Low level of attending to politics (percent) | 29 | 20 | 20 | 25 | 23 | 20 |
| Medium level of attending to politics (percent) | 45 | 51 | 49 | 44 | 44 | 39 |
| High level of attending to politics (percent) | 27 | 30 | 31 | 31 | 33 | 42 |
| <i>N</i> | 1243 | 118 | 173 | 1127 | 142 | 214 |

Source: 2002 and 2004 Pew Research Center Media Consumption Surveys.

year did not follow politics. This finding indicates that even though the program's typical viewers pay at least some attention to politics, it still attracts a considerable number of apolitical viewers, and therefore, has the potential to draw apolitical viewers' attention to issues covered by the program. Moreover, the bivariate correlations between exposure to *The Daily Show* ($r = .08$; $p < .01$ in 2002; $r = .10$; $p < .01$ in 2004) and traditional news ($r = .50$; $p < .01$ in 2002; $r = .48$; $p < .01$ in 2004), on one hand, and attending to politics, on the other hand, showed that viewers of *The Daily Show* tended to follow politics but also that such viewers were not as interested in politics as traditional news consumers.

I then tested the interactive effects of exposure to *The Daily Show* and attentiveness to politics on attentiveness to issues that were mentioned with relative frequency by the show. Specifically, I examined the interactive effects of exposure and political attentiveness on attending to the Afghanistan War in 2002 and news about the presidential candidates in 2004. Along with exposure to *The Daily Show*, attentiveness to politics, and exposure to *The Daily Show* \times attentiveness to politics, the models predicting attentiveness to the war and to news about the candidates included the control variables: political knowledge, voting in past elections, strength of partisanship, exposure to traditional and online news sources, and demographics (specifically, age, education, income, gender, and race). To demonstrate the unique variance explained by the variables of interest, I included variables in a hierarchical manner with all the control variables being entered in Model 1, Exposure to *The Daily Show* and attentiveness to politics in Model 2, and finally the interaction term between Exposure to *The Daily Show* and attentiveness to politics in

Model 3. All the models were estimated using ordered probit given the ordinal nature of the dependent variables.

As reported in Table 2, exposure to traditional news sources was a positive and significant predictor of attentiveness to the war and news about the candidates. Frequent voters and people who paid attention to politics were more likely to follow the two issues than were infrequent voters and those who were less inclined to pay attention to politics. Men and whites paid more heed to the war than did women and nonwhites. Informed people and those with strong party affiliation were more likely to follow the news about candidates than were less knowledgeable people and those with weaker party affiliation—which is not surprising given the nature of the issue. Moreover, viewers of the *Daily Show* were more likely than nonviewers to follow stories about the candidates regardless of their levels of political attentiveness.

Turning to the interactive effects of watching the show and attentiveness to politics on following the war and the news about the candidates, the analysis showed that there were significant negative interactive effects of viewing the show and political attentiveness on viewers' attention to the two issues. Further analyses suggested that the magnitudes of the interactive effect did not differ across issues. Figure 1 illustrates the predicted probability of following the war very closely for hypothetical respondents with high, medium, and low levels of attentiveness to politics at minimum and maximum levels of exposure to *The Daily Show*, holding all other variables constant at their means. All else being equal, viewers with a low level of political attentiveness were 8 percent more likely to follow the war very closely than were similarly apolitical nonviewers. Audience members with a medium level of attentiveness were 2 percent less likely to follow the war very closely than were their counterparts who did not watch the show. Viewers with a high level of attentiveness, on the other hand, were 15 percent less likely to follow the issue very closely than were highly attentive nonviewers.

A similar pattern emerged for the interactive effect of watching the show and political attentiveness on the probability of following the news about the candidates very closely, as shown in Figure 2. All else being equal, the least attentive viewers were 13 percent more likely to attend to the issue very closely than were similarly inattentive nonviewers. Viewers with a medium level of political attentiveness were 8 percent more likely to follow the issue than were their counterparts who did not watch the show. The highly attentive viewers, however, were 5 percent less likely to follow the topic very closely than were highly attentive nonviewers.

All in all, the findings were consistent with the hypothesis that *The Daily Show* can foster apolitical viewers' attentiveness to issues that are mentioned with relative frequency by the program and that this positive impact decreases as viewers' political attentiveness increases. Thus, hypothesis 1 was supported.

TABLE 2 Testing the interactive effect of exposure to *The Daily Show* and attentiveness to politics on attentiveness to the Afghanistan War and news about the presidential candidates

| | Afghanistan | | | Candidates | | |
|---|--------------|---------------|---------------|--------------|--------------|---------------|
| | (Model 1) | (Model 2) | (Model 3) | (Model 1) | (Model 2) | (Model 3) |
| Age | 0.001 (.002) | 0.0002 (.002) | 0.001 (.002) | 0.003 (.002) | 0.001 (.002) | 0.001 (.002) |
| Income | 0.01 (.02) | 0.008 (.02) | 0.007 (.02) | 0.02 (.02) | 0.02 (.02) | 0.01 (.02) |
| Education | 0.01 (.03) | -0.002 (.03) | -0.0007 (.03) | 0.01 (.02) | -0.008 (.02) | -0.006 (.02) |
| Gender (0 for male; 1 for female) | 0.26 (.07)** | .24 (.07)** | 0.25 (.07)** | 0.02 (.07) | -0.03 (.07) | -0.03 (.07) |
| Race (0 for non-white; 1 for white) | 0.20 (.09)* | 0.17 (.09)† | 0.16 (.09)† | 0.03 (.09) | -0.04 (.09) | -0.03 (.09) |
| Exposure to traditional news | 0.75 (.07)** | 0.52 (.08)** | 0.53 (.08)** | 0.75 (.07)** | 0.41 (.08)** | 0.41 (.08)** |
| Exposure to on-line news | -0.01 (.02) | -0.02 (.02) | -0.02 (.02) | 0.03 (.02) | 0.008 (.02) | 0.004 (.02) |
| Political knowledge | 0.27 (.10)* | -0.04 (.11) | -0.04 (.11) | 0.63 (.11)** | 0.32 (.12)** | 0.32 (.12)** |
| Voting in the past elections | 0.09 (.03)** | 0.05 (.03)† | 0.05 (.03)† | 0.19 (.03)** | 0.14 (.03)** | 0.14 (.03)** |
| Partisanship | 0.01 (.05) | 0.002 (.05) | 0.003 (.05) | 0.21 (.05)** | 0.21 (.05)** | 0.21 (.05)** |
| Exposure to <i>The Daily Show</i> (TDS) | - | -0.04 (.05) | -0.03 (.05) | - | 0.09 (.05)† | 0.10 (.05)* |
| Attentiveness to politics | - | 0.50 (.05)** | 0.49 (.05)** | - | 0.65 (.05)** | 0.66 (.05)** |
| TDS X attentiveness to politics | - | - | -0.15 (.06)* | - | - | -0.15 (.06)** |
| Constant 1 | 0.02 (.17) | 0.10 (.17) | 0.09 (.17) | 1.27 (.17) | 1.33 (.18) | 1.34 (.18) |
| Constant 2 | 0.74 (.17) | .86 (.17) | 0.86 (.17) | 2.06 (.18) | 2.21 (.18) | 2.23 (.18) |
| Constant 3 | 2.00 (.17) | 2.19 (.18) | 2.19 (.18) | 3.11 (.18) | 3.26 (.19) | 3.38 (.19) |
| Log likelihood | -1283.77 | -1236.23 | -1233.65 | -1393.99 | -1306.75 | -1303.32 |
| χ^2 | 245.88** | 340.96** | 346.12** | 395.72** | 570.20** | 577.06** |
| Pseudo R ² | 0.087 | 0.121 | 0.123 | 0.124 | 0.179 | 0.181 |
| χ^2 changed | | 95.08** | 5.16* | | 174.48** | 6.86** |
| N | 1198 | 1198 | 1198 | 1199 | 1199 | 1199 |

Source: 2002 and 2004 Pew Research Center Media Consumption Surveys.

Note: Table entries are ordered probit coefficients; standard errors are in parentheses. Cases with missing data were excluded from the analyses.

† $p < .10$; * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$.

FIGURE 1 The impact of exposure to *The Daily Show* and attentiveness to politics on the probability of attending to the Afghanistan War very closely

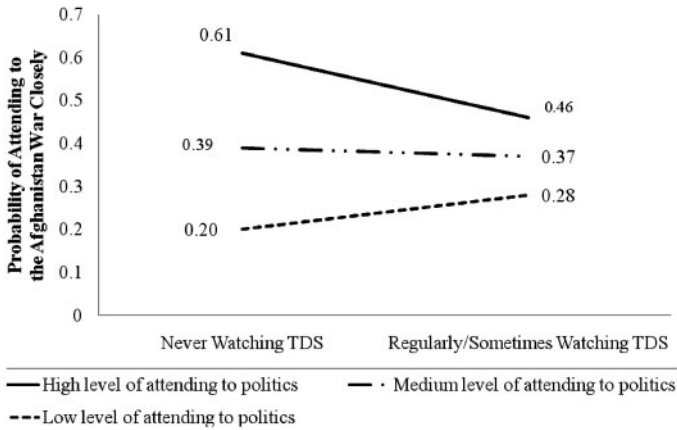
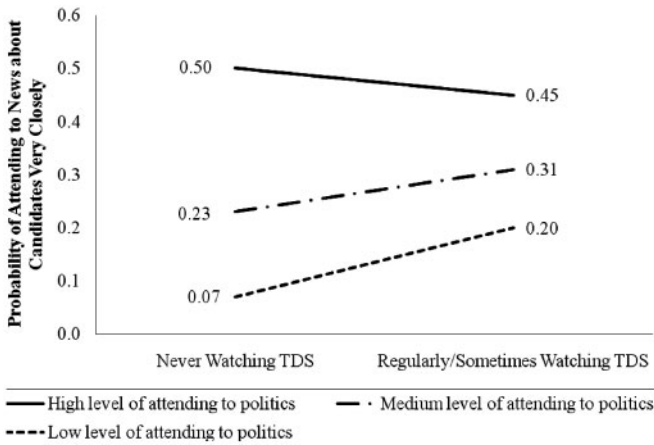


FIGURE 2 The impact of exposure to *The Daily Show* and attentiveness to politics on the probability of attending to news about the presidential candidates very closely



Moreover, post-hoc analyses (using Analysis of Covariance) showed that politically inattentive viewers of the show followed the two issues more closely ($M=2.15$; $SE=0.15$ in 2002; $M=1.87$; $SE=0.14$ in 2004) than apolitical nonviewers ($M=1.73$; $SE=0.05$; $p < .05$ in 2002; $M=1.14$; $SE=0.06$; $p < .05$ in 2004). There were no significant differences in attending the two issues between viewers with medium or high levels of political attentiveness and their counterparts who did not watch the show.

To examine whether the observed interactive effects between *The Daily Show* viewing and political attentiveness on attending to political issues were limited to the issues that were mentioned with relative frequency by the show,

I also estimated the interactive effects of viewing the show and political attentiveness on attentiveness to two issues that were either never or rarely covered by the program—namely, the Secretary of State’s visit to the Middle East in 2002 and the high gasoline price in 2004. As expected, the analyses revealed *no* negative interactive effects of the viewing and attentiveness to politics—a result that provides additional support for my hypothesis that *The Daily Show* can increase apolitical viewers’ attentiveness to issues that are mentioned *with relative frequency* by the program and that this positive impact decreases as viewers’ political attentiveness increases.

DISCUSSION

Today, Americans have greater opportunities to choose entertainment over news than three decades ago. These opportunities may have contributed to a widening gap between apolitical citizens and news junkies in following public affairs (Prior, 2007). At the same time, there are entertainment-oriented television programs that piggyback political information on their entertainment content, and thus, have the potential to direct politically apathetic citizens’ attention back to politics (Baum, 2003). This article examined how *The Daily Show*, an American political comedy show that covers politics on a regular basis, influences viewers’ attention to political issues.

Though studies have suggested that typical *Daily Show* viewers are interested in and knowledgeable about politics (Young, 2004a; Young & Tisinger, 2006), the analyses reported here showed that there are still a considerable number of viewers (*i.e.*, 20 percent) who were not inclined to follow politics. This made it possible for the show to direct these viewers’ attention to political issues that were covered by the program. Indeed, further analyses revealed negative interactive effects of watching the show and political attentiveness on attentiveness to the Afghanistan War and the news about the 2004 presidential candidates. This was consistent with the notion that the program can increase apolitical viewers’ attention to issues that are mentioned with relative frequency by the program and that this positive effect decreases as audience members’ attentiveness to politics increases. The analyses also revealed a significant positive impact of watching the show on attending to the two issues among those who were least likely to follow politics. Finally, the analyses did not show negative interactive effects of viewing and political attentiveness on attentiveness to issues that were never or rarely covered by Jon Stewart (*i.e.*, the Secretary of State’s visit to the Middle East in 2002 and the high price of gas in 2004)—another piece of evidence consistent with my argument regarding the impact of watching *The Daily Show* on viewers’ attentiveness to political issues.

Some may argue that the findings of this study are consistent not only with the argument that *The Daily Show* can influence apolitical viewers' attention to political issues, but also with the notion that the show can prime the issues on which it focuses. This is because people may be inclined to self-report following an issue more closely if the issue was more salient than if it was less salient. Hence, the findings may be explained by an alternative argument regarding the priming effect of the show. However, the priming argument is consistent with my argument regarding the effect of the show on attentiveness to political issues because people have to pay attention to the information about an issue in order for the issue to be primed. Hence, even if the self-reported measures of attentiveness to political issues captured the salience of the issues, they still indicated the amount of attention that people had paid to the issues.

Admittedly, the use of cross-sectional survey data means that I cannot necessarily conclude that watching *The Daily Show* caused greater attentiveness to political issues among politically inattentive viewers. Claims of this sort, however, would be consistent not only with my findings, but also with theoretical accounts of how citizens obtain political information as a by-product of their daily life (Down, 1957; Popkin, 1994)—for example, watching political comedy shows for entertainment—and how viewers of soft news programs may pay attention to additional information about political issues as a result of being exposed to the information about the issues on the programs (Baum, 2003). The findings therefore reinforce the argument that entertainment-oriented television programs such as *The Daily Show* can direct viewers' attention to politics.

Furthermore, the findings of the present study suggest that entertainment programs do not have to cover politics only *sporadically* to attract politically inattentive citizens; nor do apolitical citizens need to encounter political information in an *incidental* manner. Even television programs such as *The Daily Show* may lure those with little interest in politics into watching the shows and thereby direct their attention to political issues. Contrary to what some observers may have argued (*e.g.*, Prior, 2007), such programs may reach and affect people who prefer entertainment to news. To be sure, I by no means argue that political comedy shows such as *The Daily Show* have the potential to influence people who would rather turn off television than to be exposed to any political information. Rather, it is people who seek entertaining shows that such programs tend to benefit in the current media environment.

In drawing conclusions from the results presented here, one should be appropriately cautious. To begin with, the use of self-reports of exposure to a wide range of media could have led to overestimating—or underestimating—the relationships between exposure to *The Daily Show* and attentiveness to the political issues. Moreover, this study focused on a particular show, *The Daily*

Show. Further research might examine whether the findings of this study extend to other political comedy programs (e.g., *The Colbert Report* and *Saturday Night Live*). Moreover, it may also examine how political comedy shows interact with other information sources (e.g., traditional news programs or on-line news) to influence public attentiveness to politics given that people are usually exposed to information from multiple sources and rarely consume one type of media in isolation. The final caveat is that the study focused on viewers' attentiveness to political issues. Further studies could test to what extent such attentiveness affects other political outcome variables (e.g., political knowledge and participation) and in what way programs like *The Daily Show* interact with other information sources to influence these variables.

As media choices increase, apolitical citizens can watch entertainment shows around the clock, which may have caused a decline in their attentiveness to political issues (Prior, 2007). The decline, in turn, may lead to greater inequality in political knowledge and participation between politically apathetic citizens and political junkies (Prior, 2007), which raises concern about the health of the democratic system in the U.S. Though this study suggests that *The Daily Show* and others of its ilk can redirect apolitical citizens' attention back to politics, it is unclear to what extent such increased attention will reduce the inequality in political knowledge and participation. On one hand, seeing the political world through the eyes of satirists such as Jon Stewart may increase the sense of alienation from the political process among those who already feel detached from the process by cultivating mistrust in the political system (Baumgartner & Morris, 2006). Moreover, the show may lower political gratifications associated with traditional news outlets (e.g., national television news) that have been shown to facilitate political knowledge acquisition and political participation (Holbert *et al.*, 2007); this may in turn further demobilize apolitical citizens. On the other hand, seeing the political world from Jon Stewart's perspective may stimulate political participation among apolitical citizens by increasing their confidence in their own ability to understand political issues (Baumgartner & Morris, 2006) and by inducing concern about the current political situation (Cao & Brewer, 2008). The mixed evidence suggests that it may be too early to draw a definitive conclusion about the potential effect of *The Daily Show* and other late-night shows on the democratic system in the U.S. This study, along with others examining the effects of the program, calls for further investigations of political consequences of the show, especially given its ability to redirect apolitical citizens' attention back to politics.

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