

# Ability Matters: Testing the Differential Effects of Political News and Late-Night Political Comedy on Cognitive Responses and the Role of Ability in Micro-Level Opinion Formation

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Entertainment-oriented media are a staple in today's political media environment (Prior, 2007), ranging from fictional narratives (e.g., *Iron Lady*, *Ideas of March*) to entertainment-infused news programming (e.g., *Fox and Friends*, *Rock Center*). Amidst the rapidly changing media environment, media producers are packaging political content in a variety of entertaining formats known to engage audiences and increase message receptivity (e.g., Holbert, Hmielowski, Jain, Lather, & Morey, 2011; Holbert, Pillion, Tschida, Armfield, Kinder, & Cherry 2003; LaMarre & Landreville, 2009). Although the primary goal of political entertainment media content is to entertain, some forms are developed with secondary goals aimed at influencing political attitudes and opinions (Holbert, 2005). Comedian Steve Martin noted this in his recent autobiography, revealing that while performing on *Saturday Night Live* he intentionally used parody and satire to influence attitudes about political issues and public officials (Martin, 2007). Much of what the public consumes as popular entertainment media includes a secondary emphasis on real-world political issues, potentially influencing public opinion (Delli Carpini & Williams, 1994; Holbert, 2005). As such, there is an increasing interest in how individuals cognitively process and form opinions in response to political entertainment media consumption. To this end, the present study examines cognitive responses to different forms of political media: Political news and late-night political comedy.

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Using Petty and Cacioppo's (1986) Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) as the theoretical framework, individuals' cognitive responses to a contemporary political issue (e.g., bank bailouts) viewed during a segment of CNN's *Anderson Cooper 360°* (AC 360°) were compared with individuals' responses to the same political issue presented in a segment of *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* (TDS). To better understand cognitive processing of political satire, this study experimentally manipulates message format (political news, late night) and ability to think about the message (low, high), with a focus on how these factors influence individual-level thoughts, show-host perceptions, and resulting opinions of the message target (i.e., Congress).

### Political Entertainment Processing and Effects

Research aimed at understanding the influence of popular political media such as Hollywood films (e.g., *Sicko*, *The Campaign*), late-night comedy (e.g., *TDS*, *The Colbert Report*), and soft news [e.g., *Good Morning America* (GMA), *The View*] has identified a broad range of political entertainment media effects (e.g., Delli Carpini & Williams, 1994; Holbert, Shah, & Kwak, 2003). Baum and Jamieson (2006) identified the "Oprah effect" wherein inattentive citizens who regularly consumed the soft news format were more likely to consistently vote. Baum (2003) posited the "gateway hypothesis" in which soft news consumption increases political interest among inattentive publics. Meanwhile, Prior (2003) argued that soft news potentially decreases political knowledge among viewers. Recent political humor studies have identified more nuanced effects. Holbert et al. (2011) revealed that satirical tone led to differing levels of perceived issue importance among viewers crossing the ideological spectrum, while LaMarre, Landreville, and Beam (2009) found that political ideology predicted opposing interpretations of Stephen Colbert's political joke telling on *The Colbert Report*. In both cases, the authors identified consequential implications for public opinion such as shifting attitudes among key voting constituencies. Indeed, late-night political comedy has been linked to a variety of public opinion outcomes including viewer perceptions (e.g., Cao & Brewer, 2008; Hoffmann & Thompson, 2009), evaluations of political candidates and leaders (e.g., Baumgartner & Morris, 2006; Moy, Xenos, & Hess, 2005; Niven, Lichter, & Amundson, 2003), political knowledge (e.g., Young, 2004), and political attitudes (e.g., Young & Tisinger, 2006).

In a study focused on political humor processing, Young (2008) found that increased cognitive load needed to interpret complex political satire resulted in reduced argument scrutiny among late-night viewers. In contrast, Nabi, Moyer-Gusé, and Byrne (2007) argued that people intentionally discounted entertainment-based messages, rendering them less relevant than those found in news or debates. Although the researchers differed in their account of the

underlying mechanisms at work, they agreed that late-night humor processing was largely superficial, relying on heuristics, signals, and cues. Still, it remains unknown whether, under certain circumstances, late-night audiences engage in more central processing, or if late-night comedy viewers process political messages significantly different than political news viewers. As such, the present study extends what is known about late-night political comedy message processing in a few important ways. Namely, it tests whether significant differences in cognitive responses emerge between political news and political comedy viewers, if one's ability to think about the political component directly or indirectly affects cognitive activity, and when resulting attitudes and opinions regarding the message target are influenced.

### **Ability, Cognitive Elaboration, and Opinion Formation**

For the purposes of this study, the ELM offers an excellent model for understanding how audiences' cognitive responses to popular political media shape attitudes and form micro-level opinion. Dual-processing models of persuasion such as the ELM outline two routes to persuasion: one that relies on superficial or peripheral cues and one that involves deeper or more central message processing (Eagly & Chaiken, 1993; Petty, Briñol, & Priester, 2009; Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). Individual-level cognitive elaboration, generally defined as the extent of one's thinking about the message, is situated as the key determinant of which route is taken. The ELM identifies two recipient factors, ability and motivation, as key predictors of one's likelihood for elaboration (LOE). When an individual has the ability and is motivated to think about the attitude object, central processing occurs (Eagly & Chaiken, 1993; Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). However, when either ability or motivation to think about an attitude object or message target is low, peripheral processing tends to dominate (Petty & Cacioppo, 1981, 1986; Petty, Wells, and Brock, 1979). Krosnick & Petty (1995) outline a set of key variables shown to influence one's ability and/or motivation to engage in cognitive elaboration. For example, prior knowledge positively influences one's ability to elaborate (Petty et al., 1979; Wegener, Downing, Krosnick, & Petty, 1995), while personal relevance positively influences one's motivation to elaborate (Johnson & Eagly, 1989). Notably, there are consequential differences in the attitudes and opinions formed by the two routes. Namely, attitudes and opinions formed through central processing are relatively stronger, harder to change, and more stable over time (Krosnick & Petty, 1995).

Applying this theoretical framework to political news and late-night comedy, the ELM would predict that individuals with relatively higher ability to think about the message would generate significantly more elaborations

(thoughts) than those with lower ability. The first formal hypothesis tests this basic ELM prediction as follows:

*H1*: The high-ability group will generate significantly more individual-level thoughts when compared with the low-ability group.

Still, issue-relevant thought generation (defined herein as the number of distinct complete thoughts about the message target that manifest in response to the media stimuli) offers a more nuanced test of ability on cognitive responses (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986, 1996). This is an important distinction, considering that mere exposure to a stimulus is likely to generate some thoughts, albeit they may be politically irrelevant (Delli Carpini & Williams, 1994; Young, 2008). In keeping with the theoretical framework, enhanced ability is also thought to increase issue-relevant thinking.

*H2*: The high-ability group will generate significantly more individual-level issue-relevant thoughts when compared with the low-ability group.

### Political Humor, Cognitive Elaboration, and Opinion Formation

Using Holbert's (2005) typology for political entertainment television, late-night comedy is categorized as traditional satire. Satire such as *TDS* primarily focuses on politics, but the humor includes implicit political messages (Baym, 2005). Additionally, *TDS* offers a sophisticated form of political humor (satire), which differs from other forms of political comedy (Baym, 2005; Feldman & Young, 2008; Fox, Koloen, & Sahin, 2007; Jones, 2007). In contrast, *AC 360°* provides a more explicit non-satirical form of political content. Still, both maintain a primary political focus. While both forms of media offer news and information pertaining to politics, Hmielowski, Holbert, and Lee (2011) note, "satire does not approach the topic of politics with the same lens as used in newsrooms" (p. 109).

Recalling that Nabi et al. (2007) and Young (2008) conjectured peripheral processing of late-night comedy, prior political entertainment research indicates that satirical news audiences generate significantly less issue-relevant elaborations than their political news-viewing counterparts. However, the ELM does not situate message format as a predictor of one's LOE. Rather, agency is assigned to the individual in terms of ability and motivation. Theoretically, audiences could process either message format (news or late-night) centrally, raising the question of whether message format directly influences one's level of cognitive responses. As such, the following research question is offered:

*RQ1*: Are there significant differences in levels of total issue-relevant thought generation between those who watch political news and those who watch late-night political comedy?

### Political Satire, News, and Thought Valence

Under the ELM framework, cognitive responses are often examined along two dimensions: Level and direction. Level (or amount) of thinking is conceptually and operationally defined as the total number of individual-level complete distinct thoughts generated. The direction of one's elaborations (either favoring or opposing the message target) is referred to as valence (Wegener et al., 1995). Here, thought valence is conceptually defined as the direction of thoughts (positive or negative) about the message target (i.e., Congress) that are generated in response to the media stimuli. Specifically, unfavorable thoughts about Congress are considered negative relevant thoughts, while those favoring Congress are deemed positive relevant thoughts.

Although higher levels of ability are expected to generate more message scrutiny (e.g., strong negative messages about Congress should generate more negative thoughts about Congress among higher-ability groups), relatively little is known about whether message format (news or late-night) differentially effect the direction of one's thinking (Feldman & Young, 2008; Jones, 2007). Sophisticated forms of political humor such as late-night satire have been shown to impede scrutiny, yet prior research did not specifically examine a direct effect of satire on individual-level thought valence (e.g., Young, 2008). Neither ELM nor political entertainment literature say much about the direct influence of message format on thought valence. Thus, the following research question is offered:

*RQ2:* Do levels of negative and positive thoughts differ significantly between those who watch political news and those who watch late-night political comedy?

### Source Perceptions and Micro-level Opinion

As political entertainment media tend to use known sources (e.g., celebrity show hosts), credibility, likability, and other source attributes likely play a role in the processing of information (Harkins & Petty, 1981). Lower-ability individuals will largely rely on cues such as source perceptions to form judgments, regardless of whether they consume political entertainment or political news. As such, differences in perceptions (e.g., low or high credibility) likely influence opinion formation. However, when looking at potential source perceptions differences, it quickly becomes muddled. That Anderson Cooper (at number two) and Jon Stewart (at number four) both rank among the top five highest-paid and -rated cable show hosts suggests both enjoy large followings. Given the similar celebrity status of Stewart and Cooper, perceptions of source likeability might not differ between the groups. Still, it is possible that while both hosts enjoy celebrity status and large audiences,

individuals view their likeability differently. As such, the following research question asks:

*RQ3: Do perceptions of Jon Stewart and Anderson Cooper as likeable sources for political news significantly differ across viewing groups (i.e., AC 360° low-ability, AC 360° high-ability, TDS low-ability, TDS high-ability)?*

Additionally, studies show that individuals apply more scrutiny to a source's credibility under relatively higher cognitive elaboration conditions (Harkins & Petty, 1981). If, as Nabi et al. (2007) hypothesized, audiences discount political entertainment messages, then one might expect them to similarly discount the comedian as a credible source. Furthermore, recent research has shown that an argument offered with more levity is not as strong as one offered with gravity (Holbert et al., 2011). As such, traditional journalists might be able to separate themselves from comedians in terms of positive source credibility, especially when audience members engage in relatively higher levels of cognitive activity. Still, these assumptions might not be warranted. Cooper and Stewart have both received top journalistic honors (i.e., The Peabody), as well as top entertainment awards (i.e., The Emmy Award) (emmyonline.org, 2001; Poniewozik, 2007). Additionally, Jon Stewart tied anchormen Brian Williams, Tom Brokaw, Dan Rather, and Anderson Cooper for most admired journalist in a recent national survey (Pew Research Center, 2008). Because audiences could equally perceive these two show hosts as entertainers or journalists, it is unclear whether significant source credibility perceptions will emerge, or if such differences are conditional on one's LOE. Thus, the following research question is posed:

*RQ4: Do perceptions of Stewart and Cooper as credible sources for political news significantly differ across groups (i.e., AC 360° low-ability, AC 360° high-ability, TDS low-ability, TDS high-ability)?*

### Micro-level Opinion Formation

In keeping with the ELM, it is suspected that low-ability groups will use peripheral cues to form attitudes, while those in the high-ability groups will scrutinize the arguments during opinion formation. Although attitude change can occur through both routes, centrally processed attitudes and opinions are significantly stronger and more stable over time (Wegener et al., 1995). As such, it is helpful to understand whether significant differences in resulting attitudes toward the message target (i.e., Congress) emerge between political news and late-night groups, and if differing levels of ability play a significant role in this process. More formally, the following research question is asked:

*RQ5: Do attitudes toward Congress significantly differ across groups (i.e., AC 360° low-ability, AC 360° high-ability, TDS low-ability, TDS high-ability)?*

## Method

Following Petty and Cacioppo's (1986) basic methodological design for testing ability's influence on individual-level cognitive elaboration, this study was a 2 (ability: low, high)  $\times$  2 (message format: entertainment, news) posttest-only experiment with random assignment.

### Random Assignment

To ensure random assignment, a comparison of the treatment groups was conducted. No significant differences between *AC 360°* and *Daily Show* viewing groups were found for gender,  $t(130) = 0.641$ ,  $p = .522$ ; race, ( $\chi^2(3) = 5.07$ ,  $p = .166$ ),  $t(130) = -.386$ ,  $p = .70$ ; education,  $t(130) = -0.859$ ,  $p = .392$ ; or age  $t(130) = -1.67$ ,  $p = .097$ . Likewise, no significant differences between the low-ability and high-ability groups were found for gender,  $t(130) = -0.063$ ,  $p = .95$ ; race,  $t(130) = -1.817$ ,  $p = .07$ ; education,  $t(130) = -0.85$ ,  $p = .326$ ; or age  $t(130) = .874$ ,  $p = .384$ . A significant difference only emerged between the low- and high-ability groups for household income,  $t(130) = 2.189$ ,  $p < .05$ . As such, it appears that the random assignment was sufficient.

### Manipulations

Ability was manipulated by increasing prior knowledge for the treatment group. The prior knowledge manipulation followed a well-validated protocol used in persuasion research for decades (Krosnick & Petty, 1995; Wegener et al., 1995). Additionally, a message-format manipulation was used to compare cognitive elaboration processes and effects between late-night comedy and political news.

### Data

The data were collected using an adult jury pool sample ( $N = 132$ ) recruited from a highly populated county in the Midwest. Although this was a non-probability/non-representative sample, the jury pool consisted of randomly selected registered voters from a highly populated urban, suburban, and rural mix county. Slightly more than half of the participants were female (51%). The average age was 36 years. Ninety-two percent of participants were Caucasian, 3.2% were African-American, 1.6% were Hispanic, 0.08% were Asian, and the remaining 3.12% reported themselves as "other" or chose not to answer the question. The average household income was \$50,001–75,000. The mean level of education for this sample was a 4-year college degree. Although the average education of the sample was relatively high, inflated cognitive ability potentially made it more difficult to manipulate



ability or find significant cognitive effects. As such, these findings are likely conservative estimates of the role ability plays among average- or lower-educated individuals. Additionally, *TDS* viewers tend to be well educated (Feldman & Young, 2008), suggesting the sample resembled *TDS* audiences.

### Procedure

All research was conducted on-site using a laptop computer in the attorney-client conference rooms of the county courthouse. The researcher reported to the jury room with permission from the duty judge and asked jurors if they would like to participate in a voluntary online survey about political entertainment. The researcher explained that the study would take 25–30 min to complete, including a short video clip and follow-up questionnaire. Participants were entered into a raffle, they were free to skip any questions they wished, could exit and delete their answers at any time, and all information was confidential.

Participants were randomly assigned a URL, which linked them to one of four conditions in the computer program created to reflect the  $2 \times 2$  experimental design. The two high-ability conditions began with an artificial news article about Congress approving bank executive bonuses using taxpayer dollars (see below for stimuli details). The article was used to increase individuals' prior knowledge about this issue, and in turn, increase their ability to think about messages in the media stimuli. The two low-ability conditions were given a non-relevant artificial news article about video games. To maintain consistent time and effort across conditions, the video game news article was the same length and style as the issue-relevant article, but did not include any information regarding the political issue. The news articles were text only with no publication source information provided.

Following the news article, two multiple-choice questions were asked of all four groups to ensure that the ability manipulation was effective (see below for manipulation check results). Next, all four groups watched a 4-min embedded media clip about Congress approving taxpayer-funded bank executive bonuses. The late-night political comedy group viewed a clip from *TDS*, while the political news group viewed a clip from CNN's *AC 360°* cable television news show. Immediately following, all four groups were asked to list their thoughts about the television segment they viewed. In keeping with several ELM studies using thought listing, 4 min were provided for this procedure (Krosnick & Petty, 1995; Wegener et al., 1995). Thoughts were either typed into an open response box that allowed each participant to elaborate as much as individually desired or hand written on pen and paper provided by the researcher. The posttest survey included a series of questions regarding issue interest, political interest, source perception, attitudes toward Congress,



and demographics. The entire process from start to finish averaged roughly 30 min.

## Stimuli

*Ability manipulation article.* A one-page artificially created news article was used to manipulate ability. The article covered the bank executive bonus scandal from spring 2009. Republican and Democrat viewpoints were offered in the form of quotes from key congressional members. Similarly, White House opinion was offered in the form of quotes from the Treasury Secretary and a White House spokesperson. The article was portrayed as a real news article written by M. Smith (the same byline was used for the artificial news article about video games as well). No other source identification was supplied. The ambiguity regarding source was done to reduce source effects. Although the news article was fictitious, the information was accurate and taken from real news. The tone of the article was designed to be objective and neutral. Both sides of the debate were offered; no commentary or intentional framing was used.

## Manipulation Check

Following consumption of the news article, two multiple-choice questions were asked of all four groups to ensure that the ability manipulation was effective. The first question simply asked participants to identify the topic of their news article, and the second asked a basic knowledge question taken from the high-ability artificial news article content. Participants properly identified the topic of their news article. The manipulation check revealed a significant difference between the low- and high-ability groups regarding the knowledge question,  $t = 11.06$ ,  $p < .001$ , where 92% of the participants in high-ability group answered the question correctly, while only 23% of the participants in the low-ability were able to offer the correct response. The low-ability correct-response level is roughly that of chance based on the number of possible responses offered. The ability manipulation was deemed highly effective.

## Late-Night Political Comedy Clip

The entertainment media clip used in this study was a 4 min: 11 s clip from a segment entitled “Notorious AIG”, which originally aired during the March 19, 2009 episode of *TDS*. The clip was the entire original segment in which Jon Stewart provided commentary about the \$165 million in AIG bonuses Congress approved. *The Daily Show* segment included a montage of news clips about the executive bonus scandal coupled with Stewart’s satirical commentary

about the events. The tone was satirical, but Stewart's message was unequivocally negative toward Congress. A copy of the clip used is available for viewing at: <http://www.thedailyshow.com/video/index.jhtml?videoId=220572&title=the-notorious-aig-outrage>.

### Political news Clip

The news clip was 4 min: 15 s segment entitled "AIG Controversy", which originally aired during the March 20, 2009 episode of *AC 360°*. The *AC 360°* clip was the entire original segment, in which Cooper included a montage of media statements along with his own comments about the issue. The commentary offered by Anderson Cooper was straightforward, as opposed to Stewart's predominant use of satire in the entertainment clip. However, Cooper also took a position that clearly admonished Congress and opposed the use of taxpayer funds for executive bonuses. Thus, both the entertainment and the news stimuli were offering highly similar negative messages about Congress' action. A copy of the *AC 360°* clip is available for viewing at <http://www.cnn.com/video/?/video/politics/2009/03/20/ac.aig.bonus.cnn> (Cable News Network, 2011).

## Coding Procedures

### Coders

Three research assistants were hired, trained, and paid to conduct the coding of the open-ended elaborations and counterarguments. Coders had no interaction with the participants. After coders were trained, they were each given a copy of 10% of the full sample. Intercoder reliability was assessed for each variable using the Krippendorff's alpha macro for SPSS created by Hayes and Krippendorff (2007). The analyses revealed solid reliabilities between all three coders. Specifically, all of the Krippendorff's alphas for this study were above the .80 level: total thoughts  $\alpha = .82$ ; total issue-relevant thoughts  $\alpha = .82$ ; relevant positive thoughts  $\alpha = .82$ ; relevant negative thoughts  $\alpha = .83$ .

## Measures

### Cognitive Elaboration

The criterion variable was cognitive elaboration. This was conceptualized as total number of discreet complete thoughts [Mean ( $M$ ) = 2.80, standard deviation ( $SD$ ) = 1.87] and total number of discreet complete issue-relevant thoughts ( $M = 0.52$ ,  $SD = 0.98$ ).

### Thought Valence

Thought valence was defined as the direction (positive or negative) of relevant thoughts about the message target generated in response to the media stimuli. Positive thoughts were operationalized as relevant thoughts favoring the Congress ( $M = 1.64$ ,  $SD = 1.91$ ), while negative thoughts were operationalized as unfavorable relevant thoughts about Congress ( $M = 0.52$ ,  $SD = 0.98$ ).

### Micro-level Opinion

Individual-level attitudes toward the message target (i.e., Congress) were measured for this study. The attitude measure used a three-item index created from unique items measured along six-point semantic differential scales. Participants were asked to select the number on the scale that most represented their opinion from the statements: “Congress is . . .” “good (1)/bad (6)”, “wise (6)/unwise (1)”, and “honest (1)/corrupt (6)”. The answers to “good/bad” and “honest/corrupt” were reverse coded. The index was reliable with Cronbach’s  $\alpha = .79$  ( $M = 2.50$ ,  $SD = 1.76$ ).

### Source Perceptions

Perceptions of Jon Stewart and Anderson Cooper as credible sources for political information were measured using a three-item index,  $M = 2.21$ ,  $SD = 1.70$ , Cronbach’s  $\alpha = .89$ . All three asked participants to strongly disagree, disagree, neither agree nor disagree, agree, or strongly agree with the statement, “Jon Stewart/Anderson Cooper is a credible, incompetent (reverse coded), and trusted source for political information.” Using the same 5-point scale, source likeability was measured by asking participants how much they agree with the statement, “Jon Stewart/Anderson Cooper is a likeable source for political information.”

### Covariate

Political interest was used as the covariate. Extant political entertainment literature has demonstrated the influence of political interest, indicating that individual-level interest in politics would influence one’s elaboration, perceptions, and attitudes about the message, sources, and message target (e.g., Young & Tisinger, 2006; Holbert et al., 2003). Political interest was measured by on a seven-point Likert-type scale from “not at all interested” (1) to “very interested” (7) ( $M = 3.24$ ,  $SD = 1.21$ ).

## Analysis

Analysis of Covariance was run to assess the relevant hypotheses and research questions. Each test retained the same pair of independent variables, ability (i.e., low, high), and message (i.e., late-night political comedy, political news), as well as the same covariate, political interest. The outcome variables included total thoughts (H1), total relevant thoughts (H2, RQ1), thought valence (RQ2), source perceptions (RQ 3,4), and opinions regarding Congress (RQ5).

## Results

### Total Thoughts

As predicted in H1, those in the high-ability groups had significantly more total thoughts [adjusted  $M=3.39$ , standard error ( $SE$ ) = .202] than the low-ability groups (adjusted  $M=2.07$ ,  $SE=0.223$ ),  $F(1, 127)=19.42$ ,  $p<.001$ ,  $\eta^2=.04$ . *TDS* viewers generated significantly more total thoughts (adjusted  $M=3.20$ ,  $SE=0.206$ ) than *AC 360°* viewers (adjusted  $M=2.26$ ,  $SE=0.219$ ),  $F(1, 127)=9.60$ ,  $p<.01$ ,  $\eta^2=.02$  (Table 1).

### Issue-Relevant Thoughts

Supporting H2, high-ability groups generated significantly more relevant thoughts (adjusted  $M=3.32$ ,  $SE=0.193$ ) than low-ability groups (adjusted  $M=1.94$ ,  $SE=0.123$ ),  $F(1, 127)=22.97$ ,  $p<.001$ ,  $\eta^2=.04$  (Table 1). Similarly, *TDS* groups generated significantly more relevant thoughts (adjusted  $M=3.05$ ,  $SE=0.197$ ) than *AC 360°* groups (adjusted  $M=2.20$ ,  $SE=0.209$ ),  $F(1, 127)=8.81$ ,  $p<.01$ ,  $\eta^2=.02$ .

Table 1

*Adjusted Means and Standard Errors of Total, Issue-Relevant, Positive, and Negative Thoughts for Ability and Message Groups*

Groups	Total thoughts	Issue-relevant thoughts
Low-ability	2.07 (0.223)	1.94 (0.123)
High-ability	3.39 (0.202)	3.32 (0.193)
Political comedy ( <i>The Daily Show</i> )	3.20 (0.206)	3.05 (0.197)
Political news ( <i>Anderson Cooper 360°</i> )	2.26 (0.219)	2.20 (0.209)
	Positive thoughts	Negative thoughts
Low-ability	0.86 (0.222)	0.61 (0.120)
High-ability	2.24 (0.201)	0.47 (0.109)
Political comedy ( <i>The Daily Show</i> )	2.20 (0.205)	0.19 (0.111)
Political news ( <i>Anderson Cooper 360°</i> )	0.92 (0.218)	0.90 (0.118)

### Relevant Positive Thoughts

High-ability groups generated significantly more positive thoughts (adjusted  $M=2.24$ ,  $SE=0.107$ ) than low-ability groups (adjusted  $M=0.86$ ,  $SE=0.222$ ),  $F(1, 127)=21.095$ ,  $p<.001$ ,  $\eta^2=.07$ . Positive-thought generation was also significantly higher among *TDS* groups (adjusted  $M=2.20$ ,  $SE=0.205$ ) than *AC 360°* groups (adjusted  $M=0.92$ ,  $SE=0.218$ ),  $F(1, 122)=18.20$ ,  $p<.001$ ,  $\eta^2=.06$ .

### Relevant Negative Thoughts

Negative-thought generation was significantly higher in the *AC 360°* groups (adjusted  $M=0.90$ ,  $SE=0.118$ ) than in *TDS groups* (adjusted  $M=0.19$ ,  $SE=0.111$ ),  $F(1, 127)=19.03$ ,  $p<.001$ ,  $\eta^2=.09$ . There was no main effect for ability on negative thoughts,  $F(1, 127)=0.78$ ,  $p>.35$ , or on the ability-by-message interaction  $F(1, 127)=0.00$ ,  $p>.95$  (Table 1).

### Source Likeability

In response to RQ3, it appears that audiences found Jon Stewart and Anderson Cooper equally likeable across all four groups with no main effects emerging for source likeability,  $F(1, 127)=0.296$ ,  $p=.829$ .

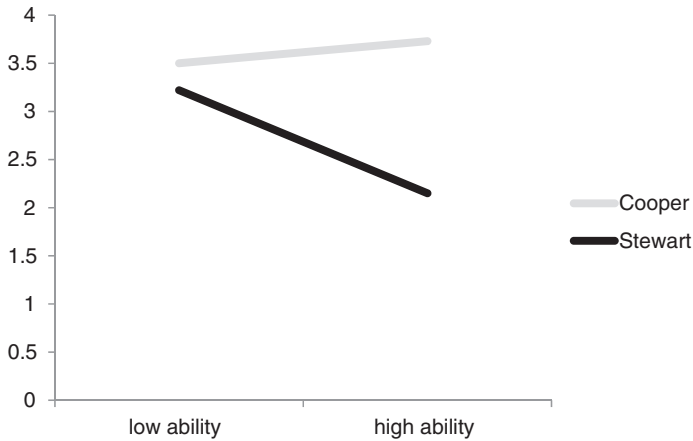
### Source Credibility

*AC 360°* participants rated Anderson Cooper as being significantly more credible (adjusted  $M=3.50$ ,  $SE=0.089$ ) than *TDS participants* rated Jon Stewart (adjusted  $M=3.20$ ,  $SE=0.083$ ),  $F(1, 127)=6.04$ ,  $p<.05$ ,  $\eta^2=.01$ . Additionally, a significant interaction between message and ability was revealed,  $F(1, 127)=4.93$ ,  $p<.05$ ,  $\eta^2=.01$ . *AC 360°* viewer ratings of Cooper (adjusted  $M=3.48$ ,  $SE=0.114$ ) and *TDS* viewer ratings of Stewart (adjusted  $M=3.43$ ,  $SE=0.112$ ) were relatively similar across the low-ability conditions, but moved in opposite directions across high-ability conditions (see Figure 1). In response to RQ4, Anderson Cooper (adjusted  $M=3.73$ ,  $SE=0.114$ ) began to separate himself in a positive manner from Jon Stewart (adjusted  $M=2.15$ ,  $SE=0.118$ ) among the high-ability groups.

### Attitudes

The message  $\times$  ability interaction term was significant in predicting attitudes toward Congress,  $F(2, 126)=4.88$ ,  $p<.01$ . *TDS* groups trended upward with more favorable attitudes of Congress in the high-ability group (*TDS-low-ability*—adjusted  $M=2.25$ ,  $SE=0.283$ ; *TDS-high-ability*—adjusted  $M=3.11$ ,  $SE=0.286$ ), while the *AC 360°* groups trended downward with less favorable

Figure 1

*Ability by message interaction for source credibility*

attitudes toward Congress reported among the high-ability group (*AC 360°*-low-ability-adjusted  $M = 2.47$ ,  $SE = 0.273$ ; *AC 360°*-high-ability-adjusted  $M = 2.11$ ,  $SE = 0.325$ ; see Figure 2). In response to RQ 5, higher levels of ability resulted in more negative attitudes toward Congress among *AC 360°* viewers, but more positive attitudes of Congress for late-night political comedy. This finding raises the possibility that the increased cognitive activity among high-ability *TDS* viewers was not allocated to scrutinizing the message about Congress. If, as Young (2008) hypothesized, *TDS* viewers devoted more resources to the humor component, then higher levels of cognitive elaboration might not translate into more message scrutiny. Rather, those resources could have been expended on interpreting the satire. To further explore this potential explanation, a post hoc analysis was conducted (below).

### Post Hoc Analysis

An OLS regression was conducted with individual-level negative-thought generation as the independent variable and attitude toward Congress as the dependent variable. Controlling for demographics and political ideology, results indicate a significant negative relationship between the variables. Specifically, fewer negative thoughts led to more favorable attitudes toward Congress  $\beta = -.43$  ( $SE = 0.19$ ),  $p < .05$  (Table 2). Considering Stewart's decreased source credibility among high-ability *TDS* viewers, it is also conceivable that participants in this group began discounting the messages, reducing them to jokes delivered by a comedian (Nabi et al., 2007). To test this alternative explanation, additional regressions were run. However, there was no direct effect for source credibility on negative thoughts  $\beta = -.04$  ( $SE = 0.048$ ),

Figure 2  
Ability by message interaction for congress attitude

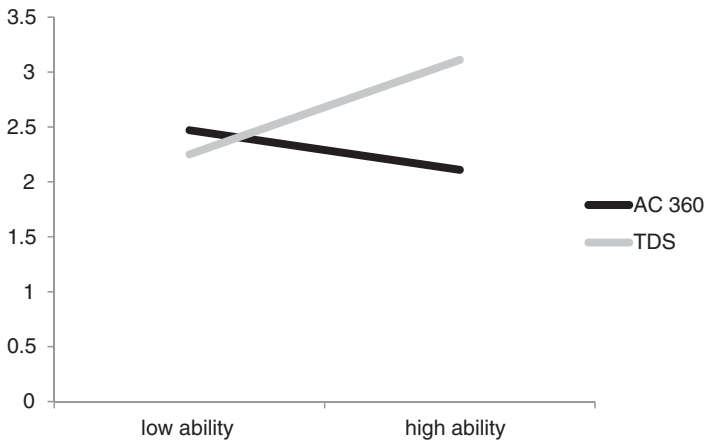


Table 2  
Regression Model Predicting Attitudes Toward Congress

Variable	Upon entry B (SE)	Final B (SE)
<b>Block 1</b>		
Constant	2.366 (0.647)	2.070 (0.630)
Household income	-0.106 (0.114)	-0.092 (0.111)
Education (grad degree coded high)	-0.047 (.130)*	-0.209 (0.127)
Biological sex (male coded high)	-0.261 (0.283)	-0.152 (0.274)
Age	-0.043 (0.011)***	-0.040 (0.011)**
Political ideology (Cons coded high)	0.119 (.072)	0.126 (0.070)
<b>Block 2</b>		
Related negative thoughts		-0.430 (0.196)*

Note. Unstandardized OLS regression B's are reported (standard errors in parentheses).  
\* $p < .05$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ ; \*\*\* $p < .001$ ;  $N = 132$ .

$p = .317$ . Likewise, no significant interaction emerged between source credibility and negative thoughts on opinions of Congress  $\beta = -.08$  ( $SE = 0.123$ ),  $p = .495$ .

### Discussion

The purpose of this study was to extend what is known about cognitive responses to political entertainment media and their role in shaping micro-level opinion. Recapping the findings, increased ability led to more issue-relevant thoughts. Additionally, late-night political comedy viewers generated more



positive and less negative thoughts about Congress than did political news viewers. Conversely, political news viewing led to more message-consistent (negative) thoughts about Congress than did late-night political comedy. Interestingly, these results challenge earlier research findings that concluded political entertainment audiences automatically discount messages (Nabi et al., 2007). Rather, late-night audiences thought *more* about the content compared with their news-viewing counterparts. However, the increased thinking did not translate into increased scrutiny of the intended target of the message (i.e., Congress). Rather, the *TDS* viewers produced more issue-relevant thoughts, but fewer message-consistent (negative) thoughts. Furthermore, the high-ability *TDS* viewers rated Stewart as a less credible source for political information than their high-ability *AC 360°* counterparts.

Clearly, one's level of elaboration does result in significant differences that affect source and message target evaluations. Specifically, higher levels of ability produced lower perceptions of Stewart's source credibility, but failed to produce more message-consistent (negative) thoughts. Instead, an interesting paradox occurred where high-ability late-night comedy viewers produced more thoughts about the issue yet less of them specifically scrutinized the intended message target (i.e., less negative thoughts about Congress). The combination of increased thinking (overall) coupled with decreased scrutiny of the message target, suggests that viewers' were either allocating their cognitive resources differently than those in the high-ability *AC 360°* viewing group or scrutinizing something other than the intended message target (e.g., perhaps the decreased source credibility caused them to discount the message more). Yet, the post hoc analysis found no evidence of direct or indirect effects of source perceptions on negative thoughts. Thus, reduced source credibility did not appear to play a significant role among the high-ability late-night comedy viewers. However, the individual-level analysis did reveal a significant inverse relationship between one's level of negative thoughts and his/her attitude toward Congress. Specifically, fewer negative thoughts resulted in relatively more favorable attitudes toward Congress. These findings suggest the underlying mechanism was likely reduced message scrutiny resulting from increased thinking about the satire component (e.g., Young, 2008) as opposed to message discounting in conjunction with reduced credibility (e.g., Nabi et al., 2007).

Additionally, message format significantly affects how one processes and forms opinions in response to political news and information. Specifically, key differences between the *AC 360°* and *TDS* groups emerged for levels of issue-relevant thinking, source perceptions, and attitudes toward Congress. Overall, the political news groups held more favorable perceptions of Anderson Cooper as a credible political information source than did late-night political comedy groups for Jon Stewart. However, this difference was only meaningful among the high-ability groups. Inattentive viewers found no meaningful difference

between Jon Stewart and Anderson Cooper in terms of source perceptions. Put differently, participants did not differentiate between Cooper and Stewart in terms of credibility until they began thinking more about the issue. Because lower levels of elaboration tend to occur more often (Eagly & Chaiken, 1993; Petty & Cacioppo, 1996), audiences tend to rely more on superficial or peripheral processing. As such, the common viewer is likely to consider political information provided by Jon Stewart and Anderson Cooper with equal regard.

In terms of issue-relevant thinking and subsequent opinion formation, message also plays a key role. These findings suggest that late-night viewers do think about the topics and issues being presented; yet, interpreting complex and sophisticated satire impedes one's ability to properly scrutinize the underlying message. Thus, the political news viewers were better able to think about the political message, although their overall levels of thinking were lower than their late-night counterparts. The irony, of course, is that while political humor appears to increase one's thinking (when compared with political news) it does not increase thinking about the political component of the message. Still, political humor offers a powerful way to engage viewers, influence attitudes, and shape public opinion. The interaction between message and ability on opinion formation is especially relevant, suggesting that late-night comedy and political news can elicit similar (low-ability) and opposing (high-ability) effects on public opinion.

These results demonstrate the complex cognitive processes involved with attitude and micro-level opinion formation. Future work in this area should continue to examine the underlying mechanisms. The link between negative thought suppression and subsequent opinion formation offers new insights into how individuals process complex media such as political satire. Still, this is a small step. Additionally, the lack of source influence raises new questions regarding what cues are likely to influence late-night audiences, and under what conditions source credibility matters in today's mix of politics and entertainment. Work in this area should explore these questions and begin to build more robust models specific to political entertainment and/or political humor processing.

As with any single study, there were limits that merit mention. For instance, only one issue was examined and the relatively small sample was mostly White. Yet, the use of a jury pool does provide some external validity to these findings. Perhaps the most difficult issue to overcome is that entertainment and news vary in many ways, making it difficult to control all of the variables in an experimental setting. Furthermore, it is possible that findings regarding attitudes toward Congress are specific to the clips used in this study rather than the message formats. Thus, future studies should aim to disentangle this. Ideally, novel stimuli using the same content and characters would be created, manipulating only format (e.g., traditional news or satirical news).

Additionally, this study only used political interest as a covariate. Future models could include additional covariates such as political ideology and political knowledge.

Overall, this study demonstrates the significant role that political entertainment media such as late-night comedy play in shaping micro-level opinion and affecting democratic outcomes. Given the rise in political entertainment consumption and the rapidly changing media environment facing today's media producers, there is reason to suspect that these media will continue to grow in prominence and influence. As such, this study offers a theoretically grounded way to approach this line of research, setting the stage for examining the consequential effects on public opinion.

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