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Satirical Politics and Late-Night Television Ratings

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Abstract

Since the 2016 Presidential election, it has become increasingly difficult to turn on the television or log onto social media without being informed of everything happening at The White House. This includes late-night television. What once was meant for humorous jokes and celebrity interviews suitable for any pop culture follower has not gotten less funny, but nowadays, the jokes are not always jokes. Satirical news has been around for a long time with *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report*, but as of 2016, the line between fact and fiction cannot be as easily differentiated between as it used to. Now that late-night programs such as *Jimmy Kimmel Live*, *The Late Show*, *Late Night* and even Jimmy Fallon's version of *The Tonight Show* have begun making political statements and producing politically motivated skits, my research is asking the question: How do people like this mix of business and pleasure, and what impact is this shift in content having on the shows' ratings? Are people switching off their favorite late-night programs because where they once went for a break from reality became a reminder of it, instead?

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Introduction

University of Alberta Faculty of Arts professor, Serra Tinic PhD, defines satire as the “moralistic mode of address that critiques the missteps and hypocrisies of those who wield cultural and political authority (Tinic 167). This is the definition of “satire” I intend to follow throughout this study. Despite the fact that the presence of satire in the American media following the 2016 Presidential election became even more prominent in the form of pop culture references and late-night television programs, the practice of satirizing America’s political climate and government practices is nothing new. Late-night programming such as *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* (now hosted by South African comedian Trevor Noah) and *The Colbert Report* (which ended in 2014 as Colbert moved to CBS to host *The Late Show with Stephen Colbert*) served as two of the top entertainment outlets that provided news through the lens of satire and spent significant airtime discussing world events. However, as a new President was sworn into office and Colbert took the stage in a new studio, other late night hosts began to follow suit and use their platforms to discuss current events, more specifically White House events, through a satirical lens. As Colbert took over for David Letterman and Jimmy Fallon took the reigns from Jay Leno, these names became the late-night legacies for a new generation.

The Daily Show

For the purpose of this study, I will not be analyzing *The Daily Show* but rather using it as a foundation from which I will analyze other late-night television programs. *The Daily Show* began in 1996 headed by Craig Kilborn, but the focus on the show was more of a stab at uninformed Americans rather than using mockery to simultaneously humor and inform

them. When John Stewart took the reins in 1999, his focus was to use the news to inspire his segments rather than use his segments to defy the news. After the election of George W. Bush in 2000, “Stewart became laser-focused on exposing the lies of the administration and the failures of the news media to point them out” (McClennen, Maisel 82). Ironically, Stewart’s being known as the “most trusted name in fake news” (McClennen, Maisel 85), he is also deemed one of the most trusted names in news. Based on a Pew Research Center study, “Stewart landed in fourth place, tied with Brian Williams, Tom Brokaw, Dan Rather, and Anderson Cooper, as the journalist that Americans most admired” (qtd. in Compton 3).

On an episode of *The Daily Show* in 2010, Jon Stewart dedicated the full episode to speaking with 9/11 First Responders regarding a health care bill that was in jeopardy due to a Republican filibuster. The James Zadroga 9/11 Health Bill was proposed in order to provide free health coverage to first responders during the attacks that may have been exposed to harmful toxins. In 2015, after Stewart had already departed from *The Daily Show*, he returned as a guest to speak with one of the four original first responders he spoke to in 2010, and once the bill was passed that year, many credited Stewart for his activism and dedication to the cause, as he left his studio walls and traveled to The Hill in order to enact change twice. This list of creditors included Kenny Specht, founder of the New York City Firefighter Brotherhood Foundation, and former Mayor, Michael Bloomberg (McClennen, Maisel 32).

The Daily Show was a key player upon its conception in bringing a satirical twist to the news media. In an analysis on *TDS*, author Josh Compton notes that *TDS* “should be considered...something completely different: a program designed to entertain but that functions predominately as a political program,” (Compton 11).

Literature Review

For years, researchers have been conducting studies regarding whether or not satire has a place in the news media, and as times are changing, it is becoming more evident that it, indeed, does. According to McClennen and Maisel (2014), “satire is a unique form of comedy and it depends on creating a cognitive space for the audience that allows them to recognize the things they have taken for granted need to be questioned” (McClennen, Maisel 7). The authors argue that the news media has strayed so far from the news they are responsible for reporting that the mockery politics viewers are exposed to on late-night television has become “a source of information rather than just a critic of it” (McClennen, Maisel 7).

Along with *The Daily Show*, another key figure in satirical news was *The Colbert Report*. The show, which was Comedy Central’s popular spin-off to *The Daily Show*, featured Stephen Colbert acting as a right-wing political commentator whose views are always superior to anyone with doubts. While Stewart’s position on *The Daily Show* allowed him to discuss real-world issues accompanied by humor, and sometimes without such as in the example mentioned above, Colbert’s program created a caricature of the right wing media in an effort to highlight his opposing views in the form of: if you cannot beat them, join them. University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill Associate Professor Geoffrey Baym describes Colbert’s mockery take of *The O’Reilly Factor* as a postmodern style that exists in “ironic tension with its deeper and decidedly modernist agenda” (Baym 141). He also makes the point that “bullshit is an effect of postmodernism, parody is a modernist textual device...Colbert’s parody thus functions to pierce the O’Reillyan simulacra and to provide an anecdote of sorts to the kind of “mystification” that is woven

by so much contemporary political speech” (Baym 141). Baym discusses how behind the mock-façade of Colbert’s character lies the message that the words and messages that viewers are collecting from political commentators need to “mean something” (Baym 141) and that holding our politicians and our journalists accountable for the things they say is a fundamental step in keeping an honest news media alive.

Harvard University public policy professor Matthew Baum (2003) found that when politics are discussed in entertainment-oriented outlets, or “soft news,” attentiveness to politics increases, especially among apolitical audiences. He found that the inclusion of soft news as a reliable source of political news closes the gap between those who are heavily interested in politics and those who hold only a minimal interest. He says this is because “by piggybacking such information on entertainment content, attention to science and the environment becomes an inadvertent consequence of entertainment consumption,” (Feldman, Leiserwitz, and Maibach 39).

The Colbert Bump: Science and Satire

Similar to Stewart’s role in increasing his viewers’ awareness of The James Zadroga 9/11 Health Bill, in 2010, Stephen Colbert dedicated a portion of an episode of *The Colbert Report* to President Obama’s decision to cut a percentage of the funding for NASA’s manned space program. After an interview between Colbert and Neil deGrasse Tyson, President Obama changed his mind on the decision a week later. This is an example of the “Colbert Bump,” phrased by Stephen Colbert himself. While it is not fair to say that President Obama’s decision was based solely on this interview conducted by Colbert, it is safe to claim that this issue was brought to the forefront of public attention after being discussed

on Colbert's show, which very likely could have played a part in the President's ultimate decision. According to James Fowler, a researcher at the University of California San Diego, "anyone who comes on the *Report* receives the 'Colbert bump,' immediately vaulting the guest to stardom, fame, and fortune. Like Midas turning everything he touches to gold, Stephen Colbert can turn losers into winners, just by interviewing them on his show," (Fowler 2008). However, this is not the first time Colbert has displayed his influence. In 2006, Colbert hosted John Hall, who at the time was running to become a New York state representative. He beat his opponent, Sue Kelly, who declined to visit the show, and thus, the term was introduced. It is defined as "the boost in popularity that guests – political candidates, in particular – achieve by appearing on his show" (Feldman, Leiserowitz, Maibach 25). According to Fowler, "the Democratic congressional candidates who appeared on *The Colbert Report*'s 'Better Know a District' segment...went on to significantly out-fundraise their peers...who had not appeared on the show" (Fowler 2008). Between October 2005 and April 2010, both *The Colbert Report* and *The Daily Show* combined brought on more than thirty-six scientists, along with "public figures and advocates discussing science and environmental policy issues, including former Vice President Al Gore" (Feldman, Leiserowitz, Maibach 26).

In a study done by Feldman, Leiserowitz and Maibach (2011), it was concluded that there is a connection between viewing shows like *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report* and paying more attention to news about science and technology, specifically news about the environment. The strongest connection is between viewers with lower levels of education. These findings support Baum's "gateway" hypothesis, which states that making

information more accessible to viewers, regarding politics, the environment, etc., can promote “subsequent attention to news about these topics” (Baum 2003).

According to Nisbet and Scheufele (2009), “engaging the public is a matter of strategic communication” (qtd. in Feldman, Leiserwitz, and Maibach 2011). Nisbet and Scheufele are arguing that scientists must be made available to the public in order to speak on scientific topics in layman’s terms. This method of promoting a discussion between scientists and the public was taken most advantage of by using Comedy Central’s programming as a method of educating the public on environmental issues and scientific discoveries.

Political Literacy and Engagement in the Youth

In an effort to understand satirical media, it is fundamental to understand the differences between political and media literacy, and how the two must intertwine in order to be deemed effective when analyzing politics in a world commanded by digital technology. As defined by Pace University Communication Studies professor Satish Kolluri (2015), political literacy “provides us with abilities to understand the role of government and civil society to fully participate and engage in political and public life,” while media literacy “gives us technological competencies and intellectual tools to establish theoretical distance and come up with an immanent critique of the hegemony of that very political and public culture we inhabit” (Kolluri 3). As technology develops, it is vital that young voters and political participants understand how to use their social platforms to spread messages that lead and inspire their peers.

While *TCR* and *TDS* open up a conversation with younger viewers about how they, too, can utilize their voice via these social platforms in order to become more politically engaged, Stephen Duncombe noted that there are negative possibilities that must be considered. In an interview with Stephen Duncombe, Henry Jenkins noted that shows such as *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report* “[teach] viewers to ask skeptical questions about core political values and the rhetorical process that embody them” (Jenkins 202).

However, Jenkins notes that Duncombe also brought up a concern that these types of shows can just as easily result in the conclusion that all politics are a joke and that they are there to provide viewers with laughs (Jenkins 202). John McMurria also noted a disadvantage to people with limited access to these social platforms. He noted “an open platform does not necessarily ensure diversity” (qtd. in Jenkins 203). However, these pushes toward political activism on social media from the satirical approaches of late-night television and other media may not be as effective as they once thought. Based on a Pew Research Report, “One in ten Americans are political bystanders, who are not registered to vote, rarely or never follow current affairs and have never contributed to a campaign. Pew data [also] suggests few Americans beyond that 10 percent are serial participants in consuming or contributing to discourse around politics” (Pew Research Center 2014). Although satirical news programs are becoming more frequent, especially among the millennial generation, Pew’s research suggests that a majority of those who log in after tuning in do not offer any contribution to political conversations that take place on their news feeds.

Understanding the Effects of Satirical Politics

Despite the many positive outcomes that have arisen from heightened political awareness at the hands of late-night hosts, such as Colbert's stance on Barack Obama's decision to cut back funding on NASA programming and Stewart's heavy involvement with The James Zadroga 9/11 Health Bill and his commitment to getting the bill passed, studies have shown how a reliance on late night television's satirical news commentary as a primary source of news has decreased viewers' trust in the American government and politicians. According to researchers, political programming such as *The Daily Show* promotes a "culture of cynicism" (Hart and Hartelius, 2007) that shows the results of these types of shows constantly making fun of traditional news outlets and political figures as having "a generally negative influence...on attitudes toward the political system" (Xenos, Moy and Becker 48). In a study done by Baumgartner and Morris (2006) where the researchers showed participants clips from *The Daily Show* and *CBS Evening News*, they concluded that they "depressed not only attitudes toward the political figures depicted in the clips, but also participants' faith in the electoral system and their trust in the news media to provide fair and accurate coverage of political events" (Baumgartner and Morris, 2006).

When analyzing the use of satire in politics, it is important to understand the difference between satire and irony. In comparison with the definition for satire that this review is using, irony is defined as saying something and meaning the opposite (McClennen and Maisel, 108). There is a gap between those who understand irony and can identify when it is being used and those who cannot. McClennen and Maisel (2014) state that irony is so important because it leaves the audience in control of interpreting the underlying message. However, this can become dangerous for someone who is unable to differentiate

between the two. In this case, someone watching a satirical news program could possibly believe that the true messages being communicated to viewers, accompanied by humor for entertainment value, are exaggerations or entirely false claims.

The distinction between programming that is satire and mockery is important when considering the message behind *The Daily Show* and its satirical take toward politics and a show such as *South Park* where there is no clear political agenda or message the writers of the show are trying to get across, but rather, they are in the business of making fun of anyone and anything. Gray, Jones, and Thompson further explain that “satire is provocative, not dismissive – a crucial point that critics typically ignore when assessing its role in public discourse” (qtd. in McClennen and Maisel 113).

As mentioned above, Roderick Hart and Johanna Hartelius criticized Stewart in the past, stating he “has engaged in unbridled political cynicism,” (qtd. in McClennen and Maisel 114). They both describe how Stewart’s cynical nature toward politics is in the interest of earning a paycheck rather than educating his viewers, and they raise a question that is important to consider when analyzing satire: are these commentators cynics or skeptics? According to their definition, “skeptics are buoyed up by the need to know...but unlike the cynic, the skeptic can have faith in human institutions because they are fashioned by group effort, not by lone individuals,” (qtd. in McClennen and Maisel 114). Just as Colbert famously played a caricature on *The Colbert Report*, sometimes messages can be lost or misinterpreted due to the sender playing a character.

According to Gray, Jones and Thompson, “parody aims to provoke reflection and re-evaluation of how the targeted texts or genre works,” (qtd. in McClennen and Maisel 114). This allows audiences to analyze parodies and delve deeper for a meaning that would

provide commentary on relevant issues in politics, the environment, etc. Despite any cynicism that becomes prominent on television, the importance of staying engaged and keeping up with what is happening, even if under the guise of humor, is unparalleled, especially in the age of ‘fake news.’

Late-Night Television, Satire, and Today

Moving forward past the eras of Jon Stewart’s *Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report*, we are now entering an entirely different playing field in American politics. Trevor Noah, Jimmy Fallon, Jimmy Kimmel, Seth Meyers, Stephen Colbert, James Corden, Bill Maher, John Oliver, Samantha Bee, Chelsea Handler and Conan O’Brien are just some of the key players in the late-night television scene, and while Comedy Central no longer is the primary host of late-night satire (apart from Trevor Noah’s *The Daily Show* and *The Opposition with Jordan Klepper*), politics is one topic that grows in relevance every day to the point where it would almost seem irresponsible if the late-night media did not satirize the Donald Trump administration as late-night hosts have for several administrations before them.

Late night’s persistence to provide viewers a detailed and timely account of the Trump administration’s policies and activities has proven to be disastrous for others. Tim Grierson raised the question: “why flip on a comedy show to be further incensed and depressed? That rationale has been proven false by Fallon’s slipping ratings. But it’s also been debunked by the miraculous rebirth of Jimmy Kimmel” (Grierson 2017).

According to *The New York Times*, “[Jimmy Fallon] does deploy an impression of Mr. Trump, but it lacks bite. His inability to capitalize on the political moment has been an outlier for the network, which has had late-night ratings successes thanks to caustic

sketches centered on the president on *Saturday Night Live*, not to mention Seth Meyers's lawyerly satirical segments on *Late Night* at 12:35 a.m." (Koblin 2017). However, Stephen Colbert has been seeing an increase in ratings. In November 2015, Fallon held a 500,000 person lead in viewership over Colbert, but in November 2017, Colbert was only behind *The Tonight Show* by 57,000 viewers which is stated as "the closest the CBS host has come to Mr. Fallon among 18- to 49-year-olds in the 27 months the two have competed head-to-head" (Koblin 2017).

In 2016, NBC's Fallon-led programming had a lead of 1 million over ABC's *Jimmy Kimmel Live!* However, Kimmel's show is now averaging 2.4 million viewers following closely behind Fallon's 2.6 million average (Koblin 2017). Kimmel's programming did see a rise when rather than satirizing the current administration, he made a desperate plea to the White House to reconsider repealing the Affordable Care Act in 2017.

Late night hosts have received backlash from all sides due to the increasingly heavy political content in their programming. However, some see it as an exciting new wave of politics and entertainment, once again, combined as a package deal. Former *New York Times* writer Bill Carter stated in an interview that "there's no example of any kind of sustained attack like this on a politician...there's a horde of writers writing jokes about Donald Trump every single night...[this is] absolutely uncharted territory" (Rutenberg 2017).

Methodology

In this study, I felt it important to analyze people's opinions on late night television hosts taking a satirical approach to the Trump administration. However, I felt it equally

important to supplement these opinions with Nielsen ratings to analyze whether there were any connections between the responses I received from participants and the ratings I received from Nielsen.

The first thing that I did in my research was I conducted a survey consisting of 14 questions that I distributed through several outlets in order to gauge a varied and diverse collection of responses. I asked participants to indicate which political party they identify with, whether or not they voted in the 2016 Presidential election and for whom if so, whether they watch late night hosts and which hosts in particular, whether they take an interest in politics and whether this interest has resulted in a heightened awareness due to late night programming, and whether they felt it important that late night hosts dedicate time during their comedic monologues to discuss current events taking place at the White House. Participants were also asked to indicate whether these hosts were unfair in their commentary of President Trump and if they thought using satire was an appropriate and effective way to discuss politics with viewers. I also asked participants to provide their ages and their geographical locations. While I felt it important to distribute this survey to my peers at Pace University, it was of equal importance to me to distribute the survey as far across the country as possible. After a successful distribution effort via Facebook and Twitter, 300 participants ranging from coast to coast participated in the study. Studying the ratings of these late night shows was a vital component of my study and conclusions, however, I utilized social media to collect a diverse pool of participants in order to obtain points of views from people of all different political beliefs and late night viewing habits. Starting as a Facebook post and a single tweet, the survey did end up becoming somewhat of a snowball effect, where once users started sharing my posts, the original posts would

then be extended to the sharers' entire networks, regardless of if I was connected to them or not. This enabled my survey to branch out beyond participants that I had a direct connection with or with whom I shared a network. However, a healthy sample of my participants are directly connected to me in some way as my initial post was only distributed to my personal network and to peers of mine at Pace University, but through the "sharing" and "retweet" features on the respective social networks, I was able to reach farther than my personal audience.

To supplement my survey responses, I pulled Nielsen ratings from five distinct weeks during the Trump presidency that particularly stood out in the media to indicate whether my survey responses correlated with the nationwide ratings of these programs. I pulled ratings from *The Tonight Show with Jimmy Fallon* (NBC), *Jimmy Kimmel Live* (ABC), *The Late Show with Stephen Colbert* (CBS), and *Late Night with Seth Meyers* (NBC). I used Nielsen to pull ratings for the following weeks during the Trump presidency: **January 16-20, 2017** (The week of Donald Trump's Inauguration), **May 1-5, 2017** (The week that Jimmy Kimmel revealed to his audience that his son had heart surgery; he used this anecdote as a platform to discuss his opposition to the House Republicans' efforts to repeal and replace the Affordable Care Act, put into place during the Obama administration), **June 5-9, 2017** (The week that former FBI Director James Comey testified before the Senate Intelligence Committee regarding Russia's interference with Trump's election), **January 29-February 2, 2018** (The week that Jimmy Kimmel invited DACA recipients onto his show and has them confront anti-DACA believers), and **February 26-March 2, 2018** (The week after the Winter Olympics. Also, this was the first week that all shows, except for *Jimmy Kimmel Live* which aired repeat episodes every day that week, were on the air after

the February 14 shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School. This resulted in a nationwide debate on America's gun policies).

Since Donald Trump was elected President of the United States, both Stephen Colbert and Jimmy Kimmel have used their platforms to satirize Trump's presidency and his administration with an underlying message of enacting change. For example, Colbert, along with making jokes about Trump during every monologue and segment where it will fit during *Late Night*, branched out from his late night hosting job and developed Showtime's *Our Cartoon President*, an animated adult series mocking Trump during his time in The White House. Kimmel, on the other hand, as mentioned above, has spoken out against Trump's proposed repeal of the Affordable Care Act by opening up about his own son's heart surgery and his empathy for families who do not have the funds to pay for such procedures. He also, also mentioned above, invited DACA (Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals) recipients to speak with people who are anti-DACA on his show. However, Jimmy Fallon has been criticized in the past for taking it easy on Donald Trump's presidency by simply either not discussing some of Trump's policies or by brushing over them behind the armor of a harmless joke. For example, during Trump's campaign in September 2016, Fallon hosted Trump on his show and became a viral topic of conversation when he tousled Trump's hair. In an October 2017 interview with *Sunday Today's* Willie Geist, Fallon was asked why he did not attack Trump the way his fellow late night hosts notoriously did. His response was this: "It's just not what I do...I think it would be weird for me to start doing it now. I don't really even care that much about politics. I've got to be honest. I love pop culture more than I love politics. I'm just not that brain." – Jimmy Fallon (Pulled from *The Huffington Post*). In order to accurately gauge these claims against Fallon, I analyzed

segments from each episode from each week listed above. In total, I tallied the minutes that Fallon spent talking about Trump in a total of 25 episodes. In an effort to compare my findings with a host who famously denounces the Trump administration, I conducted the same 25-episode analysis with host Seth Meyers on *Late Night*, as an effort to remain within NBC so that the difference in content cannot be confused with political influence from the shows' home networks. Since there is no academically accurate method for analyzing jokes based on severity, I used amount of time spent discussing the Trump administration as my basis for analysis.

After conducting my reviews of the episodes of both shows, I matched them with their corresponding ratings. From there, I compared and contrasted my Nielsen findings with my survey results to see if there were any parallels to be drawn between the two.

Findings

Upon completion of the survey I distributed, 300 people opted to participate (Appendix A). 82.21% of participants were between the age of 18-24 and 53.38% of participants identified as a Democrat, while 19.50% identified as Independent and 13.51% identified as Republican. While this is not representative of the country as a whole, it is important to consider that the majority of respondents are within the millennial age range and are part of the target audience that late night television markets to. Only 67.11% of the survey takers indicated that they voted in the 2016 Presidential election, with Hillary Clinton receiving 53.24% of these votes. Since the majority of survey takers who voted, voted for Clinton, it can be inferred that this survey reached an audience who would not necessarily take offense to late night's anti-Trump rhetoric. This proves to be true in my

finding that 72.15% of participants indicated they felt that late night's increased satirical takes on American politics was important. 72.48% indicated that they found comedy to be an easier medium for discussing politics because it is more relatable, more entertaining or more trustworthy than mainstream news sources. This survey finding is well represented in Kolluri's research. He states, "the use of political humor...to reconstruct and deconstruct the political and mainstream news media establishments became fairly successful in drawing in otherwise disengaged young people into the political process," (Kolluri 16). However, only 58.70% of respondents indicated they watch late night television more often than traditional news outlets such as Fox News and CNN. This creates a healthy balance between participants who view late night television with a political lens or without and those who view mainstream media in an effort to hear the facts and nothing more.

Although Nielsen ratings showed that Jimmy Fallon's ratings have fallen over time, the survey does not say the same. Jimmy Fallon was the most watched late night host out of all participants who indicated they watched late night television, with 25% responding that they regularly viewed Fallon's programming. This finding suggests that although Fallon tends to steer clear of political matters, viewers still tune into his programming more often than they do Jimmy Kimmel, who came in second at 14.79%.

As a whole, the findings from my survey suggest that although the majority of participants do find satire to be an easier tool for understanding politics, this does not disqualify the fact that mainstream news sources are seen as important due to the significant drop between those who found satire easier to digest and those who actually watch late night television more than they watch the news. Although 68.8% of participants indicated that late night hosts' increased dedication to satirizing politics has heightened

their awareness of the political climate in America, this number is higher than the percentage of participants who actually voted in the election. When compared to the fact that 85.91% of participants agree that late night, as a whole, has become more political, it becomes clear that not everyone is convinced by this satirical lens placed on politics or they simply were not paying to the underlying message of the comedian's satire. Regardless, to reference Baum's study once more, lens or no lens, late night is closing a gap between those who are and are not actively interested in keeping up with current politics (Baum 2003).

While my survey suggests that a fourth of participants primarily tune into Fallon's programming opposed to his more political counterparts, I felt it important to analyze Fallon and his fellow NBC late night host, Seth Meyers, to determine how much less time Fallon dedicates to political commentary in comparison. For both *Late Night with Seth Meyers* and *The Tonight Show with Jimmy Fallon*, I analyzed the shows' popular segments, including their opening monologues, for each episode during each week studied above. To reiterate, to avoid any research conflict regarding network preferences regarding political content, I chose to analyze the two shows that air on NBC and quantify and qualify each show's political content, e.g. attacks on Donald Trump and his administration. I found it important to decipher between whether criticisms of Donald Trump were in the form of passing jokes or if they were the topic of the hosts' monologues. I also recorded the amount of time Trump was the center of discussion during these mentions. In my research, I found that the majority of Trump mentions and discussion points from Fallon were simply jokes, always followed with a mock accent or a punch line, and they never lasted very long. However, in my review of Meyers' programming, I found that while he joked many times at Trump's expense, they were immersed in what usually was a 10-minute monologue where

Trump and/or his administration were the only point of focus. I noticed a large difference in the nature and length of Trump mentions in the two programs.

In my episode analysis (Appendix C), Fallon made Trump jokes in 18/25 episodes. In 6 episodes, the show either did not tape or he did not mention Trump, and in 1 episode, Trump was the topic of discussion rather than a punch line. Out of all 25 episodes reviewed, Fallon spent a maximum of 57.5 minutes discussing Donald Trump. Without commercials, each episode runs about 52 minutes. So, Fallon discussed Trump and/or his administration for 57.5/1,300 minutes, or about 4.4% of his time on-air. On the other hand, Meyers incorporated his jokes within his Trump-themed monologues. This resulted in longer discussions focused on the President. Episodes of *Late Night*, without commercials, run around 55 minutes. Including the many days in this research where Meyers was either off the air or a repeat episode was aired in the place of a new one, he spent a maximum of 137 minutes discussing Trump, often at much more length than Fallon. This means that Meyers spoke about Trump to his audience for 137/1,375 minutes of his programming over 25 episodes, or about 10% of the time. Meyers' amount of minutes discussing, whether as a satirical news story or as a punch line to a joke, more than doubled that of Fallon's, which contributes to the criticisms that Fallon has received for failing to call Trump out on the same policies as the other late night hosts in his league.

These findings suggest that since more survey takers opted to watch Fallon opposed to Meyers, Kimmel or Colbert, political commentary is not the only thing viewers are interested in listening to when tuning in to late night. However, since my survey sample was much smaller than the actual amount of viewers who watch late night television, I used Nielsen ratings to decipher whether Fallon's popularity in my survey would translate into

national ratings of his programming. Considering that such a large number of survey respondents indicated that satire made politics easier to absorb and that they felt it was important that hosts are discussing politics at such a long length, I analyzed these ratings expecting to find that Fallon would not score as high of ratings as I may have predicted after collecting survey results.

Using the dates I indicated to be of importance in both late night and mainstream news coverage, I looked at ratings across networks, looking at Stephen Colbert, Jimmy Fallon and Jimmy Kimmel (Appendix B). Due to the fact that *Late Night with Seth Meyers* airs re-runs on most Fridays and that it airs an hour later than its competitors, the data I collected for the program were skewed and could not be applied to my findings.

Ranging from the week of January 16, 2017 (the week of Donald Trump's inauguration) and the week of February 26, 2018 (the week after the school shooting in Parkland, FL, which prompted a nationwide discussion about gun laws and the NRA), Fallon's ratings dropped almost consistently starting at 2.85 million viewers on average to 2.62 million viewers. While Jimmy Fallon did pledge to walk in the 2018 March for Our Lives in honor of those students who lost their lives, he did not play into the same critiques of the NRA and the Trump administration that his counterparts did. For example, Seth Meyers opened his show on February 26th with an eleven-minute monologue denouncing the NRA through a discussion regarding gun control, similar to comments made by Colbert. Jimmy Kimmel, however, aired only repeat episodes during this week, which effectively hurt his ratings for this week in particular. Jimmy Kimmel's ratings fluctuated during this week staying within a healthy 1.95-2.5 million range, only dropping during this week of reruns. Stephen Colbert, however, who is famous for his political insight, especially after

his time on *The Colbert Report*, found great success during his discussions of the Trump administration. During the week of Donald Trump's inauguration, Colbert started out with 2.84 million viewers, and ever since, he has only risen, with a total of 3.15 million viewers during the last week researched (February 26, 2018).

These findings suggest that although the survey results found Jimmy Fallon to be the most popular late night host, a strong connection was found between the fact that over 70% of participants found importance in commentary such as Colbert's and his steady increase in ratings over the first year of Donald Trump's presidency. So, while Fallon seemed to be the more popular choice, the satirical lens portrayed by Colbert proved to be more of a draw for audiences. Unfortunately, my research on Jimmy Kimmel's ratings fell directly in the middle. His ratings were not at their peak like Colbert's and they also did not beat Fallon's. This means that even though my survey indicated a heavy interest in political satire as entertainment, that preference did not translate onto paper based on the fact that Fallon's ratings continued to remain above Kimmel's, despite Fallon's consistent decrease.

Conclusion

Based on the research I have conducted, it is difficult to accurately gauge how much of an impact is had on the transformed world of late-night television, making the shift from a news outlet for pop culture to an outlet for covering The White House. However, based on the responses from my survey and the ratings pulled from Nielsen, I conclude that politics discussed through a satirical lens, or the lack thereof, can have an effect on late night television ratings. The importance of discussing politics within the entertainment realm was deemed important and effective by the majority of my survey's participants, and

this was directly represented in the fact that Colbert's ratings steadily increased while Fallon's did the opposite. When analyzing the results of my survey, I also found it important to note that, despite the fact that the late night shows the survey indicated are hosted by predominately liberal individuals, and while 53.38% of participants identified as Democrat, over 70% answered that they felt it was important that late night comedians bring politics into their programming, even when the majority (if not all) is discussing Donald Trump and the GOP in a negative light. From this, I infer that the state of American politics in 2018 is easier digested by most in the form of a joke.

However, there were significant factors that limited my research and what I was able to interpret with my findings. For example, based on the dates that I felt were important to research, I came across a poor reflection of *Jimmy Kimmel Live's* true performance. In the interest of keeping my research consistent, I did not alter the dates on which I pulled Kimmel's ratings, and this reflected two complete weeks where programming for *Kimmel* was not broadcast in the way it usually is. From May 2-5, 2017, Kimmel took a leave of absence from the show and invited celebrities to fill in for him while he was away. From February 26-March 2, 2018, the show aired only repeats, which reflected much lower ratings than the program is used to. Both of these factors reflected dips in Kimmel's ratings that were not common during weeks where Kimmel was the host of a full week's worth of new content. Also, I used *Late Night* as a platform to provide concrete evidence of Fallon's aversion to discussing Donald Trump to significant lengths. However, since Meyers' programming takes place an hour after Kimmel, Colbert and Fallon, it would not be consistent and applicable research to hold them to the same standards.

To conclude, *The Late Show with Stephen Colbert* had a viewership of 2.84 million viewers during the week of Donald Trump's inauguration, and since then, the show's ratings have been on the incline, with the latest research placing *Colbert* with 3.15 million viewers during the week of February 26-March 2, 2018. *The Tonight Show*, however, has seen an almost consistent decrease in viewership in this same time frame, dropping from 2.85 million viewers to only 2.62 million viewers. *Jimmy Kimmel Live*, on the other hand, remained within a healthy 2.1 – 2.5 million-viewership range despite weeks where programming was altered. While Fallon's numbers continue to beat Kimmel's, Fallon's numbers are steadily falling while Kimmel's are remaining steady. These findings are consistent with the public opinion survey that I distributed. The majority of the participants were within the 18-49 age range targeted by advertisers, and each question regarding political representation in late-night television were all met with at least 50% affirmative responses. For example, the survey finds that 68.8% of participants feel that late night television has heightened their sense of what is going on in American politics. This is consistent with the fact that nearly 60% of responses indicated that the participants do not feel that the liberal narrative displayed and utilized by most late night hosts is unfair in its depiction of Donald Trump. However, the remaining 40% did feel hosts to be unfair or were indifferent. This connects to Fallon's popularity in my survey, due to his near anti-political stance. My survey definitely favored Jimmy Fallon in the responses, but with near 75% of participants absorbing politics through satire than through news, it can be inferred that Fallon is not the only host the participants are viewing.

Gray, Jones, and Thompson reference the depth of humor and why viewers are intrigued by receiving their news from a satirical angle, "A closer look at humor reveals a

form that is always quintessentially about that which it seems to be an escape form, and hence a form that is always already analytical, critical, rational, albeit to varying degrees,” (Gray, Jones, and Thompson 8). As the Trump administration continues forward with their agendas, it can only be expected that more late night comedians will come out of the woodwork. For example, both Samantha Bee and Jordan Klepper (who both served as *Daily Show* correspondents) were offered television shows of their own within a year of Donald Trump’s inauguration. This increase in politically motivated talks shows could be used to inspire research on the responsibilities of these hosts to remain factual in the face of satire and how political activism in 18-49 year olds has been affected in more ways than television ratings, such as by analyzing the motives and drives between the marches and causes that have become so widely spread around the world. In terms of possibilities for extended research, these age demographics found within the survey could be collected in a way that allows researchers to know from which age group the other answers came from. In my study, I limited myself by not formatting my survey in a way that allows me that inside look, so if this study were ever to inspire further research, that cross-analysis within the survey would be a great place to start. Seeing humor as something more than a mindless escape is critical in understanding how viewers are drawn to late night for more than a laugh. They are drawn to these programs to listen to a different viewpoint on White House policies that affect each and every one of them, and slowly but consistently, ratings are reflecting this, and after surveying people, the public does know that late night has taken a shift in a more political direction. That is not to say that Johnny Carson and David Letterman did not have their fair share of political discussion and satirical monologues, however, in the age of the Trump administration, late night hosts and

writers alike are doing everything in their powers to ensure that Americans stay informed regardless of the channel they turn to after flipping on their televisions. Information from any source, as long as it is true, is better than none at all, and that is the important role that late night television has and will continue to play as years pass.

In conclusion, I can, with confidence say that the increased presence of political commentary on late night television has made an impact with these shows' audiences. However, through my research, I was unable to determine whether or not political satire was the primary reason for Colbert's ratings increase and Fallon's decrease because of the many factors that need to be taken into consideration when analyzing *why* someone chooses to watch a certain program over another. If satire was the only reason people decided to tune in, Jimmy Kimmel's ratings would have been undoubtedly higher than they were. However, the platform that late night hosts use to voice their opinions and promote political agendas they are passionate about has always been in effect, whether it's by going out and fighting for change like Stewart, or by having such an impact as Colbert that a guest's popularity can increase by a single appearance, and despite the public's opinion on the current President's administration or how late night hosts navigate the world's breaking news, these voices have been and will continue to be used to spread awareness and enact change.

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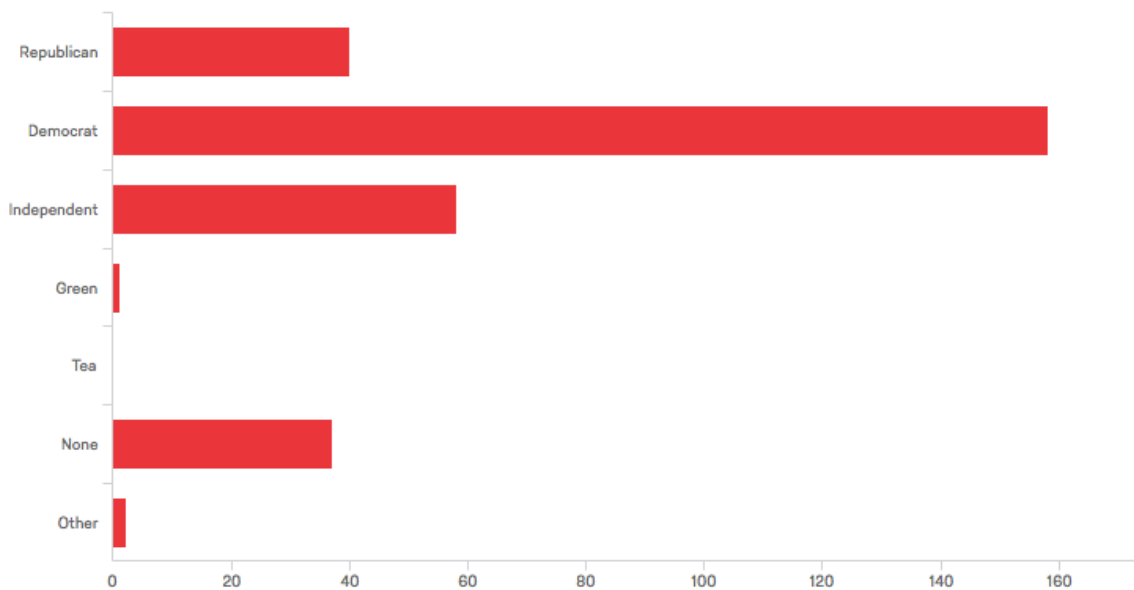
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Appendix A

#	Field	Choice Count
1	18-24	82.21% 245
2	25-34	1.68% 5
3	35-44	4.03% 12
4	45-54	3.69% 11
5	55-64	4.03% 12
6	65-75	2.35% 7
7	75 Years or Older	2.01% 6
		298

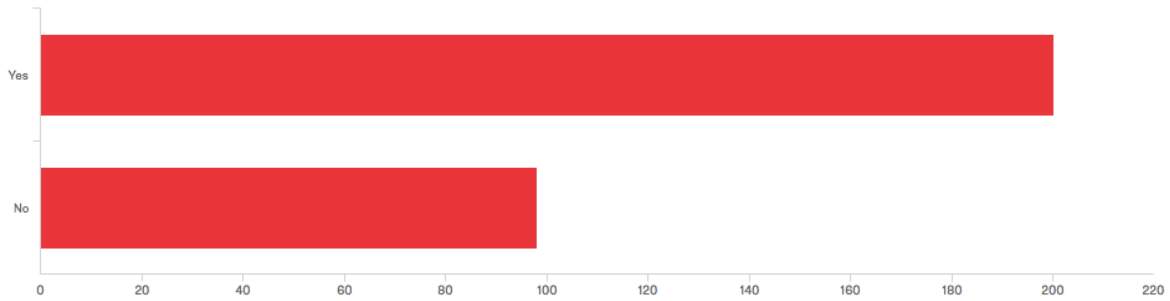
Q3 - With which political party do you identify?

Page Options ▾



Q4 - Did you vote in the 2016 Presidential Election?

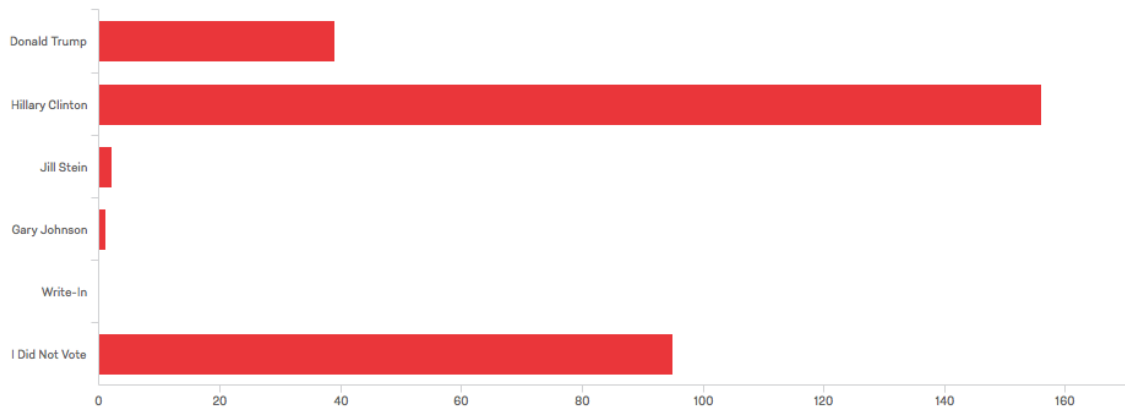
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#	Field	Choice Count
1	Yes	67.11% 200
2	No	32.89% 98

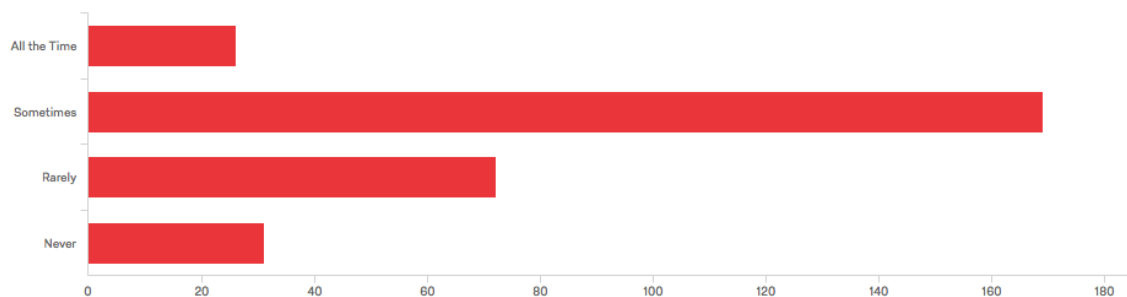
Q5 - For whom did you vote in the 2016 Presidential Election?

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Q6 - Do you watch late-night television? (Ex. Late Night, The Tonight Show, etc.)

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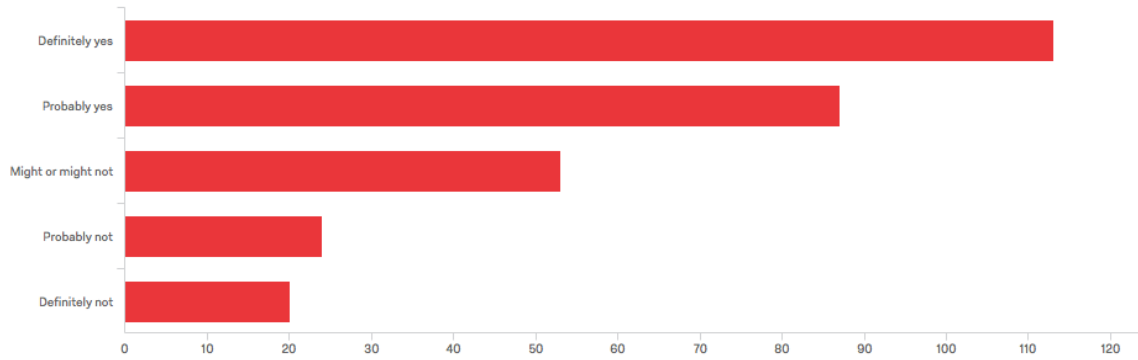


1	Jimmy Fallon (NBC)	25.00%	191
2	Seth Meyers (NBC)	9.82%	75
3	Conan O'Brien (TBS)	2.88%	22
4	Jimmy Kimmel (ABC)	14.79%	113
5	Daily Show with Trevor Noah (Comedy Central)	7.59%	58
6	Stephen Colbert (CBS)	9.55%	73
7	Samantha Bee (TBS)	2.75%	21
8	James Corden (CBS)	10.08%	77
9	Bill Maher (HBO)	1.44%	11
10	John Oliver (HBO)	8.38%	64
11	Other	1.96%	15
12	I Do Not Watch Late Night Television	5.76%	44

764

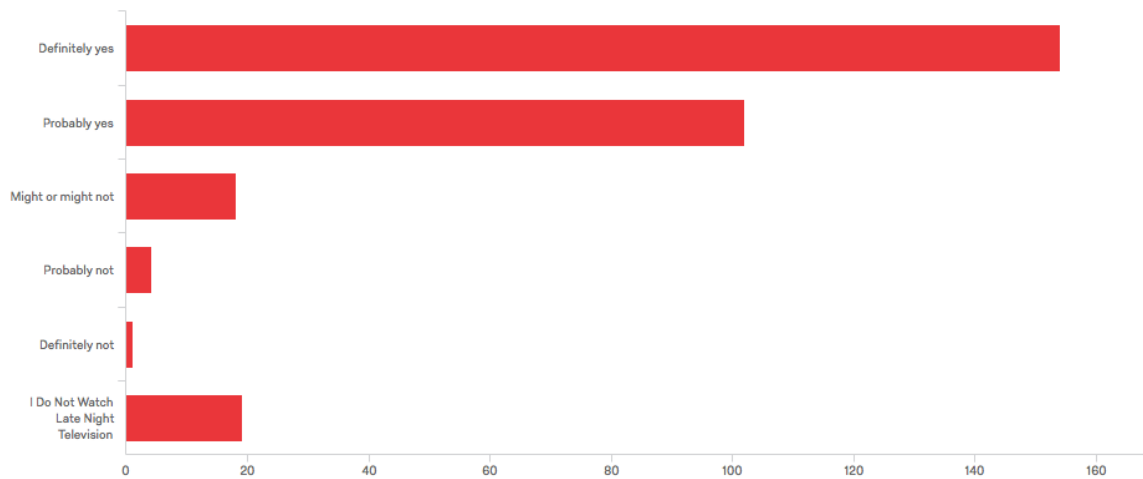
Q8 - Do you take an interest in politics? (This may include anything from discussion, community acti...

Page Options ▾



Q9 - Do you feel that, since the election, late night hosts have devoted more time to discussing politi...

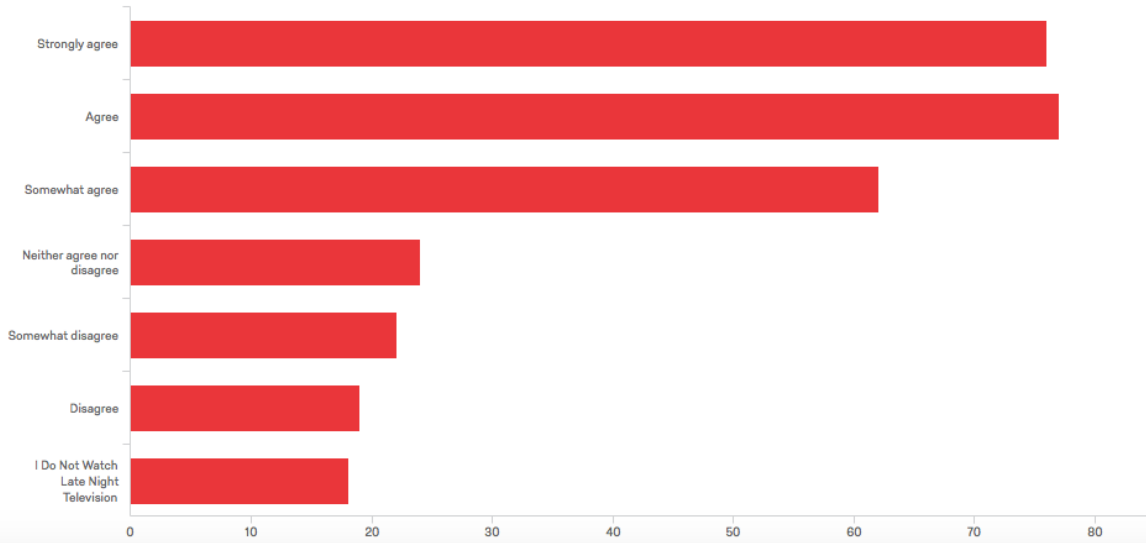
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Q10 - If so, do you feel it is important that they do so?

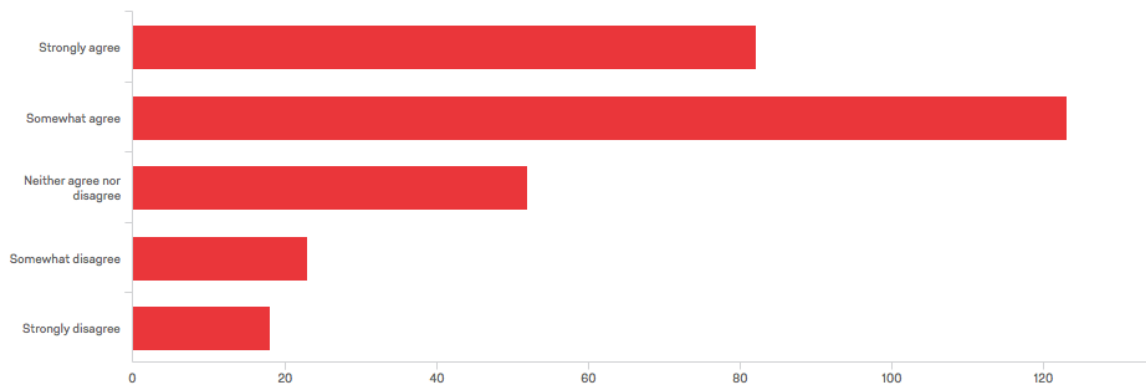
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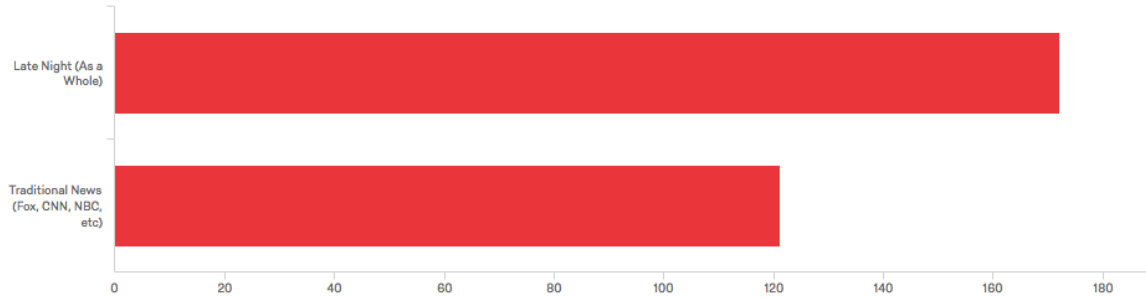
Q11 - Have late night hosts heightened your awareness of America's political climate?

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Q12 - Do you spend more time watching late night television or traditional news outlets?

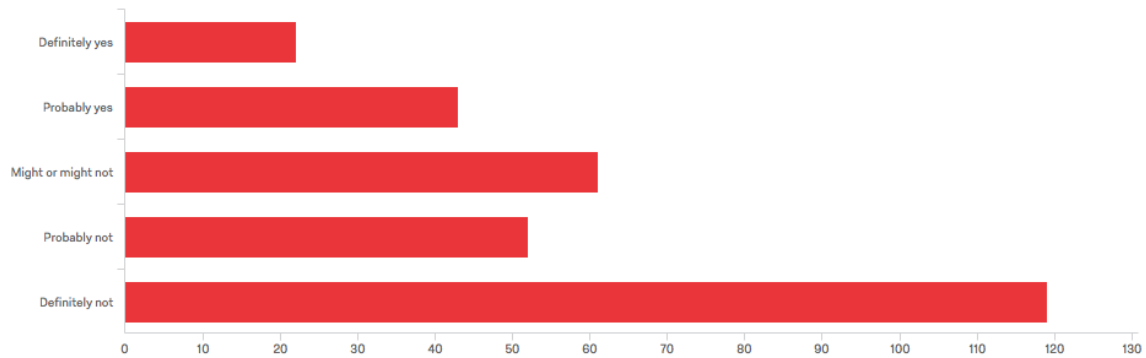
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#	Field	Choice Count
1	Late Night (As a Whole)	58.70% 172
2	Traditional News (Fox, CNN, NBC, etc)	41.30% 121

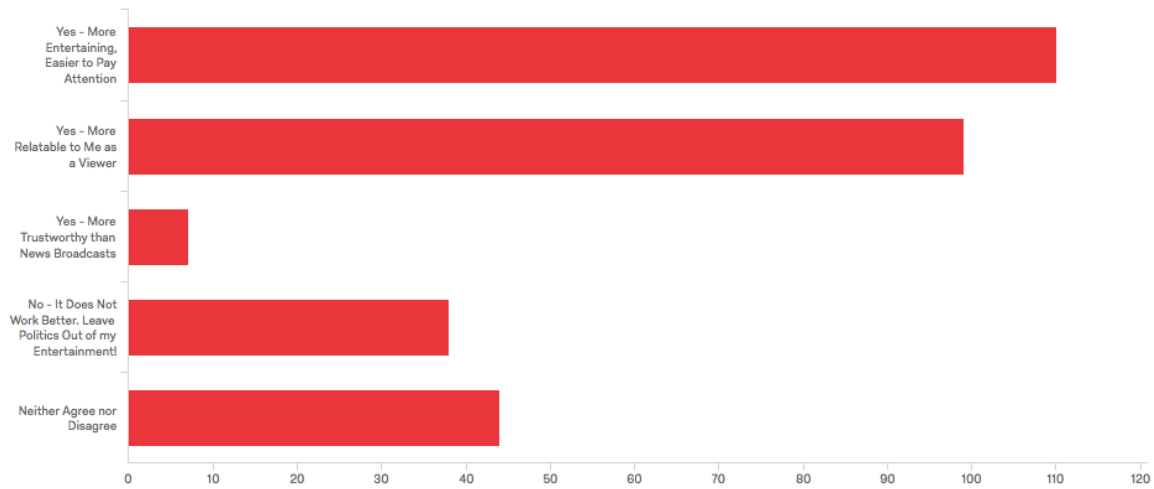
Q13 - Do you feel that late night hosts are unfair in their commentary on President Donald Trump and...

Page Options ▾



Q14 - Does comedy work as a format for discussing politics better than the news? Please pick the an...

Page Options ▾



Appendix B

Ratings from January 16-20, 2017

Show	Net	Adults 18-49, 1/16-1/20	Viewers (millions), 1/16 - 1/20	Adults 18-49 season to date	Viewers (millions) season to date
<i>11:35 p.m.</i>					
The Tonight Show Starring Jimmy Fallon	NBC	0.73/4	2.85	0.90/5	3.39
Late Show with Stephen Colbert	CBS	0.52/3	2.84	0.56/3	2.95
Jimmy Kimmel Live	ABC	0.50/3	2.26	0.50/3	2.25
<i>12:35 a.m.</i>					
Late Night with Seth Meyers -R	NBC	0.39/3	1.41	0.45/3	1.60

<http://tvbythenumbers.zap2it.com/weekly-ratings/late-night-ratings-jan-16-20-2017-the-tonight-show-takes-a-hit/>

Ratings from May 1-5, 2017

Show	Net	Adults 18-49, 5/1 - 5/5	Viewers (millions), 5/1 - 5/5	Adults 18-49 season to date	Viewers (millions) season to date
<i>11:35 p.m.</i>					
The Tonight Show Starring Jimmy Fallon	NBC	0.60/3	2.65	0.82/4	3.19
Late Show with Stephen Colbert	CBS	0.52/3	3.06	0.58/3	3.16
Jimmy Kimmel Live	ABC	0.40/2	1.95	0.48/3	2.21
<i>12:35 a.m.</i>					
Late Night with Seth Meyers	NBC	0.32/2	1.34	0.42/3	1.56

<http://tvbythenumbers.zap2it.com/weekly-ratings/late-night-ratings-may-1-5-2017-late-show-with-stephen-colbert-rises/>

Ratings from June 5-9, 2017

Show	Net	Adults 18-49, 6/5 - 6/9	Viewers (millions), 6/5 - 6/9	Adults 18-49 season to date	Viewers (millions) season to date
<i>11:35 p.m.</i>					
Jimmy Kimmel Live	ABC	0.70/4	2.50	0.49/3	2.22
The Tonight Show Starring Jimmy Fallon	NBC	0.63/4	2.57	0.80/4	3.15
Late Show with Stephen Colbert	CBS	0.48/3	3.00	0.58/3	3.23
<i>12:35 a.m.</i>					
Nightline	NBC	0.47/4	1.63	0.32/2	1.45
Late Night with Seth Meyers - R	ABC	0.32/3	1.28	0.41/3	1.55

<http://tvbythenumbers.zap2it.com/weekly-ratings/late-night-ratings-june-5-9-2017-jimmy-kimmel-live-rises-to-the-top/>

Ratings from January 29-February 2, 2018

Show	Net	Adults 18-49, 1/29 - 2/2	Viewers (millions), 1/29 - 2/2	Adults 18-49 season to date	Viewers (millions) season to date
<i>11:35 p.m.</i>					
The Tonight Show Starring Jimmy Fallon	NBC	0.59/4	2.43	0.69/4	2.77
Jimmy Kimmel Live	ABC	0.48/3	2.17	0.48/3	2.29
Late Show with Stephen Colbert	CBS	0.47/3	3.23	0.61/4	3.86
<i>12:35 a.m.</i>					
Late Night with Seth Meyers	NBC	0.36/3	1.40	0.40/3	1.58

<http://tvbythenumbers.zap2it.com/weekly-ratings/late-night-ratings-jan-29-feb-2-2018-tonight-show-holds-steady-kimmel-ticks-up/>

Ratings from February 26-March 2, 2018

Show	Net	Adults 18-49, 2/26 - 3/2	Viewers (millions), 2/26 - 3/2	Adults 18-49 season to date	Viewers (millions) season to date
<i>11:35 p.m.</i>					
The Tonight Show Starring Jimmy Fallon	NBC	0.63/4	2.62	0.70/4	2.82
Late Show with Stephen Colbert	CBS	0.43/3	3.15	0.61/4	3.87
Jimmy Kimmel Live - R	ABC	0.39/3	1.83	0.48/3	2.30
<i>12:35 a.m.</i>					
Late Night with Seth Meyers	NBC	0.36/3	1.44	0.41/3	1.60

<http://tvbythenumbers.zap2it.com/weekly-ratings/late-night-ratings-feb-26-march-2-2018-the-tonight-show-returns-up/>

Appendix C

<i>The Tonight Show with Jimmy Fallon</i>			<i>Late Night with Seth Meyers</i>		
Air Date	Trump-Related Content	Time Spent on Topic	Air Date	Trump-Related Topic	Time Spent on Topic
1/16/17	Joke – Who would you like to see at Trump’s inauguration? (Poll)	<3 min	1/16/17	NO SHOW	0
1/17/17	N/A	0	1/17/17	N/A	0
1/18/17	N/A	0	1/18/17	N/A	0
1/19/17	N/A	0	1/19/17	N/A	0
1/20/17	Joke about Kellyanne Conway’s inauguration outfit	<2 min.	1/20/17	RE-RUN	0
5/1/17	Joke about Trump – Civil War	<4 min.	5/1/17	Trump – Civil War - TOPIC	<11 min.
5/2/17	Joke about Trump call with Putin	<5 min.	5/2/17	Ivanka Joke – Attire at MET Gala	<2 min.
5/3/17	Joke about Trump family on Survivor	<5 min.	5/3/17	Comey/Health Care TOPIC	<10 min.
5/4/17	Joke about health care bill	<4 min.	5/4/17	Trumpcare - TOPIC	<10 min.
5/5/17	Joke about health care bill (BRIEF)	<30 seconds.	5/5/17	Joke of the Week – Trump/Civil War	<2 min.
6/5/17	Trump withdraws from Paris agreement - TOPIC	<7 min.	6/5/17	Trump approval ratings/tweets - TOPIC	<11 min.

6/6/17	N/A	0	6/6/17	N/A	0
6/7/17	New FBI director - Joke	<2 min.	6/7/17	Comey Opening Statements - TOPIC	<12 min.
6/8/17	Brief Comey Joke	<30 seconds	6/8/17	Comey testifies/ Trump Lied - TOPIC	<12 min.
6/9/17	Trump Loyalty Card Joke	<2 min.	6/9/17	Joke of the Week: Trump/Paris Climate Agreement	<2 min.
1/29/18	Trump Twitter Feud - Joke	<6 min.	1/29/18	Obstruction of Justice - TOPIC	<13 min.
1/30/18	Sketch – State of the Union	<4 min	1/30/18	Trump's plan to ignore Russia sanctions	<2 min.
1/31/18	Trump translates Spanish phrases - joke	<3 min	1/31/18	State of the Union – GOP Discredits Russian Probe- TOPIC	<9 min.
2/1/18	Joke about Donald and Melania - BRIEF	<30 seconds	2/1/18	GOP moves to Release Russia memo - TOPIC	<7 min.
2/2/18	N/A	0	2/2/18	N/A	0
2/26/18	BRIEF joke	<1 min	2/26/18	Parkland – NRA- TOPIC	<11 min.
2/27/18	Re-election – very mild jab at Trump	<4 min	2/27/18	Kushner – Brief TOPIC	<4 min.
2/28/18	N/A	0	2/28/18	Trump, Guns, Hicks, Kushner - TOPIC	<11 min.
3/1/18	Hope Hicks joke - BRIEF	<1 min	3/1/18	Trump vs. Attorney General	<8 min.
3/2/18	Trump Nickname Joke	<3 min	3/2/18	N/A	0