Filmed in Front of a Live Studio Audience: Laughter and Aggression in Political Entertainment Programming

Emily K. Vraga, Courtney N. Johnson, D. Jasun Carr, Leticia Bode & Mitchell T. Bard

a Department of Communication George Mason University.
b University of Washington, Seattle.
c Susquehanna University.
d Georgetown University.
e Iona College.

Published online: 28 Feb 2014.


To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/08838151.2013.875020

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR ARTICLE

Taylor & Francis makes every effort to ensure the accuracy of all the information (the “Content”) contained in the publications on our platform. However, Taylor & Francis, our agents, and our licensors make no representations or warranties whatsoever as to the accuracy, completeness, or suitability for any purpose of the Content. Any opinions and views expressed in this publication are the opinions and views of the authors, and
Filmed in Front of a Live Studio Audience: Laughter and Aggression in Political Entertainment Programming

Emily K. Vraga, Courtney N. Johnson, D. Jasun Carr, Leticia Bode, and Mitchell T. Bard

Shows blending humor and information are on the rise, and many such shows incorporate live studio audiences. Using two separate experimental studies, we test whether audience laughter on humorous political talk shows affects audience perceptions. We find that the effects of audience laughter depend on context, boosting perceptions of host and program credibility when a host is unknown, while reminding viewers of the comedic intentions and appeal of a known comedic host. If humor allows the hosts of comedic political talk shows more freedom to pointedly question their guests without turning off viewers, it may better engage and inform audiences.

Since comedian Jon Stewart began hosting Comedy Central’s satirical news program *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* in 1999, the program has transformed from a relatively obscure cable television program to an 18-time Emmy-winning phenomenon. *The Daily Show* now draws up to 2 million nightly viewers (Starr, 2008), and his faux-pundit counterpart Stephen Colbert draws an average of 1.4 million...
nightly viewers with his cable news parody *The Colbert Report* (Gorman, 2010). The popularity of these shows is not limited to the United States; spin-offs of *The Daily Show* air in countries around the world.

While these programs are among the most popular and thus most studied of comedic or satirical news (e.g., see Baumgartner & Morris, 2006, 2008; Bennett, 2007; Cao, 2010; Guggenheim, Kwak, & Campbell, 2011; Kim & Vishak, 2008; Morris, 2009), they are not the only example of this growing genre. Satirical news coverage is available on the Web site for *The Onion*, a parody newspaper, and other late-night talk shows such as *The Tonight Show*, *The Late Show with David Letterman*, and *Saturday Night Live* often offer comedic references to current events. Despite being “fake,” these shows potentially have political influence. Like traditional talk shows, the hosts of these comedic news programs often interview important political and cultural figures: for example, presidential candidates appeared on late-night TV comedy/talk shows 110 times during the 2008 election (Center for Media and Public Affairs, 2008).

Beyond their popularity and ability to engage with prominent political and cultural figures, these shows may also offer hosts a unique advantage through their use of humor. Humor can reduce tensions that arise when discussions become heated, which may allow comedic hosts maintain credibility while asking pointed questions of their guests—questions that, without humor, appear inappropriately aggressive (Sternthal & Craig, 1973; Vraga et al., 2012).

However, that is not to say a comedic host is always absolved of aggressive intent. We argue that the audience must recognize the host’s comedic goals for humor to be effective in reducing perceptions of aggression and boosting credibility. Television producers have long known that laughter serves as an important cue to viewers, sending the message “What this person said is meant to be funny” (Lawson, Downing, & Cetola, 1998; Lieberman, Neuendorf, Denny, Skalski, & Wang, 2009). Satirical news programs like *The Daily Show* benefit from their audiences’ laughter; when laughter accompanies aggressive questioning, viewers are alerted that the hosts are attempting to be humorous rather than accusatory. Beyond limiting perceptions of aggression, this cue may also amplify the humor itself, enhancing likeability and credibility of those who engage in it (Kuiper, McKenzie, & Belanger, 1995; Morris, 2009).

Therefore, this study examines how viewers respond to a host interacting with political guests depending on whether a salient cue—audience laughter taken from *The Daily Show*—is present. We argue when audience laughter is present, viewers will perceive the host as more credible and likeable and less aggressive. Further, we expect these perceptions of the host will mediate the impact of the inclusion of audience laughter on the program’s credibility; in other words, when the host is seen as less aggressive, more likeable, or more credible, the program will also be seen as more credible. We test these assumptions using a series of two experiments, which maintain the content of the host’s questions (and the guests’ response) while altering whether audience laughter is included in the program to isolate its impact on evaluations of the host and the show.
Literature Review

Cues in Mediated Contexts

People have a lot of information available to them to guide political decision-making. Nowhere is this truer than in the ever-expanding media environment, in which people can select programming in line with their preferences (Baym, 2010; Prior, 2007). Moreover, people tend to be efficient in seeking information, employing heuristics to fill in their knowledge gaps rather than expending the effort to obtain complete information (Kahneman, Slovic, & Tversky, 1982; Lau & Redlawsk, 2001; Nisbett & Ross, 1980). Heuristics are mental shortcuts that allow the fast processing of messages, and they are one mechanism by which citizens track, evaluate, and interact with political affairs on a daily basis (Mondak, 1993; Scheufele, Nisbet, & Brossard, 2003). These heuristics are developed and accumulated through a lifetime of personal experiences, as well as those shared by friends, family, and acquaintances.

Social cues are particularly relevant heuristics in televised contexts given the personal and visual nature of the medium (O'Keefe, 2002). People are social by nature and often rely on cues from others to help define reality, especially in ambiguous situations (R. S. Baron, Kerr, & Miller, 2003). In most situations, social norms and cues help individuals make decisions about how they should evaluate situations and actors, as well as the appropriate behavioral response (R. S. Baron et al., 2003; Cho, Shah, Nah, & Brossard, 2009; Fein, Goethals, & Kugler, 2007).

In the context of television, these social cues can originate from both “real” interpersonal interactions (e.g., the reactions of those viewing the program with you) and from “unreal” interactions (e.g., the reactions of those on television) (Rothenbuhler, 2003). For example, in manipulations of political debate, audience and candidate response to televised exchanges affected evaluations of candidate performance, debate civility, and news credibility (Fein et al., 2007). Thus, on-air audience responses can help individuals determine which social norms are governing a mediated exchange.

Humor and Cues

One social context in which cues are likely to be particularly relevant is determining whether humor is present in a situation. Although the processes behind laughter are separate and distinct from the forces that drive humor—e.g., different brain activity is associated with humor detection (i.e., “getting the joke”) and with humor appreciation (i.e., laughter; Moran, Wig, Adams, Ianata, & Kelley, 2004)—laughter can act as a social cue to the presence of humor. While hearing laughter may not affect an individual’s perception of humor (i.e., how funny he or she finds the joke), it can signal that a humorous stimulus is present (Cundall, 2007; Lieberman et al., 2009). This phenomenon is well known to television producers, who have added
"canned" laugh tracks to programming since the 1950s to cue viewers that a scene is meant to be humorous (Lawson et al., 1998; Lieberman et al., 2009).

While hearing laughter may cause viewers to laugh, the ability of laughter to affect perceived funniness is less clear. Most researchers have found that the inclusion of laughter has a limited ability to affect overall perceptions of humor, although it can enhance humor at specific points and thus the total comic appeal of the programming (Gruner, 1996; Lieberman et al., 2009). The effect on humor may depend in part on the content itself: "Such a marker would not operate well, for example, if performances were bad, unprofessional, otherwise plainly unfunny" (Martin & Gray, 1996, p. 227; see also Lieberman et al., 2009).

Therefore, audience laughter can influence perceptions of and responses to mediated content, even if it does not always affect personal enjoyment. In situations where an individual does not perceive a joke as funny, or when she is unsure of whether something is meant to be funny, the individual will look to the behavior of those around her for cues (Chartrand & Bargh, 1999; Olson, 1992; Provine, 1992). While the person may or may not feel more entertained personally, her perceptions of the content should shift.

The Effects of Humor

Once humor is perceived, it can have important implications. Recent research has examined the effects of political humor and satire on perceptions of media credibility and government trust, particularly on The Daily Show and The Colbert Report (Baumgartner & Morris, 2006, 2008; Cao, 2010; Guggenheim et al., 2011; Kim & Vishak, 2008).

Perhaps most importantly for scholars interested in the use of humor on political talk shows, humor in and of itself can boost credibility. Self-effacing humor—used commonly by late-night talk show hosts including Jon Stewart, David Letterman, and Jay Leno—can heighten the credibility of both the show and the host (Baym, 2005; Lyttle, 2001; Morris, 2009). Humor also puts viewers in a good mood that may extend to favorable perceptions of the messenger, especially when the message is dull (Kuiper et al., 1995; Sternthal & Craig, 1973). For example, an issue like global climate change may be unexciting to many viewers, but a humorous host may lessen those viewers’ boredom and, in doing so, make them like and trust the host more.

Humor may have further implications beyond producing a "rosy glow" that envelops the host and the show. Evidence suggests humor may allow hosts to ask pointed and aggressive questions while maintaining a less charged atmosphere. Viewers may gravitate to comedic hosts like Stewart and Colbert because humor has been shown to reduce hostility and aggression by distracting people and redirecting anger (R. A. Baron & Ball, 1974; Miron, Brummett, Ruggles, & Brehm, 2008; Sternthal & Craig, 1973; Vraga et al., 2012). Furthermore, the anger-diffusing technique of "cracking jokes" may lead viewers to evaluate humorous moderators in a favorable manner.
However, humor will not diffuse tension or boost credibility if the viewer does not first perceive the humor. Late-night comedy programs like *The Daily Show* are usually filmed in front of a live audience, whose laughter provides an auditory cue to viewers at home that the host is making a joke. If the inclusion of audience laughter allows individuals to better understand when humor is intended, it should also lead to more positive evaluations of the host. This laughter will cue the viewer to the fact the host is at least trying to diffuse a tense situation with comedy—and it is possible the attempt itself, regardless of its success, will improve host evaluations.

**Host and Program Credibility**

Understanding the use of humor by a program’s host is particularly important given the critical role hosts play in discussion. Moderators organize and rule discussion spaces (Janssen & Kies, 2005), acting as gatekeepers, promoting high-quality information exchange, and “encouraging an atmosphere of mutual respect” (Ackerman & Fishkin, 2004, p. 66). Humor is one such skill that allows the host to keep the discussion flowing in a respectful manner, even between political adversaries.

Beyond their influence in maintaining conversation and ensuring quality information exchanges between guests, hosts also serve as the public face, or brand, for their shows. In television news in particular, the host has a large influence on perceptions of program and outlet credibility (Baek, Kim, & Martin, 2010; Burgoon, 1978; Markham, 1968; Newhagen & Nass, 1989). In fact, news programs often make concerted efforts to “brand themselves” with a recognizable anchor (Baek et al., 2010). The abundance of broadcast and cable news programs has made it difficult for any one program to stand out due to news content alone; branding a news program with a recognizable host differentiates that program from others, which potentially leads to increased audience share (Chan-Olmsted & Cha, 2008). Much like a respected athlete endorsing a running shoe, viewers transfer the characteristics of the host or anchor to the news program as a whole—in this way, the “personality of a program is synonymous with the personality of the hosts of the program” (McDowell, 2004, p. 313; McCracken, 1989). Thus, the characteristics of and choices made by the host, including the choice to attempt humor, should have important implications for viewers’ perceptions of the program and its credibility.

Credibility itself is a multi-dimensional concept, but when evaluating journalistic hosts, individuals generally focus on factors dealing with their competence, sincerity, dynamism, and trustworthiness (Baek et al., 2010; Bracken, 2006; Chan-Olmsted & Cha, 2008; Markham, 1968). In defining news credibility, scholars typically examine six concepts: fairness, bias, completeness, accuracy, trustworthiness, and balance (Fico, Richardson, & Edwards, 2004; Gaziano & McGrath, 1986; Meyer, 1988). Thus, for a television program to be seen as credible, the host must balance these diverse objectives while moderating the debate between guests.
In recent years, the role of talk show hosts has become even more prominent. During the 2008 election, for example, the talk show format dominated primetime cable news (State of the News Media, 2009). Moreover, political talk shows may be moving toward more sensational styles of facilitating discussions, including the use of sarcasm and humor, in an attempt to garner ratings (Baym, 2010). This trend suggests television will see more comedic hosts and more audience engagement in the future, making our research quite timely.

**Study 1**

Our first study set out to examine the potential for the presence of a well-known cue—inclusion of audience laughter within a humorous political talk show—to affect perceptions of both the host and of the program. Humor has been shown to boost the likeability and credibility of the individual engaging in it, so the inclusion of a salient humor cue should affect perceptions of the host on these key indicators (Kuiper et al., 1995; Lyttle, 2001; Morris, 2009).

But the inclusion of humor can have implications beyond whether people like the individual employing humor. Because humor often requires cracking jokes at another’s expense, a cue like audience laughter indicating the host is making a joke, rather than critiquing the guests, should diffuse possible anger at the host and impact perceptions of that host’s aggression (R. A. Baron & Ball, 1975; Miron et al., 2008; Sternthal & Craig, 1973). However, while audience laughter may provide a social cue that a situation is meant to be funny, it is less clear whether it will impact perceptions of whether the host himself is actually seen as funny (Cundall, 2007; Lawson et al., 1998; Lieberman et al., 2009; Martin & Gray, 1996).

Further, the behavior of the host has implications for perceptions of the program. Especially on television news, the host serves as the face of the show. As such, the behavior of that host—including his personality—can impact perceptions of the program’s credibility (Markham, 1968; Newhagen & Nass, 1989). Therefore, if the anchor of a news program is seen as more credible or likeable, people should rate the program as more credible. We also therefore formally test whether perceptions of the host mediate the relationship between inclusion of the laugh track and perceptions of show credibility.

**Study 1 Methods**

The data in this study were collected over a 2-week period in April and May of 2010, using an experiment embedded in a Web-based survey. All of the respondents were enrolled in undergraduate courses at a Midwestern university and were compensated for their participation through extra credit. Of the roughly 450 students who were contacted, 197 students completed the survey (61.2% female, average
age = 21.10 years). Of those, 123 were assigned to the conditions analyzed in this study (56.1% female, average age = 21.34 years).\footnote{1}

All students viewed one of two versions of a simulated political talk show, which manipulated the presence of audience laughter with a humorous host questioning two experts on merits of a fictional proposed government policy to address global climate change.

To produce the stimuli, professional actors were hired to fill the roles of the host and guests and a television studio with a green screen was used to tape a mock program, allowing the creation of stimuli in line with modern television “talking head” programming. A professional director and experienced video editor assisted in the development and production of the script and recorded stimulus materials, maintaining consistent quality and realism.

Inspired by Jon Stewart, the host used humor while remaining pointed in his questioning of the guests. The host interjected summaries, self-referential asides, and humorous quips about the guests’ positions or their rationale, often undercutting their remarks or arguments as part of his jokes (e.g., “So the folks that got us into this mess are supposed to get us out of it? Okay … like that could fail.”).

The experiment used a two-cell design. In one condition, studio audience reactions, consisting of laughter taken from an episode of *The Daily Show*, were added during the editing process while maintaining the same content across conditions. In the other condition, respondents viewed the same show without the audience laughter. In this manner, the experiment was able to isolate the impact of studio audience reactions within a televised political talk show.

**Measures**

**Host Perceptions**

To examine how people’s perceptions of the host differed depending on whether or not audience laughter was included with the host’s jokes, we used four single-item indicators. Respondents were asked to report on an 11-point scale the extent to which they found the moderator credible ($M = 2.95$, $SD = 2.24$), likeable ($M = 3.72$, $SD = 2.60$), aggressive ($M = 4.57$, $SD = 2.76$), and humorous ($M = 4.00$, $SD = 2.90$). To ensure that respondents focused on the host, we included his picture with the evaluations.

**Program Credibility**

To test perceptions of the program’s credibility, we employ a battery of six items, with respondents rating their perceptions on an 11-point scale of bias, accuracy, completeness, fairness, trustworthiness, and balance (Fico et al., 2004; Meyer, 1988). These items are averaged to create an index (Cronbach’s alpha = .92, $M = 4.83$, $SD = 2.09$).
Global Climate Change Position

To measure respondents’ positions on global warming, we used a single pre-test item that asked respondents to rate on an 11-point scale their agreement with the statement that global warming is a serious problem. This item served as our indicator of global warming position (M = 7.68, SD = 2.16).

Study 1 Results

We begin by examining the impact of our experimental manipulation on perceptions of the host. Thus we employ a series of one-way ANCOVAs to examine the impact of audience laughter on perceptions of the host. Because the political talk show features experts debating climate change policies, we control for respondents’ issue stance to ensure that our results occur independent of position.2

In line with our expectations, the host is seen as significantly more likeable and credible when his jokes are accompanied by audience laughter, compared to when audience laughter is absent (see Table 1). Further, the host is seen as significantly less aggressive when his show is coupled with audience laughter, but perceptions of host humor were not significantly affected. Therefore, we confirm that respondents find the host not only more credible and likeable, but also less aggressive, when audience laughter accompanies the hosts’ jokes during the show.

Moving next to perceptions of program credibility, the data support our expectations. The one-way ANCOVA demonstrates that the program itself is also rated as significantly more credible when audience laughter accompanies the host’s jokes, compared to when it is absent.

Table 1

Effects of Audience Laughter on Perceptions of Host and Program, Study 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>F-value</th>
<th>Partial eta-squared</th>
<th>No Laugh Track</th>
<th>Laugh Track</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Host Evaluations</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Host aggression</td>
<td>4.40*</td>
<td>.036</td>
<td>5.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Host humor</td>
<td>1.23</td>
<td>.010</td>
<td>3.70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Host credibility</td>
<td>7.50**</td>
<td>.059</td>
<td>2.42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Host likeability</td>
<td>5.81*</td>
<td>.047</td>
<td>3.18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Program Evaluations</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Credibility</td>
<td>6.81**</td>
<td>.054</td>
<td>4.35</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. *p < .05, **p < .01.
Having confirmed the direct impact of inclusion of audience laughter on perceptions of the host and of the program’s content, we now examine whether perceptions of the host mediate perceptions of program credibility. We used the Preacher and Hayes (2008) method for testing mediation, which employs 5,000 bootstrapped samples to estimate the bias corrected and accelerated confidence intervals. The results largely confirm our hypotheses (see Figure 1). In line with the ANCOVA results, audience laughter predicts host perceptions across all three indicators. However, only ratings of host credibility and aggression—but not likeability—also significantly predict perceptions of program credibility. These predictors function as expected: audience laughter increases perceptions of host credibility, which then boosts program credibility and limits perceptions of host aggression, which negatively predicts program credibility.

The bias corrected and accelerated confidence intervals for the overall mediation path, as well as host credibility and host aggression do not include zero, supporting that both significantly mediate the relationship between audience laughter and program credibility (see Table 2). Finally, the direct relationship between audience laughter and program credibility is reduced to insignificance when the indirect pathways through host perceptions are taken into account. Overall, our results support our expectations: there is a significant indirect effect of audience laughter on program credibility, mediated by perceptions of host credibility and aggression.\(^3,4\)

![Figure 1](image_url)

**Figure 1**

*Mediated Relationship Between Experimental Condition and Program Credibility, Study 1*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Audience Laughter</th>
<th>Host Credibility</th>
<th>Total Effect: .88*</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.01*</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Host Likeability</th>
<th>Program Credibility</th>
<th>Direct Effect: .19</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>-1.04**</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Host Aggression</th>
<th></th>
<th>-2.0**</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

Note: *p < .05, **p < .01.
Table 2
Mediated Relationship Between Experimental Condition and Program Credibility, Study 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Product of Coefficients</th>
<th>95% Confidence Interval</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Effect</td>
<td>S.E.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total mediated effect</td>
<td>.70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Host credibility</td>
<td>.40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Host likeability</td>
<td>.09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Host aggression</td>
<td>.21</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Boldface type indicates a significant effect, as determined by the 95% bias corrected and accelerated confidence interval, using 5,000 bootstrapped samples.

Study 2

Study 1 confirmed many of our expectations: that inclusion of audience laughter impacts perceptions of the host’s aggressiveness, likeability, and credibility, leading to heightened credibility ratings for the program, even when the content of the program remained consistent. In line with previous literature, we argue that the better showing for the host when audience laughter is included may have resulted from the laughter cueing the audience to the host’s intent to be funny, thus softening his aggression (since his attack was for humorous rather than antagonistic purposes) and boosting his credibility. However, the inclusion of a laugh track did not affect respondents’ ratings of the host’s funniness.

Of course, Study 1 used an actor who was unknown to our audience and of questionable skill in conveying comedy, even though the script he delivered included humorous elements. Further, our host had no established journalistic or comedic credibility. Perhaps audience laughter might be even more effective in changing perceptions of the host and the program when the host uses humor more successfully. Conversely, it is also possible that audience laughter would be less effective when the host’s jokes were considered more humorous—if a viewer already finds the material funny, a cue that humor is intended may be redundant.

Therefore, we sought to test whether Study 1’s results hold when audience laughter is included or excluded from a program with a well-known and successful comedic host. Although perceptions of a well-known host will likely be more difficult to influence, priming research suggests that we may still expect laughter to play a role in respondents’ evaluations of the host, because cues that are most salient and readily available by virtue of their temporal recency are more likely to be used in subsequent evaluations (see for example Krosnick, 1999; Groves et al. 2009; Zaller, 1992).
To do so, we used a clip of an interview between Jon Stewart and a guest taken from the February 13, 2007 episode of The Daily Show. In it, Stewart interviews Christopher Horner, a global warming skeptic, and the exchange between the two often grows heated. Respondents were shown either this original clip, which included audience laughter when it originally aired, or the same clip with the audience laughter removed by an experienced editor. To maintain consistency with Study 1, both clips were edited down from the original length of about 7 and a half minutes to about 3 minutes.

**Study 2 Methods**

The data in this study were collected over a 2-week period in April and May of 2012, using an experiment embedded in a Web-based survey. All of the respondents were enrolled in undergraduate courses at a large Midwestern university and were compensated for their participation with extra credit. Of the roughly 230 students who were contacted, 135 students completed the survey (68.9% female, average age = 19.62 years).

**Measures**

We maintained our measurement of host perceptions, program credibility, and global climate change position from Study 1 for consistency.

**Host Perceptions**

In study 2, we used the same single-item indicators and had respondents rate on an eleven-point scale the extent to which they found the host humorous ($M = 8.37, SD = 2.11$), credible ($M = 5.84, SD = 2.11$), likeable ($M = 7.78, SD = 1.72$), and aggressive ($M = 4.76, SD = 2.36$).

**Host Intentions**

We propose that our findings in Study 1 likely result from the recognition that the host’s intention is to be funny, even if inclusion of a laugh track did not lead subjects to rate the host himself as funnier. To better test this assumption, in Study 2 we asked respondents about the host’s intentions during the interview, “regardless of whether you think the host succeeded.” Specifically, to measure the host’s humorous intentions, respondents rated on an 11-point scale the extent to which the host aimed to joke around with the guest and to make the audience laugh, which we combined into an index ($r = .63, p < .001, M = 7.74, SD = 1.42$), and we measured the host’s aggressive intentions by asking respondents the
Table 3

Effects of Audience Laughter on Perceptions of Host and Program, Study 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>F-value</th>
<th>Partial eta-squared</th>
<th>No Laugh Track</th>
<th>Laugh Track</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Host Evaluations</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Host aggression</td>
<td>.005</td>
<td>.000</td>
<td>4.78</td>
<td>4.75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Host humor</td>
<td>4.38*</td>
<td>.033</td>
<td>8.14</td>
<td>8.64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Host credibility</td>
<td>.433</td>
<td>.003</td>
<td>5.73</td>
<td>5.97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Host likeability</td>
<td>.276</td>
<td>.002</td>
<td>7.72</td>
<td>7.88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Program Evaluations</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Credibility</td>
<td>.061</td>
<td>.000</td>
<td>4.97</td>
<td>5.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Host Intentions</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Humor</td>
<td>3.88*</td>
<td>.029</td>
<td>7.49</td>
<td>7.98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aggression</td>
<td>.211</td>
<td>.002</td>
<td>4.34</td>
<td>4.49</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. *p < .05.

extent to which the host meant to attack the guest’s position and to mock the guest’s opinions, which were combined into an index ($r = .58, p < .001, M = 4.43, SD = 1.95$) (see Table 3).

**Program Credibility**

We also replicated our measurement of program credibility from Study 1 (Cronbach’s alpha = .84, $M = 5.00, SD = 1.66$).

**Global Climate Change Position**

We again used a single pre-test item that asked respondents to rate on an eleven-point scale their agreement with the statement that global warming is a serious problem ($M = 7.37, SD = 2.21$).

**Study 2 Results**

To determine whether including a laugh track had a similar effect when a host was well known as compared to an unknown host, we again used a series of one-way ANCOVAs controlling for global climate change position.
We began by testing whether including a laugh track with a known host affects ratings of host funniness. Unlike Study 1, in this case inclusion of a laugh track significantly increased perceptions of host funniness compared to when the laugh track has been removed (see Table 3).

Study 1 focused on the impact of including a laugh track on perceptions of host aggression, credibility, and likeability, as well as program credibility. Study 2 tested whether these effects are reproduced with a well-known host. Again, in contrast to Study 1, the inclusion of a laugh track in Study 2 had no significant effects on perceptions of host aggression, credibility, likeability, or program credibility (see Table 3 for details). Given the lack of main effects, we did not test the role of host perceptions in mediating effects on program credibility. These results indicate that including a laugh track has very different effects when a host is a well-known comedian versus an unknown talk show host.

The Role of Intentions

In Study 1, we speculated that a laugh track enhanced perceptions of the host and program credibility because it alerted viewers that the host was attempting to be funny, not aggressive, in his remarks. We tested these assumptions in Study 2, examining whether including a laugh track affects ratings of the host’s intention to be humorous versus aggressive.

While we found no main effect of including a laugh track on perceptions on the host’s intention to be aggressive, it did significantly increase perceptions of the host’s intention to be humorous. Therefore, even for a well-known comedic host like Jon Stewart, including a laugh track reminds viewers that a host is attempting to be funny when engaging with his guests.

Discussion

Although the inclusion of laughter in television programming is not new, the rise of humorous political talk shows makes understanding the implications of humor cues particularly valuable. The humor employed by these shows often includes pointed questioning of the guests, including attacking or undermining their positions, but our research indicates that including a cue to indicate humor—in this case, audience laughter accompanying the host’s jokes—may give the host greater freedom to aggressively challenge guests, particularly when the host is unknown. Even without altering the content of the host’s remarks, audience laughter can boost perceptions of the host, as well as ratings of the program’s credibility.

However, our results also suggest that the impact of including audience laughter on audience evaluations is not uniform. When an unknown host interacts with guests on a fictional show, respondents have no information on which to base their judgments of the host’s intentions, his character, or the credibility of the program. In
low-information environments, cues that alert others to humor’s presence are particularly important, especially because whether humor is present is often ambiguous (Lawson et al., 1998; Lieberman et al., 2009). In this scenario, it makes sense that including audience laughter led people to rate the host as significantly more likeable, more credible, and less aggressive, which contributed to higher credibility ratings for the show (R. S. Baron et al., 2003; Kuiper et al., 1995; Morris, 2009; Vraga et al., 2012).

However, while including a laugh track impacted perceptions of host aggression and credibility, it did not affect ratings of whether the host was actually humorous. Several factors could contribute to this null effect. First, previous research has only produced mixed results on the impact of audience laughter on perceptions of host humor (for example, see Gruner, 1996; Lieberman et al., 2009). Convincing people that something is funny is more difficult than drawing their attention to an attempt at being funny. Furthermore, the effectiveness of a social cue like audience laughter should depend heavily on the content itself (Martin & Grey, 1996). Despite our efforts to develop a funny script and our actor’s efforts at line delivery, respondents did not find our unknown host very comical, rating him 4.00 out of 10.00 on humorousness.

Study 2 was designed to answer several of the important questions generated by Study 1. Using a clip from The Daily Show, this study tested whether including audience laughter alongside comedic content is as meaningful for evaluations of the host and his program when they are both well known. Further, we examined whether including audience laughter proves more successful in adjusting perceptions of host humor when the host is successful at employing humor—that is, when he is funnier.

Considering evaluations of Jon Stewart compared to our fictitious host validates our claims: Stewart is seen as substantially more likeable ($M = 7.78$ versus $M = 3.72$), credible ($M = 5.84$ versus $M = 2.95$), and humorous ($M = 8.37$ versus $M = 4.00$), although he is seen as similarly aggressive ($M = 4.76$ versus $M = 4.57$). However, unlike the first study, audience laughter produced no significant differences in ratings of Stewart’s likeability, credibility, and aggression, nor on ratings of program credibility. Additionally, including audience laughter produced no significant differences in ratings of Stewart’s aggressive intent.

However, including audience laughter alongside Stewart’s jokes did have a significant impact on ratings of his humor: Stewart was seen to have more humorous intentions and to actually be more humorous himself when audience laughter was present. So whereas audience laughter did not affect ratings of the humor of an unknown host—who was uniformly seen as relatively unfunny—it did enhance Stewart’s already high comedic appeal.

That the impact of a humor cue—in this case, audience laughter—had competing effects depending on context is hardly surprising. As noted above, the effects of audience laughter on perceptions of the humor of the content is mixed and may depend in large part on whether the content is sufficiently funny (Martin & Grey, 1996). However, even when humor is expected and generally successful—as in the
case of Jon Stewart on The Daily Show—including audience laughter can still be influential in reminding audiences that the content is funny.

Meanwhile, a humorous cue might be more important when faced with a more ambiguous context (such as an unknown host on an unknown program), as people have substantially less information on which to rely. In these cases, perceptions of credibility are more malleable, and people have to rely on heuristic cues to process the information (R. S. Baron et al., 2003). Conversely, Stewart is a well-known figure in our society, and one who generally inspires respect (timepolls.com). That one airing of his program—with or without accompanying audience laughter—had a limited ability to affect perceptions of Stewart or his program may not be surprising. But that is not to say it is entirely without impact: the inclusion of audience laughter may have been an important component in building the now-established perception of Stewart as a humorous and credible host. It is also worth noting our results may be idiosyncratic to the hosts, guests, and subjects examined. Stewart is likely to be especially well-known by our audience of college students, whereas other hosts may have been perceived differently and thereby change the effect of social cues. Similarly, the effects of audience laughter may be more important depending on the guests’ positions relatively to the host and the audience. Future research should continue to explore when audience laughter matters and for whom.

This study also has implications for theoretical development. While we are not the first to suggest that social cues are important in determining response to televised programming, especially political programming imbued with partisan debate (see Cho et al., 2009; Fein et al., 2007; Mutz & Reeves, 2005), many of the previous studies have focused on the deleterious effects of incivility. In this study, we examine a related concept—the aggressive and conflictual interactions also shown to have negative implications for democratic functioning (Forgette & Morris, 2006)—while testing the potential for a mitigating factor: inclusion of audience laughter as a cue indicating humor is present. Given important democratic concerns about the effects of conflict, aggression, and incivility for trust in political actors, journalists, and institutions (Mutz, 2007; Mutz & Reeves, 2005; Thorson, Vraga, & Ekdale, 2010), examining contexts that limit its effects become particularly consequential.

Further, highlighting the use of humor through appropriate cues may allow journalists to blend together multiple roles in their presentation and questioning style. Journalists have been criticized from both sides—for being too passive in their acceptance of partisan talking points, for over-emphasizing balance at the expense of truth-seeking (Cunningham, 2003; Pingree, 2011), and for being too aggressive and combative in their approach (Bennett, 2003; Sabato, 1991; Tannen, 1998). If the inclusion of audience laughter conveys to the audience that the host is trying to be humorous, hosts may be able to employ a more pointed form of questioning while sustaining their own credibility and, by extension, their show’s credibility.

But before we laud humor as a way to allow the tough journalistic questioning of political pundits that democracy requires, or as a way to get people more involved in otherwise dull programming (Cao, 2010), we must note that the effects of humor are context-specific and may even be detrimental (Lieberman et al., 2009). For example,
adding audience laughter to a scathing critique of a position, or to a detailed or unemotional discussion, may in fact turn viewers away or reduce their engagement (Gruner, 1996). Naturally, this is an area ripe for future study on the extent and limitations of laughter and humor cues in these settings.

Additional work might also consider the interaction between types of humor and cues indicating that humor. While our construction of the humor employed by the host is rooted in examples such as The Daily Show and The Colbert Report, it by no means covers the range of political humor. Differences in humorous approaches open many avenues for scholars, examining the intersection of the type of humor employed, the style of the signaling cue, and the expectations of the audience.

In addition, using an experimental design allows us to go beyond past research in precisely examining the role of one specific element within these shows: the audience’s laughter. Stewart’s nomination as the most trusted newscaster in America (timepolls.com) may result as much from what he says as the context in which he says it. In questioning their guests, Stewart and other comedic hosts have an advantage: The laughter that accompanies their jests and quips signal to the viewers that however pointed the remarks, the host is credibly performing their role.

Altogether, this study represents a significant step in examining the importance that laughter plays when hosts turn to humor on political talk shows. The inclusion of audience laughter in conjunction with the host’s remarks has a profound impact on perceptions of the host, which further influences perceptions of the program’s credibility. Ensuring that audiences correctly interpret a host’s remarks as humorous is an important component of a successful political comedy program. If humor does allow hosts to engage in more pointed questioning of their guests without turning off their viewers, it has the potential to engage audiences and enhance their understanding of important issues.

Notes

1 This design was isolated from a larger three-cell experimental design. This third cell was not crossed with our experimental factors.

2 We also tested whether an individual’s global warming attitude moderates the influence of the experimental manipulation on perceptions of the host. Using the Hayes (2013) process model, we tested a mediated moderation model (or as Preacher, Rucker, & Hayes [2007] call it, a conditional indirect effect). This analysis did not provide any support for this possibility: global warming position did not impact the mediation analysis described in the findings. Details about these and any other additional analyses are available from the lead author upon request.

3 Mediation was also tested using path analysis in MPlus. The results largely replicate those found here: significant pathways exist between audience laughter and all three host perceptions, but only host credibility and host aggression significantly predict program credibility, with similar beta weights and variance explained to the Preacher & Hayes (2008) mediation analysis.

4 Additionally, we empirically tested our assumption that host perceptions would mediate program evaluations, rather than program evaluations influencing host perceptions. Using MPlus, we empirically fitted two competing models to the data. Across a range of indicators–
including a lower chi-square value, RMSEA score, and higher CFI—the model fit was superior for our model than the competing model.

5Further, many previous studies have examined the impact of a single exposure to clips from well-known shows like The Daily Show, The Colbert Report, and other programs on evaluations of prominent figures like politicians (Baumgartner & Morris, 2006, 2008; Becker, 2012; Holbert et al., 2003), or the host (LaMarre, Landreville, & Beam, 2009). We follow this research tradition to suggest that a single exposure to The Daily Show may prime respondents to reconsider or update their attitudes, even when those attitudes regard established and recognized figures.

6It should be noted that this methodological approach was developed in line with previous work performed by Martin & Gray (1996), which examined the effect of audience laughter within radio comedy programming. By removing the audience reactions from the stimulus program, Martin and Gray found that those individuals who listened with laughter present rated the program as significantly higher in both enjoyment and humor.

References

Center for Media and Public Affairs. 2008. Late-Nite talk shows were road to White House. Retrieved from http://www.cmpa.com/media_room_comedy_12_29_08.htm


