

**“HE COMES FROM THE LAND OF THE ICE AND SNOW”:  
THE MODERATING ROLE OF INFORMATION ON  
COUNTERARGUING CANDIDATE-RELATED MESSAGES IN  
*THE COLBERT REPORT***

by

Michaele D. Myers

A thesis submitted to the Faculty of the University of Delaware in partial fulfillment of  
the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in Communication

Spring 2014

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Michaele D. Myers

Approved:

---

Dannagal G. Young, Ph.D.  
Professor in charge of thesis on behalf of the Advisory Committee

Approved:

---

Elizabeth Perse, Ph.D.  
Chair of the Department of Communication

Approved:

---

George H. Watson, Ph.D.  
Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences

Approved:

---

James G. Richards, Ph.D.  
Vice Provost for Graduate and Professional Education

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would first like to thank the Department of Communication at the University of Delaware for all their support in this academic endeavour. Never before have I had a whole department behind me with such vigor.

My thesis would not have been possible without my advisor, Danna Young, and my committee members, Lindsay Hoffman and Steve Mortenson. Danna – you are the reason I became enthralled with political humor research. Working with you has been an honor and a dream come true. You supported me, inspired me, tested me, calmed me down, and ultimately, made me into a better writer and scholar. I cannot thank you enough. Lindsay – your support and knowledge have been invaluable. Thank you for dealing with my insane amount of questions; as well, thank you for all the great advice on everything in academics and life. You always help me see things more clearly. Steve – thank you for telling me to never let the ‘good’ get in the way of the ‘good enough’. Believe me, this advice kept my head from exploding more times than you know. Thank you for being a voice of reason and reminding me to be confident in my abilities.

To my family, thank you for supporting me on another journey through grad school. I hope I’ve made you proud. To my grandma and my mom – thank you for inspiring me and pushing me to always move forward. To my father – thanks for giving

me a weird name! And for your never-wavering confidence in my journey. To my twin sister Nicolle and younger sister Abby – thank you for everything you do to make me a better person. Twin – To say more, a life without you would be the worst. Also: “This hand is your hand. This hand is my hand. No wait that’s your hand... No wait! That’s my hand.” WINKY FACE. ;-)

To my friends Kerriann, Julia, Jen (best study buddy!), Katie, Amunoo, Lauren, and Amanda – whether you know it or not, you’ve positively affected my grad and life experience at Delaware in so many ways. I’m a better person for knowing you all. And lastly, to my most amazing cohort. It’s been an honor to go on this journey with you. You’re the greatest cohort I could have asked for. I will miss our time together and our inside jokes. (“She has GOT to go!”)

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## **ABSTRACT**

This study explores the moderating role of information when counterarguing a persuasive message about a candidate in the context of political humor. As the genre of political humor grows, so too does the need to understand the effect of potentially critical information on one's cognitive processes. While recent research has indicated that individuals are less likely to counterargue a humorous persuasive message due to either message discounting (Nabi, Moyer-Guse & Byrne, 2007) or resource allocation (Young, 2008), studies have yet to discuss what role information may play in thwarting the effects of humor on one's argument scrutiny. The results of an online experiment indicate that information exposure does play a moderating role in counterargumentation, but negatively in the presence of humor. Although exposure to information positively influenced one's processing ability and motivation when exposed to humor, it did not influence depth processing, which is a necessary process needed to counterargue a message. The study also found no significant difference in candidate favorability between conditions, indicating cable news is just as likely to negatively impact favorability as political humor. Implications on manipulating knowledge in the Elaboration Likelihood Model and political humor research are discussed.

## Chapter 1

### REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Over the past two decades the media landscape has changed, with the Internet, punditry shows and political comedy obtaining larger audiences and playing a seemingly larger role in American political culture (Pew Research Center, 2012). The most interesting trend lies in political comedy. What began as entertainment, political comedy has evolved into a format which delivers substantive satirical ridicule regarding politics and the media with *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report* leading the trend. Without a doubt, the shows anchored by Jon Stewart and Stephen Colbert have shaken up politics in the United States, influencing viewers' levels of political knowledge (Baek & Wojcieszak, 2009; Baumgartner & Morris, 2008; Young & Tisinger, 2006), civic engagement (Baumgartner & Morris, 2006; Cao & Brewer, 2008; Hoffman & Young, 2011), and candidate perceptions (Becker, 2012; Moy, Xenos & Hess, 2005; Young, 2004; Young 2006).

More importantly, scholarship indicates there are both negative and positive effects of political comedy on viewers (see Baumgartner & Morris, 2008 & Hart, 2007) signifying a lack of cohesive understanding of the programs' societal impact. In terms of critical effects, research by Prior (2005) suggests that political knowledge and likelihood to vote may be negatively impacted as the availability of media programs increase,

especially among those with a preference for entertainment programs. In regards to age, Baumgartner and Morris (2006, 2008) argue that exposure to *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report* provide unintended consequences on the young, with *The Daily Show* alienating viewers from the political process and *The Colbert Report* influencing young viewers to perceive Colbert's message as one of support for the conservative party line instead of one that is in fact critical. As scholars continue the debate regarding the normative implications of political satire, many have turned to addressing questions through the lens of the Elaboration Likelihood Model (LaMarre & Walther, 2013; Nabi, Moyer-Guse & Byrne, 2007; Polk, Young & Holbert, 2009; Young, 2008).

### **Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) and Implications on Argument Scrutiny**

The utilization of ELM has allowed the scholarly world to gain a general understanding of how people centrally and peripherally process persuasive messages, as well as allowed scholars to understand how message recipients scrutinize message arguments based on their levels of cognitive motivation and ability. According to Booth-Butterfield and Welbourne (2002), central processing of persuasion “involves effortful processing of attitude-relevant information to determine the merits of a persuasive communication” (p. 157). In other words, when someone processes an argument centrally, they are able to formulate their own arguments in response. The secondary route, peripheral, contributes to attitude change through less thoughtful processing, which takes place through simple heuristics (Perloff, 2010). Elaboration occurs to a lesser

extent, as well. Attitude changes that result from peripheral processing are less likely to be based on the argument's strength. (Booth-Butterfield & Welbourne, 2002).

To build upon how people process messages, research shows that the likelihood of elaboration is situated on a continuum, indicating elaboration likelihood is the “determinate of whether attitude change in a given instance occurs through the central or peripheral route” (Booth-Butterfield & Welbourne, 2002, p. 159). For example, high elaboration likelihood indicates central processing, and low elaboration likelihood signifies peripheral processing (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). However, when elaboration likelihood is moderate, people are uncertain as to how they will process the message and whether or not they possess the ability to analyze the message (Petty, Briñol & Priester, 2009).

Likelihood of elaboration, whether it is high or low, is dependent on motivation and ability. A person's motivation to elaborate may depend on issues such as involvement and need for cognition; whereas ability to elaborate is dependent on knowledge and confidence in their opinion (Perloff, 2010). One ability factor that has been studied in the context of ELM is one's level of knowledge on the topic of the persuasive message. Research indicates that knowledge on the message topic is a key individual difference upon which to gauge how capable a person is of processing a message. With high capacity for message elaboration, a message recipient with a larger knowledge base should be able to produce more counterarguments, and thus be more resistant to the arguments within that message. Accordingly, “high levels of knowledge

about a topic encourage greater elaboration on a persuasive message pertaining to that topic. Conversely, if a person has very little knowledge about a topic, thoughtful scrutiny of the arguments in a message might not be possible, leading to a reliance on peripheral cues” (Booth-Butterfield & Welbourne, 2002, p. 160).

Although it is known that high levels of knowledge impacts one’s *ability* to scrutinize an argument, we must also consider that an elevated level of knowledge may impact *motivation* to scrutinize message arguments. Those with a high knowledge base tend to have a greater need for cognition, which the need for cognition is a key component of motivation. Additionally, those with a high knowledge on a message topic have a greater saliency regarding the topic. With a high need for cognition and greater message saliency, we will most likely find an increase in motivation to think about a topic, as well as process a message.

### **Humor and the Elaboration Likelihood Model**

Scholars have indicated that political satire is a form of persuasive argumentation given its presentation of a critical viewpoint on an attitude object, such as a candidate or political issue (Morris, 2009; Niven, Lichter & Amundson, 2003). Political jokes, videos and segments are by and large valenced, taking aim at an individual, institution, or idea, and generally encourage critical debate through entertaining and playful verbal attacks and judgment passing (Caufield, 2008; Gray, Jones & Thompson, 2009). What makes political satire an argument-based expression lies in its ability to express “truth” or a sense of “rightness” regarding hypocrisy, governmental ills, and wrongdoings. Such

expression takes place through satire's four characteristics, as set out by George Test: aggression, play, judgment, and laughter. By diminishing and discrediting a joke target through a playful manner, satire allows the aggressive act of ridicule to bring forward judgment in a humorous and hopefully laughter-inducing manner (Gray et al., 2009).

Despite its goals to stress a critical viewpoint through artful attack and judgment, political comedy research has shown that the humor used to deliver a persuasive message has mitigating effects on the likelihood that message recipients will scrutinize the underlying argument in that message. There are two schools of thought that explain this process: the discounting cue and resource allocation theory.

According to Nabi et al. (2007), the discounting cue indicates a message recipient may choose to see the humorous persuasive message as nothing more than a joke; thereby leading to a discounting of the message and affecting the recipient's argument scrutiny. Message discounting is one part of the argument disruption model put forth by Nabi et al., which also cites source liking and processing depth as elements. In two experiments, Nabi et al. found that message discounting consistently moderates processing depth, indicating that while humor alone can have an effect on the persuasive message; discounting further moderates the effect. When a message is discounted it lowers processing depth and counterargumentation. In turn, there is a reduction of argument quality and the message is less likely to have a persuasive effect. The findings of this study also provide indication that humor may be subject to less scrutiny than serious discourse.

Another explanation regarding the mitigating effects of humor is resource allocation theory. Young (2008) states that the cognitive resources needed to counterargue a persuasive message are used by the initial processing of the humor of the message, leading to reduction of argument scrutiny. The process, however, is dependent on how the message recipient perceives the humor. The ability of the message recipient to process the humor (Young, 2008) and the context of the humor further impact the process of argument scrutiny (Polk et al, 2009). For example, satire has been shown to be the most difficult humor to discern and process, and results in further reduction of argument scrutiny (Holbert, Hmielowski, Jain, Lather & Morey, 2011; LaMarre & Walther, 2013; Polk et al., 2009).

Despite the findings, we see that humor's reduction of argument scrutiny has not been found to produce sizeable effects on persuasion (Nabi et al., 2007; Young, 2008). Nevertheless, other analyses have found causal and correlational evidence that political jokes do have a significant impact on viewers' opinions of the issues and people who are highlighted within them (Baumgartner & Morris, 2006; Baumgartner, Morris & Walth, 2012; Morris, 2009). The present study will work to explicate these processes by actively manipulating information exposure to increase recipients' knowledge about the message topic to understand how differing levels of knowledge about the message topic might affect the persuasive impact of political humor.

## **Importance of Moderating Variables in Shaping the Effects of Political Humor**

Research has shown that moderating variables play a significant role in discerning the effects of political comedy, while indicating there may be a wide range of impact from the programs based on the type of viewer (e.g. Young and Tisinger, 2006). One study indicated that political knowledge and partisanship account for differences in candidate evaluations based on level of late-night comedy exposure (Young, 2004). In addition, partisanship and knowledge have been found to affect how construct salience occurs in the face of political humor (Young, 2006). Political interest has also shown to moderate the effects of political comedy on attentiveness, with those with a lower level of interest most likely to be affected by the information presented by the comedy message (Cao, 2010). Additionally, levels of political interest have been found to moderate the extent to which exposure to political humor increases the acquisition of information from traditional news, with those of lower political interest being the most likely to seek out additional information on the topic (Xenos & Becker, 2009). Age has also been shown to moderate the impact of political comedy, with younger viewers' level of political knowledge more likely to be impacted by *The Daily Show* than older viewers (Cao, 2008).

One moderating variable that deserves particular attention in the context of political humor effects is that of political knowledge. Knowledge is the basis upon which new information can be incorporated into evaluations of an attitude object (Popkin & Dimock, 1999). It is the information that allows us to provide context to attitude objects,

while allowing us to interpret new information that may later impact evaluation of a similar or different attitude object (Popkin & Dimock, 1999). Research has shown that differing levels of knowledge determine evaluations, such that those with high levels of knowledge are more likely to have information to recall and are more likely to consider an object in terms of the information that is already accessible to them (Yi, 1993). Those with lower knowledge levels are shown to be more susceptible to messages regarding the attitude object due to the lack of information to recall (Yi, 1993). Essentially, a person's level of knowledge dictates how the receiver will interact with an object (Herr, 1989).

Research regarding the moderating impact of knowledge has been conducted in the fields of political communication and advertisement, providing indications that the level of knowledge one holds about a topic impacts the ability for individuals to be primed (Valenzuela, 2010; Yi, 1993). Moreover, as discussed in the review of the ELM, studies indicate that a person's knowledge level fuels cognitive elaboration (Eveland, 2002), and impacts how respondents with direct or indirect experience with an attitude object counterargue a message based on either cognitive elaborations (for those with direct experience) or source characteristics (for those with indirect experience) (Wu & Shaffer, 1987).

In these studies, individuals with higher knowledge about a message topic are more likely to cognitively elaborate and counterargue a message, indicating that knowledge may thwart the impact of a persuasive message. Effect studies in political humor have demonstrated similar results, indicating those with lower political knowledge

are most affected by exposure to political humor, most likely due to the role knowledge plays in fostering one's ability to reject or counterargue a message, as suggested through the ELM (Young 2004; Young, 2006).

Traditionally, in order to discover if knowledge is a moderating variable that determines outcomes such as the ability to be primed or news elaboration, a pre-test with knowledge measures (such as in Valenzuela, 2010) is utilized to gain perspective of a respondent's knowledge level. However, rather than measure pre-existing knowledge that may stand prior to an experiment or survey, this study proposes to actively manipulate a person's knowledge about a message topic prior to exposure to a humorous persuasive message. In order to actively manipulate a person's knowledge level, information regarding the message topic will be introduced through an "information manipulation" article.

According to Eveland (2002), manipulating levels of attention to a message or topic will impact a person's learning, thus providing the respondent with greater attention to the topic and to greater recall abilities. In the case of Elaboration Likelihood Model, this means we may be able to impact depth processing and actively manipulate one's ability and motivation to counterargue by introducing an information manipulation (Eveland, 2002). The ability to increase a person's knowledge through a manipulation may have healthy implications for society, given that citizen empowerment is gained through interaction with information. As far as we know, no active manipulation of information to increase knowledge has taken place in the study of political humor effects.

It should be noted that in a recent study by LaMarre and Walther (2013), an information manipulation was introduced, however, in the context to increase *prior* knowledge and ability.

We believe that testing respondents based on an “information manipulation” will not only provide a greater variance to the moderating variable and enable the identification of moderating effects, but will also allow us to consider how active information campaigns can readily alter the persuasiveness of messages – even humorous ones.

### **Knowledge Levels and Humor**

Despite the fact that humor has been found to reduce argument scrutiny – either through a reduction in ability or motivation to counterargue the premise of a message, it is likely that this reduction in argument scrutiny doesn’t happen for everyone. In particular, this project is guided by the assumption that higher levels of knowledge about the topic of a humorous political message will thwart the role that humor usually plays in reducing counterargumentation. We know that those with high levels of knowledge centrally process messages, are more resistant to counterattitudinal messages, and have better recall of information (Wu & Shaffer, 1987). As well, we should recall from ELM research that those with high levels of knowledge encourage greater elaboration on a persuasive message through knowledge’s positive impact on both ability and motivation to scrutinize a message (Wood, Rhodes & Biek, 1995; Wood & Kallgren, 1988). Based on such information, message recipients with high levels of knowledge should also be

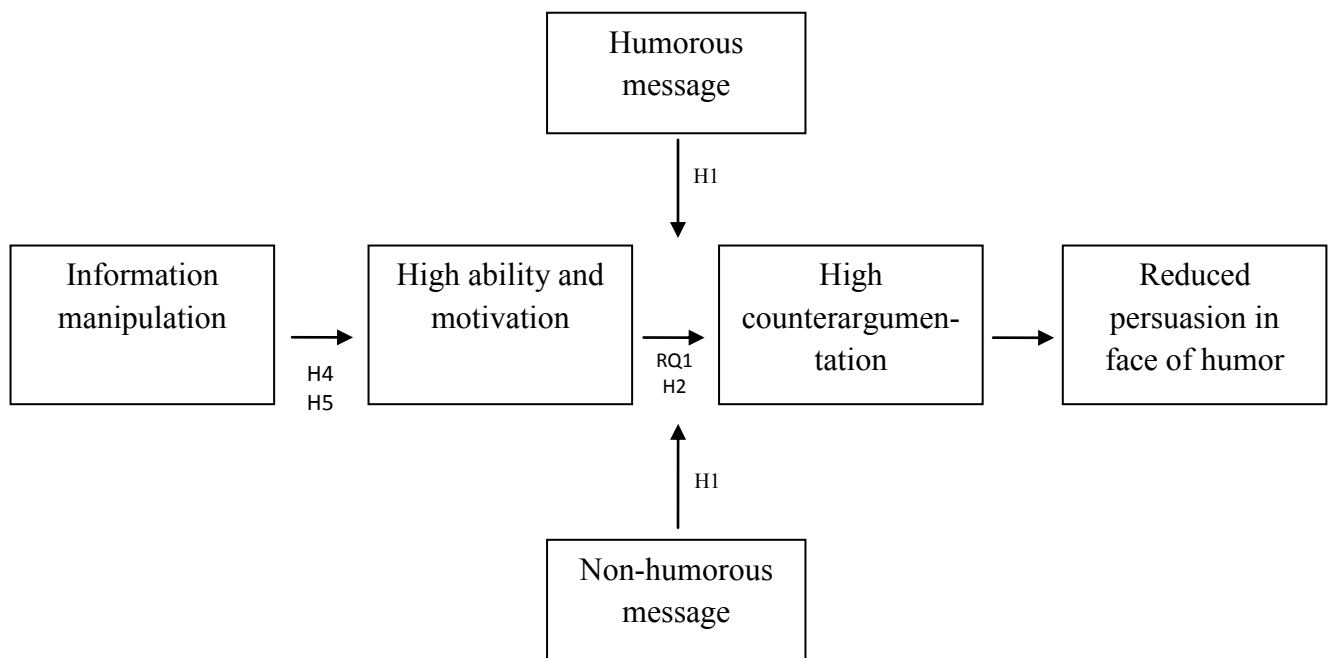
equipped to centrally process and elaborate humorous messages, even with the reduction in argument scrutiny that occurs in the face of humor (Nabi, Moyer Guse, & Byrne, 2007; Young 2008). To further support this idea, research has indicated that those with higher internal efficacy levels are more likely to counterargue a satirical message, based on their higher levels of motivation and ability (Polk et al., 2009). If a person with high efficacy perceives themselves to have the skills necessary to engage the humorous message in a thoughtful way, then so too might a person with adequate knowledge about the message topic be able to scrutinize claims in spite of the humor.

The operationalization of knowledge can be done through a measurement of pre-existing knowledge on a topic and through a manipulation in an experimental setting. By operationalizing knowledge levels with an information manipulation (through exposure to information on the topic of the political humor they are about to encounter), we are then able to maximize their ability (and motivation) to centrally process the humorous argument(s) to best capture the underlying dynamics at play.

Research has shown that when a person is given an opportunity to think about an attitude object, one's attitude can become more extreme in either direction (negative or positive) (Wu & Shaffer, 1987), indicating that if we give an information manipulation to someone with high knowledge it may further reinforce their knowledge and their *ability* to counterargue. Through priming, an information manipulation may also impact *motivation* to counterargue due to the increase in saliency and the resulting increase in a need for cognition. As well, if the respondent has a low level of knowledge, we have now

provided them with information to think about, which may impact their ability and motivation to elaborate.

Given what we know about the moderating effects of knowledge in the persuasion model, and what we know about the mitigating effects of humor, the following model has been proposed to understand the effects of an information manipulation:



*Figure 1. Theoretical Model*

It is also important to note that research has documented significant selective perception in the context of ironic programming, such as in *The Colbert Report*. Stephen Colbert portrays a conservative pundit that hates President Obama and loves America, which one study demonstrated that if the message recipient is a conservative, the

conservative viewer is more likely to perceive Colbert's humor as joking and genuine; whereas liberal viewers are likely to perceive Colbert as satire and not serious (LaMarre et al., 2009). If ideology can impact how people perceive humor, then we must assume that levels of knowledge will also impact how people perceive the humorous message. The result of the study reinforces the idea that the way people perceive humor is situational. And if it is situational, then wouldn't high knowledge have a larger impact on argument scrutiny than the humor itself?

H1: Respondents in the humorous condition will engage in less counterargumentation than those in the serious condition.

RQ1: Do the effects of humor on argument scrutiny vary as a function of exposure to information on the message topic (through an information manipulation)?

H2: Participants in the "information manipulation" condition will be more likely to counterargue the humorous message than participants in the "no information manipulation" condition.

RQ2: Does knowledge "trump" the reduction of argument scrutiny that occurs in the face of humor? In other words, are participants in the "information manipulation" condition as likely to counterargue the humorous message as they are to counterargue the non-humorous message?

To understand if one's knowledge on the message topic is a valid moderating variable, this study will introduce an "information manipulation" condition which will provide respondents with information on the joke target. To ensure the manipulation succeeds in providing respondents with immediate knowledge of the joke target, we will ask the following:

H3: Exposure to information about the topic will lead to higher levels of knowledge on that topic. (Pretest and posttest)

H3b: Participants in the “information manipulation” condition will have higher levels of knowledge on the topic than will participants in the “no-information manipulation” condition. (Between-conditions test)

Research in the ELM states that ability and motivation play a key role in how an individual processes a persuasion attempt, and that those with high knowledge are more likely to have a high capacity for message elaboration. In order to fully comprehend how knowledge, or in this case exposure to information, interacts with one’s scrutiny of an argument we will need to explore the mechanisms that lead to counterargumentation.

H4: Participants in the “information manipulation” condition will have a greater *ability* to counterargue a message on that topic than participants in the “no-information manipulation” condition.

H5: Participants in the “information manipulation” condition will have a greater *motivation* to counterargue a message on that topic than participants in the “no-information manipulation” condition

### **Argument Scrutiny and Candidate Favorability**

The overall goal of this project is to understand the role knowledge plays in the effects of political humor on a joke target (political candidate). For this project, we will be utilizing Representative Paul Ryan during his run for vice president in 2012 as the object and testing the resulting evaluations. So far, research has indicated that humor presents differential impacts on candidates, with late-night comedy such as *David Letterman* and *Jay Leno* indicating exposure is beneficial to perceptions of lesser-known

candidates (Moy et al., 2005; Young, 2004; Young, 2006) and that hostile humor of *The Colbert Report* creates a greater impact on evaluations opposed to other comedy shows, such as *Saturday Night Live* (Becker, 2012). In an analysis of specific humor types on evaluations, it was shown there is a negative relationship between exposure to *The Colbert Report* and evaluations of the joke target (John McCain), indicating that those who watch *The Colbert Report* could be more likely to view conservative joke targets more negatively.

Despite this information, we do not have clear indication as to the mechanism through which political comedy shapes viewers' evaluations of these joke targets. This is important in the overarching quest to understand the role political comedy plays in the normative debate. In order to understand the outcomes of political comedy, this project will apply the theoretical framework of ELM to gauge how people process and scrutinize information presented to them about a candidate. In the context of this study, by manipulating one's knowledge about a candidate, we will be able to gain an understanding of how people counterargue the message and if their evaluations of the candidate are shifted as a result.

According to ELM, when counterargumentation of message arguments is high, persuasion is reduced. In the context of political humor, the underlying arguments are most often critical of the candidate. Therefore, if humor reduces argument scrutiny, we should find more favorable evaluations of the attitude object in the non-humorous condition (in which argument scrutiny is not disrupted) than in the humorous condition.

If an audience member is actively thinking how the underlying argument is inaccurate, unfair, or biased, then the underlying argument will not change the opinion of the listener, and his/her opinion of the joke target should remain relatively positive. In this project, since we assume that our information manipulation will increase argument scrutiny and counterargumentation, we should find that participants in the “information manipulation” condition show little movement in their perceptions of the joke target.

RQ3: Do different levels of knowledge impact overall favorability of the candidate?

H6: Overall favorability towards the joke target will be higher in the non-humorous condition than in the humorous condition.

H6b: Overall attitude towards the joke target will be higher in the non-humorous condition

H7: Those in the “information manipulation” condition will have more favorable evaluations of the candidate targeted by the humor than those in the “no information manipulation” condition.

H7b: Those in the “information manipulation” condition will have a more positive attitude towards the candidate targeted by humor than those in the “no information manipulation” condition.

## **Chapter 2**

### **METHODS**

The study included 229 participants recruited from two undergraduate communication courses offered at a large, mid-Atlantic university. The convenient sample of college students, while problematic in some ways, allowed the study to utilize a population that has been shown to traditionally dominate the audience of late-night political comedy television programs (see Young & Tisinger, 2006; Pew Research Center, 2012). The study sought to acquire over 200 respondents, with 50 respondents required for each factorial condition. The sample consisted of 44 males (19.2%) and 184 females (80.3%) and ranged in age from 18 to 26 years old ( $M = 19.14$ ,  $SD = 1.02$ ). A majority self-identified as Democrats ( $N = 111$ , 48.5%), with 19% self-reporting as Republican and 28.4% Independent. Nine individuals classified their political party as “Other.”

#### **Procedures**

In order to understand if knowledge moderates the impact of humor on counterargumentation, this study utilized an online experiment conducted on Qualtrics survey software. The study required all individuals to provide their informed consent to participate and acknowledgement of consenting age. In exchange for their participations, respondents were awarded up to five points of extra credit. The few respondents ( $N = 27$ )

who were enrolled in both courses were offered extra credit for both classes by participating in the study once.

The experiment employed a pretest/posttest 2 x 2 between-subjects factorial design. The pre-test survey included candidate evaluation measures, knowledge items, media exposure and political interest items. The post-test survey was administered one week later and included four conditions, each containing separate sets of video stimuli and article manipulation. For the post-test, respondents were first randomized into one of two “information manipulation” article conditions. Respondents received either (1) a brief biographical article about Representative Paul Ryan, followed by a feeling thermometer about Rep. Ryan, or (2) did not receive an article and were instead brought directly to a feeling thermometer about Rep. Ryan. Respondents were then randomly assigned into either a humorous (*The Colbert Report*) or non-humorous (MSNBC’s *The Rachel Maddow Show*) video stimuli condition regarding Paul Ryan’s Republican National Convention speech in 2012. Once these two factors were crossed, the video stimuli and article manipulation sets formed the following outcomes: Condition 1 (N = 55) and 2 (N = 54) watched the humorous clip, with Condition 1 receiving an information manipulation article prior to watching the video. Conditions 3 (N = 62) and 4 (N = 58) watched a non-humorous clip, with Condition 3 receiving the article. See Table 1 below.

Table 1. *Experimental Explanation*

|                             | <b>Humor condition<br/>(Colbert)</b>           | <b>Non-humor condition<br/>(MSNBC)</b>        |
|-----------------------------|------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------|
| Information manipulation    | Manipulation article in humor condition (1)    | Manipulation article in news condition (3)    |
| No information manipulation | No manipulation article in humor condition (2) | No manipulation article in news condition (4) |

### **Information Manipulation**

The experiment sought to manipulate respondents' knowledge levels through exposure to an "information manipulation." Respondents in Conditions 1 and 3 read a short, three-paragraph informational article with personal and political facts regarding former Republican vice presidential candidate, Paul Ryan. Specifics incorporated in the article include details about his biography and policy record that were mentioned throughout the course of the 2012 campaign, such as what state Rep. Ryan represents, his current political office, the number of children he has, as well as his stance on social issues such as social security, the Affordable Care Act, same-sex marriage, and Medicare. The article was written through aggregated information in the style of a news profile. The tone of the article was meant to be purely informative and written without bias<sup>1</sup>. To verify

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<sup>1</sup> To confirm the information article did not influence respondents' opinion of Paul Ryan, a feeling thermometer was administered immediately following the article. An independent-samples *t*-test revealed no significant differences in favorability towards Rep. Ryan between the article and no article conditions.

knowledge acquisition from the information manipulation article, knowledge items administered in the pre-test and post-test surveys included questions pertaining to details discussed in the article.<sup>2</sup> A pilot test was conducted prior to the final experiment to ensure the article significantly increased knowledge about Paul Ryan. Results are discussed on page 27.

### **Humor and Non-Humor Condition**

Respondents in Conditions 1 and 2 watched a video from *The Colbert Report*, in which host Stephen Colbert satirically criticizes the inaccuracies and exaggerations of Paul Ryan's speech given at the Republican National Committee (RNC) convention on August 29, 2012 (The Colbert Report, 2012). The clip was shortened to three and a half minutes in length to ensure the persuasive argument was easy to identify and that the clip included the same information as the non-humorous clip. Those in Conditions 3 and 4 watched a three and a half minute long video excerpt of MSNBC's *The Rachel Maddow Show*, in which host Rachel Maddow and NBC correspondent Chuck Todd discuss the press' negative and critical reaction to the same speech given by Paul Ryan at the RNC convention (MSNBC, 2012). Finding a clip that showcases the same inherent arguments as the ones found in the *Colbert* clip was difficult, which is why this study utilized *The Rachel Maddow Show*. Both the *Colbert* and MSNBC clips present similar arguments regarding Paul Ryan's misrepresentation of general political facts, his inaccurate

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<sup>2</sup> See Appendix A for manipulation article.

identification of Barack Obama as the president who oversaw the closure of a GM plant in Janesville, Wisconsin, and the Romney/Ryan campaign's disregard for fact checking.

### **Randomization Check**

A randomization check was run to ensure all socio-demographic dependent variables (gender, age, political ideology, political affiliation, political interest, and media consumption) do not vary as a function of the video stimuli conditions or information manipulation article conditions. Two, one-way MANOVAs demonstrated no significant difference between video conditions and information manipulation conditions across the majority of the socio-demographic variables. However, there was a statistically significant difference between the two video conditions in regards to self-reported viewership of *The Colbert Report*,  $F(1, 212) = 5.51, p < .05$ . Upon further examination of the mean difference, it appears respondents assigned to the *Colbert* condition reported slightly higher exposure to the program (*Colbert*:  $M = 2.11, SD = 1.20$  and MSNBC:  $M = 1.75, SD = 1.03$ ).<sup>3</sup> Given that viewership of *The Colbert Report* was reportedly higher in the *Colbert* condition, the issue arises whether or not exposure to the program outside of the confines of the experiment reduced the potential impact of the selected *Colbert* clip – particularly if respondents have seen it before. In the case respondents viewed the piece some time during or after the 2012 election, we might expect prior exposure to the information discussed in the piece to dilute effects of the information manipulation.

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<sup>3</sup> Respondents were asked to rate how often they view media sources, such as *The Colbert Report*, on a scale of 1 to 6, ranking from 'never' to 'every day'.

## Measures

**Favorability of Paul Ryan.** A ‘feeling’ thermometer was administered to capture respondents’ rating of the candidate: “What is your overall favorability of Paul Ryan, where 0 is extremely unfavorable, and 100 is extremely favorable?” ( $M = 34.21$ ,  $SD = 20.08$ )

**Trait characteristics of Paul Ryan.** Participants were asked to identify how well the following words and phrases describe the candidate: *Trustworthy*, *honest*, *charismatic*, *cares about people like me*, and *strong moral character*. Responses were recorded using a 4-point Likert scale ranging from ‘Not well at all’ to ‘Extremely well.’ ‘Don’t know’ responses were given a mid-point value (3) for analysis. The index proved to be reliable with a Cronbach’s alpha of .86 ( $M = 2.58$ ,  $SD = .82$ ).

**Knowledge of Paul Ryan.** Four items were included in both the pre- and post-test to investigate a shift in knowledge over time. The repeated measures include: (1) *Paul Ryan represents which state?*, (2) *Paul Ryan identifies as a member of which political party?*, (3) *Which of the following best describes the office currently held by Paul Ryan*, and (4) *What national office did Paul Ryan run for in the 2012 election?*. After recoding the correct answer to 1 and all other answers including ‘don’t know’ to 0, the pre-test measures formed a reliable mean scale with a Cronbach’s alpha equaling .77 ( $M = .49$ ,  $SD = .37$ ). Cronbach’s alpha for the post-test mean scale was .60 ( $M = .69$ ,  $SD = .29$ ).

In addition to the four measures, the post-test included eight additional knowledge items to capture differences between the information conditions. Items include number of

children, religion, and stances on current issues such as same-sex marriage. The twelve total knowledge items formed a reliable mean scale ( $\alpha = .82$ ;  $M = .53$ ,  $SD = .27$ ). To minimize possible priming of Ryan-specific constructs prior to viewing video stimuli, we waited a week between administering the pre-test and administering the post-test, which contained the video stimuli plus post-test items. For the full question battery, see Appendix B.

**Counterargumentation.** To understand how the persuasive messages of each video were counterargued by respondents, this study relied on validated elaboration measures from Nabi, Moyer-Guse, and Bryne (2007). A 5-point Likert scale regarding counterargumentation was used to gauge how people interact with the persuasive message. Respondents were asked to what extent they agree or disagree with the following statements: (1) *I found myself actively agreeing with the message in the video*, (2) *I found myself actively disagreeing with the message in the video*, (3) *I was looking for flaws in the video's arguments*, and (4) *It was easy to agree with the arguments made in this video*. Questions 1 and 4 were reverse coded to ensure strong levels of agreement indicate how likely individuals are to counterargue the message of the video. The measures formed a reliable mean scale ( $\alpha = .71$ ;  $M = 2.51$ ,  $SD = .64$ ).

**Message Processing.** Measures for motivation, ability, and depth processing were adapted for this study from the Message Processing Depth scale from Wolski and Nabi (2000):

**Motivation.** To measure motivation, respondents were asked to indicate how much they agree or disagree with the following statements: (1) *This video was interesting to me*, (2) *I was interested in what the video had to say*, (3) *I didn't find this video very interesting*, and (4) *I was motivated to watch this video*. Question 3 was reversely coded to ensure the scale captured an individual's motivation level. The measures formed a reliable mean scale ( $\alpha = .89$ ;  $M = 3.51$ ,  $SD = .85$ ).

**Ability.** To measure ability, respondents were asked to indicate how much they agree or disagree with the following: (1) *My mind kept wandering as I watched the video*, (2) *While watching the video, I didn't let myself get distracted from focusing on the video's content*, (3) *While watching the video, thoughts about other things kept popping up in my head*, and (4) *My mind did not wander as I watched the video*. Questions 1 and 3 were reversely coded to capture an individual's ability to focus on the persuasive message. The measures formed a reliable mean scale ( $\alpha = .89$ ;  $M = 3.09$ ,  $SD = .94$ ).

**Depth.** To measure depth processing, respondents were asked to indicate their agreement or disagreement with the following: (1) *I focused on the arguments that were made*, (2) *While watching the video, I paid close attention to each point that was made*, (3) *I didn't pay close attention to the arguments*, and (4) *I concentrated on the video arguments*. Question 3 was reversely coded to ensure the scale captured an individual's likelihood to concentrate on a persuasive message. Respondents answered questions for each set of measurements using a 5-point Likert scale (strongly disagree to strongly

agree). All measure sets formed highly reliable mean scales. The measures showed to form a reliable mean scale ( $\alpha = .86$ ;  $M = 3.46$ ,  $SD = .73$ ).

**Perceived Humor.** The main goal of this study is to understand if knowledge trumps the mitigating effects of humor -- both in terms of its impact on counterargumentation disruption, and on ultimate persuasion. First, to ensure the *Colbert* clip is in fact humorous, perceived humor was tested by asking respondents to rank how well the following statements describe the video on a 5-point Likert scale: funny, boring, amusing, unfunny, confusing, informative, interesting, serious, and entertaining (from Nabi et al., 2007). To ensure a mean scale that best represents perceptions of humor, this study removed “confusing” and “informative” from the overall scale. The two variables are intended to serve as separate indicators of how individuals perceive the message of the videos. The humor-related measures (funny, boring [reverse coded], amusing, unfunny [reverse coded], interesting, serious [reverse coded], and entertaining) created a highly reliable mean scale ( $\alpha = .90$ ;  $M = 3.52$ ,  $SD = .83$ ).

A manipulation check was conducted to verify there was a significant difference in perceptions of humor between video conditions. An independent-samples *t*-test indicated a higher perception of humor for the *Colbert* video ( $M = 4.11$ ,  $SD = .62$ ) than the MSNBC video ( $M = 2.98$ ,  $SD = .61$ ),  $t(227) = -14.02$ ,  $p < .001$ . In addition, perceptions of whether the video was “confusing” varied between the two conditions, *Colbert*:  $M = 2.09$ ,  $SD = .96$ ; MSNBC:  $M = 2.38$ ,  $SD = .94$ ,  $t(227) = 2.26$ ,  $p < .05$ ; as did perceptions of whether the video was informative, *Colbert*:  $M = 3.65$ ,  $SD = .76$ ; MSNBC:  $M = 4.02$ ,  $SD = .70$ ,  $t(227) = 3.79$ ,  $p < .001$ .

**Message Discounting.** To understand participants' interaction with the humorous *Colbert* clip, this study utilized the message discounting scale from Nabi et al. (2007). Measures included in the scale are: (1) *The host in the video was just joking*, (2) *The video was made more to entertain people than to persuade them*, (3) *The host in the video was serious about advancing his or her views in the message* (reverse coded), and (4) *It would be easy to dismiss this video as simply a joke*. Respondents were asked the extent to which they agree or disagree with the statements on a 5-point Likert scale. The measures formed a reliable mean scale ( $\alpha = .70$ ;  $M = 2.69$ ,  $SD = .68$ ). See Table 2 below for reliability levels of each scale, as well as their means (M) and standard deviations (SD).

Demographics, political ideology, political knowledge and interest, as well as news and political comedy viewing habits were also collected.

Table 2. *Reliability of Scales, with Means and Standard Deviations*

|                                  | <i>M</i> | <i>SD</i> | <i>α</i> |
|----------------------------------|----------|-----------|----------|
| Trait characteristics [pre]      | 2.89     | .73       | .88      |
| Trait characteristics [post]     | 2.58     | .82       | .86      |
| Knowledge (four measures) [pre]  | .49      | .37       | .77      |
| Knowledge (four measures) [post] | .69      | .29       | .60      |
| Knowledge (all measures) [post]  | .53      | .27       | .82      |
| Counterargumentation             | 2.51     | .64       | .71      |
| Motivation                       | 3.51     | .85       | .89      |
| Ability                          | 3.09     | .94       | .89      |
| Depth                            | 3.46     | .73       | .86      |
| Humor                            | 3.52     | .83       | .90      |
| Message discounting              | 2.69     | .68       | .70      |

### **Manipulation Check**

As mentioned in the previous chapter, before the study can be administered, manipulation checks need to occur through a pilot study. We conducted two manipulation checks using two separate pilot studies. For the first pilot study (N = 54) participants were recruited from three undergraduate journalism courses, in which they were given a pre-test questionnaire, the information manipulation article, a randomized video (*Colbert* or *MSNBC*), and a post-test questionnaire with the full knowledge battery. Since the

purpose of the main study is to determine if knowledge trumps the impact of humor, the first goal of the pilot was to confirm if the information manipulation article increased respondent knowledge of the message subject, Paul Ryan. In the pre-test, respondents were asked four knowledge questions from the full battery. The four questions selected included basic questions about the candidate under evaluation, such as: (1) *Paul Ryan represents which state*, (2) *Paul Ryan identifies as a member of which political party*, (3) *Which of the following best describes the office currently held by Paul Ryan*, and (4) *What national office did Paul Ryan run for in the 2012 election*. The full question battery was incorporated in the post-test.

Despite the significant increase in knowledge between the pre- and post-test in pilot one<sup>4</sup>, it was determined that the order in which stimuli was presented in the study prevented proper attribution of the cause of knowledge gain to the information manipulation alone. It is likely results were affected by watching the *Colbert* or MSNBC video directly after the manipulation. Since we cannot be sure if knowledge was increased based on the article alone or due to a combination of article and video stimuli, a

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<sup>4</sup> Responses were re-coded to 1 for correct answers and 0 for incorrect and “don’t know” answers. Four paired-sample *t*-tests were run. The results are as follows: Question 1 (State):  $t(53) = 7.02, p < .001$ . Mean increase of .48. Question 2 (Political party):  $t(53) = 4.94, p < .001$ . Mean increase from .59 to .91. Question 3 (Current office):  $t(53) = 4.56, p < .001$ . Mean increase from .31 to .63. Question 4 (National office 2012):  $t(53) = 4.35, p < .001$ . Mean increase from .50 to .79. Pre-test knowledge measures and post-test knowledge measures were both shown to produce reliable scales (pre-test, Cronbach’s  $\alpha = .85$  and post-test, Cronbach’s  $\alpha = .76$ ).

second pilot study was run to examine only the impact of the information manipulation on knowledge of Ryan. For the second pilot, undergraduates from two communication and media courses ( $N = 35$ ) received a study which included a pre-test with four knowledge questions, then the information manipulation article, followed by a post-test with the full knowledge battery.

After recoding the correct answer to 1, and recoding all incorrect answers and “don’t know” to 0, a reliable mean scale was conducted for each the pre-test and post-test knowledge measures. Both the pre- and post-test measures were shown to produce reliable scales (pre-test, Cronbach’s  $\alpha = .81$  and post-test, Cronbach’s  $\alpha = .70$ ). A paired-samples  $t$ -test was conducted to evaluate the difference in pre- and post-knowledge levels. There was statistically significant increase in knowledge between the pre-test and post-test,  $t(34) = -5.951$ ,  $p < .001$ . The mean score increase was .36 between the two tests, with a 95% confidence interval ranging -.479 to -.235.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Four paired-sample  $t$ -tests revealed statistically significant differences for the following four individual items. Question 1 (State):  $t(34) = 5.05$ ,  $p < .001$ . An increase in mean was found between pre- and post-test of .54 to .97, with a 95% confidence interval difference ranging from -.601 to -.256. Question 2 (Political affiliation):  $t(34) = 2.50$ ,  $p < .05$ . The average mean increased from .77 to .97, with a 95% confidence interval of -.362 to -.037. Question 3 (Office):  $t(34) = 5.35$ ,  $p < .001$ . The average mean increased from .42 to .89, with a 95% confidence interval of -.631 to -.284. Question 4 (2012):  $t(34) = 4.21$ ,  $p < .001$ . The average mean increased from .57 to .91, with a 95% confidence interval level of -.508 to -.177.

The second goal of the first pilot study was to assess the perceived humor of the *Colbert* video and MSNBC video. In order to verify the construct validity of the “humorous” condition, compared to the “non-humorous” condition, a between subjects comparison was run on nine perceptions elements. Doing so allowed us to be certain whether the selected stimuli are significantly different in terms of their humor and entertainment value, yet similar in terms of how confusing or clear respondents find them. Independent-samples *t*-tests for the nine humor measures indicated that *Colbert* was perceived as more humorous ( $p < .001$ ), amusing ( $p < .001$ ), interesting ( $p < .01$ ) and entertaining ( $p < .001$ ) than MSNBC. The MSNBC clip was found to be more serious ( $p < .001$ ), more boring ( $p < .001$ ), and less humorous ( $p < .001$ ) than the *Colbert* clip. Additionally, both videos were found to be equally informative, though the videos were modestly different in terms of how confusing respondents found them, with MSNBC being reasonably more confusing than *Colbert* ( $p < .05$ ). See Table 3 below.

Table 3. *Independent T-test Results for Perceived Humor*

|                | <i>M</i> | <i>SD</i> | <i>t-value</i> | <i>p</i> |
|----------------|----------|-----------|----------------|----------|
| Funny          |          |           |                |          |
| <i>Colbert</i> | 4.11     | .85       |                |          |
| <i>MSNBC</i>   | 2.56     | .93       | 6.41           | .001     |
| Boring         |          |           |                |          |
| <i>Colbert</i> | 1.74     | .81       |                |          |
| <i>MSNBC</i>   | 3.22     | .75       | 6.96           | .001     |
| Amusing        |          |           |                |          |
| <i>Colbert</i> | 4.07     | .78       |                |          |
| <i>MSNBC</i>   | 2.78     | .93       | 5.53           | .001     |
| Unfunny        |          |           |                |          |
| <i>Colbert</i> | 1.78     | .93       |                |          |
| <i>MSNBC</i>   | 2.96     | .65       | 5.42           | .001     |
| Confusing      |          |           |                |          |
| <i>Colbert</i> | 2.15     | .95       |                |          |
| <i>MSNBC</i>   | 2.67     | .96       | 1.99           | .05      |
| Informative    |          |           |                |          |
| <i>Colbert</i> | 3.59     | .84       |                |          |
| <i>MSNBC</i>   | 3.59     | .75       | .000           | 1.00     |
| Interesting    |          |           |                |          |
| <i>Colbert</i> | 4.00     | .56       |                |          |
| <i>MSNBC</i>   | 3.37     | .92       | 3.03           | .01      |
| Serious        |          |           |                |          |
| <i>Colbert</i> | 1.89     | .85       |                |          |
| <i>MSNBC</i>   | 3.26     | .86       | 5.90           | .001     |
| Entertaining   |          |           |                |          |
| <i>Colbert</i> | 4.22     | .69       |                |          |
| <i>MSNBC</i>   | 3.00     | .96       | 5.35           | .001     |

The final goal of the study was to ensure both clips invoked counterargumentation. Respondents ranked four statements on a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 representing strongly disagree and 5 representing strongly agree. Question 1 and 4 were reversed coded for consistency of valence. The measures formed a reliable mean scale with a Cronbach's alpha of .72. An independent-samples *t*-test indicated a significant difference in counterargumentation between the Colbert ( $M = 2.43$ ,  $SD = .74$ ) and MSNBC conditions ( $M = 3.01$ ,  $SD = .52$ ),  $t(52) = 3.35$ ,  $p < .01$ .

Mean comparisons were conducted for the individual counterargumentation items in order to further explore differences between the humorous and non-humorous conditions. For the first statement (*I found myself actively agreeing with the message in this video*), an independent-samples *t*-test indicated there is a statistical difference between "active" agreement with the persuasive message of Colbert ( $M = 3.59$ ,  $SD = .88$ ) and MSNBC ( $M = 2.96$ ,  $SD = .85$ ),  $t(52) = 2.66$ ,  $p < .01$ . Results indicate that respondents were more likely to agree with the message given by Colbert as opposed to the message of the MSNBC clip. A further *t*-test evaluated whether respondents found themselves actively disagreeing with the message in the video. Results signified a statistical difference between those who watched Colbert ( $M = 2.26$ ,  $SD = .90$ ) and MSNBC ( $M = 2.85$ ,  $SD = .82$ ),  $t(52) = 2.53$ ,  $p < .05$ , meaning those in the MSNBC condition were significantly more likely to report actively disagreeing with the persuasive message than respondents in the Colbert condition. As for the statement regarding whether participants were looking for the flaws in the video's argument, an independent-samples *t*-test showed no statistical difference between Colbert ( $M = 2.67$ ,  $SD = 1.14$ )

and MSNBC ( $M = 3.11$ ,  $SD = .85$ ),  $t(52) = 1.62$ ,  $p = .11$ . Lastly, an independent-samples  $t$ -test regarding the final statement (*It was easy to agree with the arguments made in the video*) showed a significant difference between those who viewed *Colbert* ( $M = 3.59$ ,  $SD = 1.05$ ) and those who viewed MSNBC ( $M = 2.93$ ,  $SD = .68$ ),  $t(52) = 2.78$ ,  $p < .01$ . The mean difference indicates those who viewed *Colbert* reported that it was “easier” to agree with the arguments made in the video.

Results from the  $t$ -tests indicate overall, the *Colbert* clip which blatantly criticizes Paul Ryan’s performance at the RNC convention invoked less counterargumentation (and more positive elaboration) from respondents than those who viewed the MSNBC video. Both clips performed at standards established by previous research (e.g. Nabi et. al, 2007, Lamarre et. al, 2013).

## Chapter 3

### RESULTS

#### Counterargumentation (H1)

In order to test whether or not respondents who receive a humorous video clip will engage in less counterargumentation than those who view a serious news clip, an independent-samples *t*-test comparing the two video conditions was conducted. The results showed a statistically significant difference in likelihood to counterargue between conditions: Colbert ( $M = 2.39$ ,  $SD = .63$ ) and MSNBC ( $M = 2.62$ ,  $SD = .63$ ),  $t(227) = -14.02$ ,  $p < .001$ . The mean difference was .22, with a 95% confidence interval ranging from -1.29 to -.976. The results support previous findings from Nabi et. al (2007) and Young (2008) that those who are exposed to a humorous text are less likely to counterargue the persuasive message than those who are given an equivalent non-humorous text.

Table 4. *Independent T-test Results for Counterargumentation*

|                | <i>M</i> | <i>SD</i> | <i>t-value</i> | <i>p</i> |
|----------------|----------|-----------|----------------|----------|
| <i>Colbert</i> | 2.39     | .63       |                |          |
| <i>MSNBC</i>   | 2.62     | .63       | -14.02         | .001     |
| Information    | 2.51     | .60       |                |          |
| No information | 2.50     | .67       | .134           | .893     |

Given the significant findings identified in the manipulation and randomization checks for viewership of *The Colbert Report (TCR)* and perceptions of “confusing,” a follow-up analysis was conducted. An ordinary-least squares (OLS) regression was used to predict whether counterargumentation differs between video conditions when controlling for these two potentially confounding variables. Predictors in the model included video condition, “confusing” and *TCR* viewership. Results indicate that once we control for perceptions of “confusing,” the video condition is no longer a significant predictor of counterargumentation ( $p = .80$ ). Viewership of *TCR* was also not a significant predictor. Essentially, the results indicate that counterargumentation was dependent on how confusing a respondent found the video’s message, such that higher perceptions of confusing yielded higher counterargumentation. Recalling to *t*-test results from the final experiment’s manipulation check, respondents in the MSNBC condition were more likely to find the video confusing ( $M = 2.38$ ,  $SD = .94$ ), and thusly counterargued the message at higher levels due to the fact they were confused. This

variation could explain the seemingly lower levels of counterargumentation in the *Colbert* condition. See Table 5.

Table 5. *Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) Regression Model Predicting Counterargumentation by Video Condition, Controlling for The Colbert Report (TCR) Viewing and Perceptions of “Confusing”*

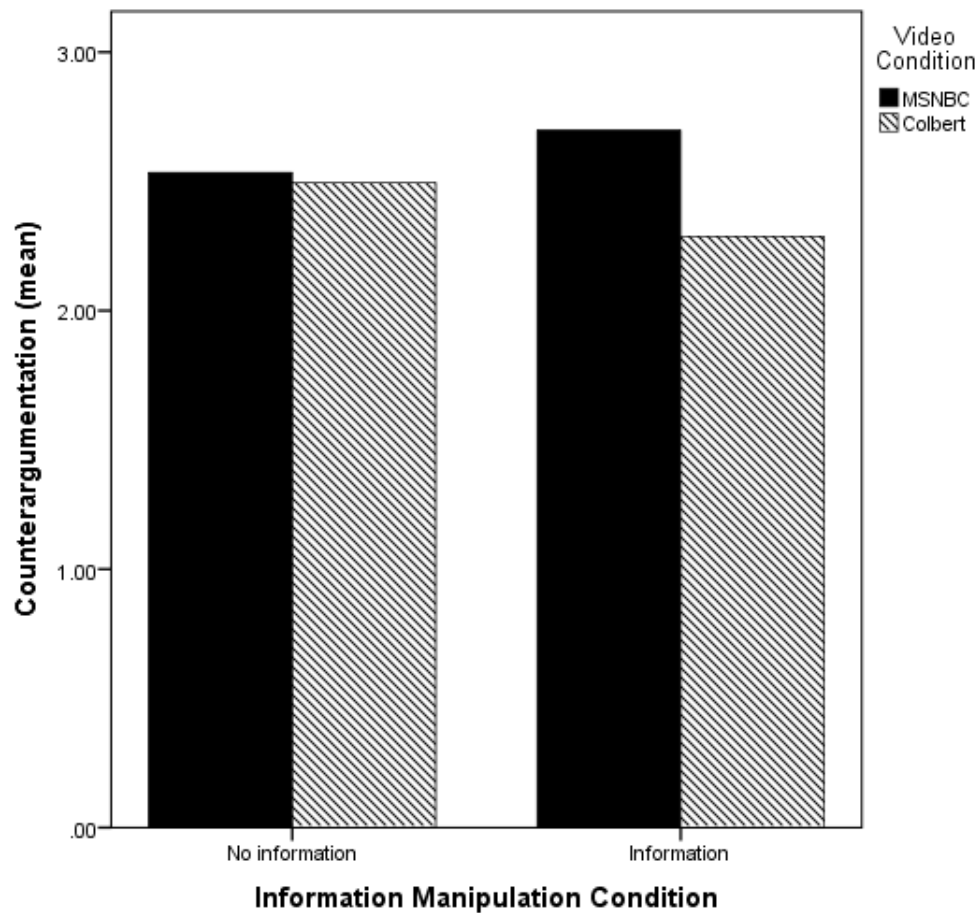
|                    | Counterargumentation |         |
|--------------------|----------------------|---------|
|                    | <i>B (SE)</i>        | $\beta$ |
| (Constant)         | 2.03 (0.135)***      |         |
| Video condition    | -.135 (0.077)        | -.106   |
| <i>TCR</i> viewing | -.042 (0.035)        | -.072   |
| Confusing          | .276 (0.041)***      | .413    |
| R <sup>2</sup>     | 0.21                 |         |
| N                  | 229                  |         |

\*p < .05, \*\*p < .01, \*\*\*p < .001

## **The Moderating Role of Information in Shaping Humor's Impact on Counterargumentation (RQ1, RQ2 and H2)**

To further investigate the difference in counterargumentation between the two videos, we explored the moderating effect of receiving an information manipulation. An OLS regression model predicting counterargumentation produced a significant model,  $F(3, 225) = 4.23$ ,  $p < .01$ , adjusted  $R^2 = .041$ . An interaction term between the video conditions and information manipulation conditions provided a statistically significant proportion of variance in counterargumentation,  $b = -.372$ ,  $se = .166$ ,  $p < .05$ . An examination of the interaction showed that exposure to information produced lower levels of counterargumentation in the *Colbert* condition, opposite of what was predicted. As shown in the graph in Figure 2, those who received the article in the MSNBC condition showed higher levels of counterargumentation than those who did not receive the article. RQ2 was dropped from the analysis after the OLS regression for RQ1 showed the same results as RQ2.

Figure 2. Impact of Humor on Counterargumentation With and Without Information



Additionally, H2 hypothesized that participants in the information manipulation condition would be more likely to counterargue the humorous message than those who were not in the condition. An independent sample *t*-test indicated there was no statistically significant difference between the two information manipulation groups, indicating the manipulation article did not influence a respondent's ability to counterargue the humorous message.

**Counterargumentation and Ideology.** A follow-up test was run to further explore why respondents may have differed in their responses for counterargumentation between video conditions after moderating for exposure to information. Political ideology (collapsed to liberal, moderate, and conservative) was selected for the control, and using an OLS regression, produced a significant model,  $F(4, 224) = 8.85$ ,  $p < .001$ , adjusted  $R^2 = .12$ . The interaction term between video condition and information manipulation, as well as political ideology, each accounted for a significant variance in counterargumentation levels. Meaning, ideology moderated the impact of information exposure on one's counterargumentation of the *Colbert* clip.

### **Knowledge Acquisition (H3 and H3b)**

To ensure the information manipulation article successfully produced higher levels of knowledge about the attitude object, Paul Ryan, a paired-samples  $t$ -test was used to compare pre-test and post-test knowledge levels (H3). The same four questions (State, Office held, Political affiliation, and 2012 candidacy) were asked in the pre- and post-test, and created reliable mean scales (pre:  $\alpha = .77$ ; post:  $\alpha = .66$ ). The paired-samples  $t$ -test showed a statistically significant difference between pre-test and post-test knowledge levels,  $t(229) = 9.83$ ,  $p < .001$ , with a 95% confidence interval of -.249 and -.166.

This study also sought to understand the difference in overall knowledge levels between information manipulation conditions (H3b). The twelve post-test knowledge items formed a reliable mean scale ( $\alpha = .82$ ). The value that a respondent scores on the mean scale (0 to 1) can be interpreted as the proportion of measures the individual

answered correctly out of the twelve items. An independents-sample *t*-test showed there was statistically significant difference in overall knowledge between the two information manipulation groups, as expected. As indicated by Table 6, participants in the information manipulation ( $M = .64$ ,  $SD = .25$ ) scored significantly higher on knowledge than those in the no information condition ( $M = .40$ ,  $SD = .24$ ),  $t(227) = -7.40$ ,  $p < .001$ . There was a .24 mean difference between manipulation conditions, with a 95% confidence interval ranging from -.300 to -.174.

Table 6. *Independent T-test Results for Overall Knowledge*

|                | <i>M</i> | <i>SD</i> | <i>t-value</i> | <i>p</i> |
|----------------|----------|-----------|----------------|----------|
| Information    | .64      | .25       | -7.40          | .000     |
| No information | .40      | .24       |                |          |

#### **Ability and Motivation (H4 and H5)**

Research in the Elaboration Likelihood Model has shown that an individual's ability and motivation to process a persuasive message impacts the likelihood of elaborating on the message, including positive elaborations and counterargumentation. If we recall, ability is directly linked to one's knowledge level and is a key individual difference in how one elaborates on a persuasive message, whereas motivation captures an individual's desire to thoughtfully process a message. By presenting an information manipulation article meant to increase knowledge, this study hypothesized that ability and motivation levels would be positively affected.

An independent-samples *t*-test showed there was no statistical difference in processing ability between the article and no article conditions ( $p = .15$ ). This suggests that the information manipulation did not provide respondents with a heightened ability to process the persuasive message. There was also no statistical difference in levels of motivation ( $p = .06$ ) between the article and no article conditions, indicating exposure to information about Paul Ryan did not increase an individual's motivation to thoughtfully process the message.

### **The Role of Knowledge in Candidate Evaluation (RQ3)**

In order to fully understand how providing information may affect an individual's subsequent evaluations, this study asked if different levels of knowledge (manipulated or not manipulated) moderated one's overall favorability of the candidate. A multiple regression predicting favorability of Paul Ryan was run, with information manipulation and overall knowledge as predictors. Results indicate no significant impact of the information manipulation or one's overall knowledge on overall favorability of Ryan. Hence results indicate knowledge, independent of the information manipulation condition, did not bias an individual's favorability of Paul Ryan.

### **Between Condition Differences and Candidate Evaluation Outcomes (H6, H6b, H7 and H7b)**

The other main goal of this study is to understand if exposure to information about a candidate moderates the relationship between exposure to a humorous persuasive message and candidate evaluation outcomes. To first understand this relationship, independent-samples *t*-tests were performed to determine if there was a difference in favorability (H6) or character trait evaluations (H6b) of Paul Ryan dependent on the type of video viewed. Results indicated that neither thermometer ratings nor overall trait evaluations of Paul Ryan were significantly different between the two video conditions. Thus, exposure to one of the two video stimuli did not result in a differential impact on one's favorability of Paul Ryan.

The final set of hypotheses stated that those who were in the humorous condition and received the information manipulation article will have a more favorable thermometer rating for Paul Ryan (H7), as well as a higher trait evaluation (H7b) than those who did not receive the manipulation article. A multiple regression was used to separately test H7 and H7b. Results showed that neither favorability of Rep. Ryan nor trait evaluations were significantly affected by the interaction of video condition and information manipulation.

**Mean Difference of Favorability.** To understand the insignificant difference in thermometer ratings of Paul Ryan between video conditions, a mean score difference was calculated between pre-test and post-test scores. An independent-samples *t*-test was run

on the mean score difference, which indicated there was no significant difference in negative favorability scores between the video conditions. Group statistics for the *t*-test indicated there was a decline in the mean average between pre- and post-test (MSNBC:  $M = -10.63$ ,  $SD = 19.38$ ; *Colbert* =  $M = -7.34$ ,  $SD = 20.11$ ), meaning respondents from both video conditions reported negative favorability of Rep. Ryan.

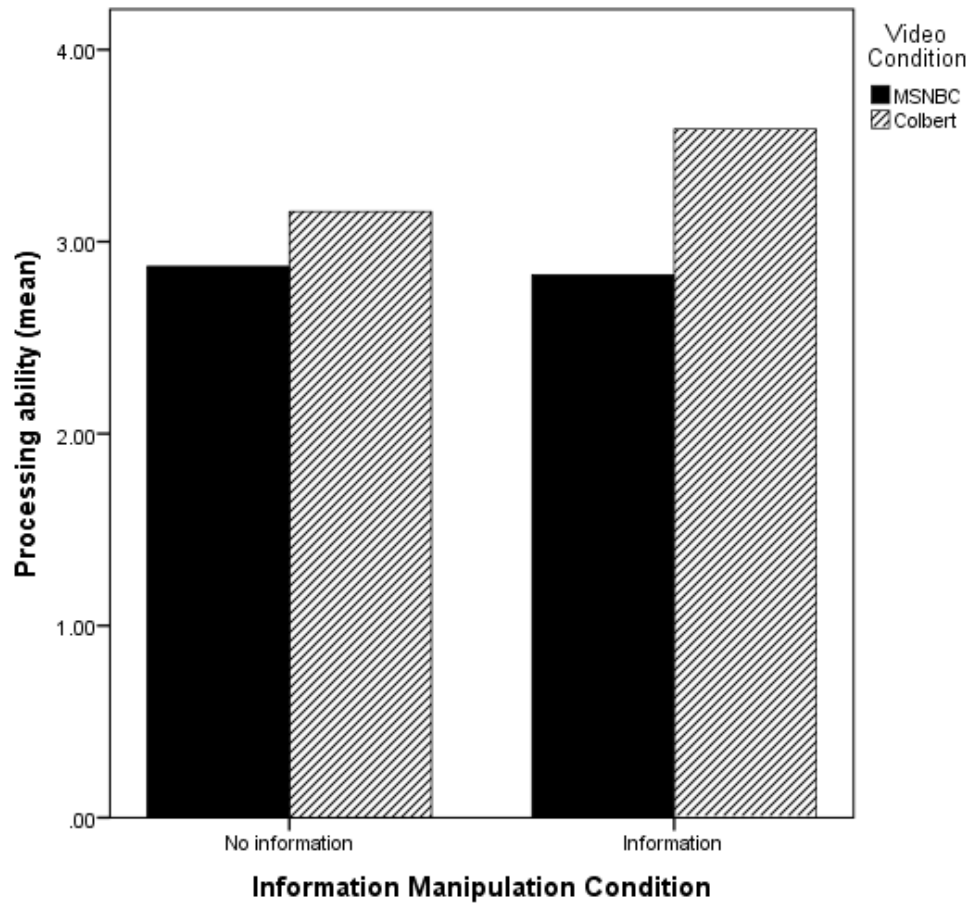
### **Post Hoc Tests**

**Ability, Motivation, and Depth Processing.** Given the nature of the study to understand counterargumentation and how it may differ as a function of video condition and information manipulation, additional tests were run to understand the underlying mechanisms that play a role in one's likelihood of counterarguing the video stimuli. First, OLS regression analyses were run, similar to RQ1, to explore the moderating effect of the information manipulation on ability, motivation, and depth processing in the face of a humorous message. Predictors included in the model were video condition, information manipulation, and an interaction term.

The OLS regression predicting processing ability produced a significant model,  $F(3, 225) = 8.71$ ,  $p < .001$ , adjusted  $R^2 = .092$ . The interaction term between video condition and information manipulation was shown to account for a statistically significant proportion of the variance in ability ( $b = .472$ ,  $se = .236$ ,  $p < .05$ ). Further examination of the interaction showed an enhancing effect that when information was introduced in the *Colbert* condition, ability levels increased. As well, ability levels were higher overall in *Colbert* for both information manipulation conditions, whereas ability

stayed constant between the information manipulation conditions for MSNBC. See the graph in Figure 3.

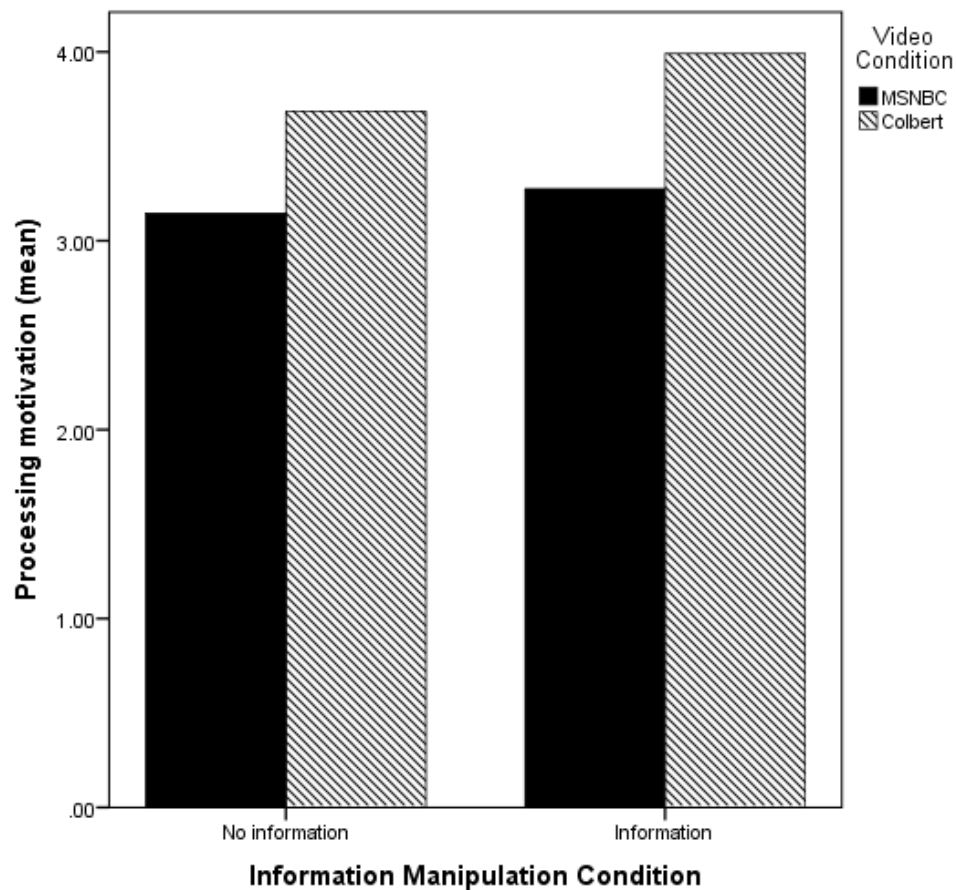
*Figure 3. Impact of Humor on Processing Ability With and Without Information*



Additionally, an OLS regression model predicting motivation to process a persuasive message produced a significant model,  $F(3, 224) = 13.71$ ,  $p < .001$ , adjusted  $R^2 = .155$ . Specifically, the results showed that the video condition accounted for a significant amount of variance in a respondent's motivation level ( $b = .539$ ,  $se = .149$ ,  $p < .001$ ). An interaction term between video condition and information manipulation also

did not account for a significant proportion of variance in motivation. A further examination of the results showed that exposure to information increased motivation for respondents in the *Colbert* condition. Those in the MSNBC condition did not significantly differ between information manipulation conditions. See Figure 4.

Figure 4. Impact of Humor on Processing Motivation With and Without Information



A subsequent OLS regression predicting depth processing did not produce a significant model. Past research has shown a relationship between exposure to a humorous message and overall processing depth (e.g. Nabi et al., 2007). Given that in

this study a set of processing measures was not shown to vary as a function of a humorous message or information manipulation, our understanding of the relationship between exposure to humor and counterargumentation is stifled.

**Controlling for Confounding Variables in Video Condition.** As mentioned earlier in H1, there is a concern that two confounding variables, perceptions of how “confusing” the videos were and *TCR* viewership, may be contributing to the significant differences described above. To further explore the differences in processing ability, motivation, depth, and message processing in the humorous verse non-humorous conditions, a MANOVA was run. The results revealed that the significant impact of the video condition on ability and motivation continues to be statistically significant, even when controlling for “confusing” and *TCR* viewership: Ability,  $F(1, 224) = 11.18, p < .01$  and Motivation:  $F(1, 224) = 27.44, p < .001$ . However, due to the significant correlation between each of these possible confounding variables and video condition, perceptions of “confusing” and *TCR* viewership were then included as control variables in an OLS regression. The new analyses will allow us to observe if the significant impact of the video condition on processing ability and motivation will remain significant, even when controlling for confounding variables.

Results predicting ability produced a significant model,  $F(3, 225) = 26.84, p < .001$ , adjusted  $R^2 = .26$ . All predictors were found to significantly contribute to the model. Video condition *TCR* viewership were positive predictors, whereas “confusing” was a negative predictor. In other words, when we control for viewership of *TCR* and

perceptions of “confusing,” those in the *Colbert* condition report statistically significant higher levels of processing ability than those in the MSNBC condition. An additional OLS regression predicting processing motivation also produce a significant model,  $F(3, 224) = 45.68, p < .001$ , adjusted  $R^2 = .37$ . Once again, all predictors provided a significant effect on motivation. We find again that respondents in the *Colbert* condition report significantly higher levels of processing motivation, controlling for *TCR* viewership and perceptions of “confusing.”

Turning our attention to depth processing, the addition of “confusing” into the earlier discussed MANOVA model actually *revealed* a significant relationship between video condition and depth processing that was not present before the controls were added to the model,  $F(1, 224) = 48.64, p < .001$ . A subsequent OLS regression analysis predicting depth processing produced a significant model,  $F(3, 225) = 20.96, p < .001$ , adjusted  $R^2 = .218$ . All predictors significantly contributed to the model. The analysis indicated that once “confusing” is taken into account, respondents in the *Colbert* condition report significantly lower depth processing than those in the MSNBC condition. See Table 7 below for OLS results from ability, motivation, and depth processing.

Table 7. *Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) Regression Model Predicting Ability, Motivation, and Processing Depth by Video Condition, Controlling for The Colbert Report (TCR) Viewing and Perceptions of “Confusing”*

|                 | Ability         |         | Motivation      |         | Depth           |       |
|-----------------|-----------------|---------|-----------------|---------|-----------------|-------|
|                 | B (SE)          | $\beta$ | B (SE)          | $\beta$ | B (SE)          | B     |
| (Constant)      | 3.38 (.192)***  |         | 4.03 (.161)***  |         | 4.14 (.155)***  |       |
| Video condition | .368 (.109)***  | .196    | .477 (.091)***  | .281    | -.207 (.088)*   | -.141 |
| TCR viewing     | .165 (.050)***  | .195    | .092 (.042)*    | .120    | .081 (.040)*    | .122  |
| Confusing       | -.343 (.058)*** | -.349   | -.408 (.048)*** | -.459   | -.328 (.047)*** | -.428 |
| R <sup>2</sup>  | .264            |         | .380            |         | .218            |       |
| N               | 229             |         | 229             |         | 229             |       |

\*p < .05, \*\*p < .01, \*\*\*p < .001

### Controlling for Confounding Variables with Interaction Effect

**(Video\*Information).** Next, OLS regressions were used to explore the moderating effect of the information manipulation on the impact of the video condition on one’s ability, motivation and processing depth, controlling for perceptions of “confusing” and viewing of *TCR*. Once again, it is our goal to understand if previous predictors, such as the interaction effect, remain significant even after controlling for the two confounding variables.

The first model predicting for ability indicated a significant model,  $F(5, 223) = 16.28$ ,  $p < .001$ , adjusted  $R^2 = .25$ . However, the information manipulation and the interaction effect between video condition and information manipulation were not significant predictors of the model. The same results were found in the models predicting motivation [ $F(5, 223) = 28.15$ ,  $p < .001$ , adjusted  $R^2 = .37$ ] and depth processing [ $F(5, 223) = 12.52$ ,  $p < .001$ , adjusted  $R^2 = .20$ ]. In other words, exposure to the information manipulation article did not moderate outcomes of processing ability, motivation, or depth for those in the *Colbert* condition when controlling for perceptions of “confusing” and *TCR* viewership.

## **Chapter 4**

### **DISCUSSION**

This study contributes to the growing literature dissecting individual depth processing of political humor, as well as the role of political comedy in shaping candidate evaluations. As political comedy programs like *The Colbert Report* become more of a mainstay in American political culture, the need to understand the cognitive processes at play when interacting with potentially negative information is crucial. By exploring the means which leads to counterargumentation of a humorous persuasive message and the potential effect of manipulated knowledge on one's ability and motivation to counterargue, this study revealed that the relationship between knowledge, counterargumentation, and humor is more complex than it appears. In terms of societal effect, this study showed that overall outcomes on candidate evaluations after exposure to a critical humorous message do not differ so greatly from those who were exposed to the messages of cable news. Indicating that political humor may not negatively influence voter perception of candidates, as some previous research has argued, but instead provide viewers with diverse insight into the intricacies of political campaigns.

## Counterargumentation

The overarching goal of this study was to understand if the introduction of an information manipulation would thwart the mitigating effects of humor on one's level of counterargumentation. Before we ran the moderating test, we examined the difference in counterargumentation between video conditions and information manipulation conditions. In tune with previous research from Nabi et al. (2007) and Young (2008), results indicated that counterargumentation varied as a function of video condition. However, this study found that perceptions of the videos as "confusing" confounded counterargumentation results. We believe that those in the MSNBC condition were more confused by the message conveyed by host Rachel Maddow and NBC correspondent Chuck Todd, thus causing respondents to react and counterargue the message at higher levels than those in the *Colbert* condition. The reaction to the non-humorous condition is interesting given the inherent arguments of both video condition clips were similar. The result is most likely indicative of the message design of the MSNBC clip. Given the confounding results, this study cannot wholly attribute difference in counterargumentation levels to the humorous content alone.

This study also asked if exposure to information would impact one's scrutiny of a message. Past research has indicated that priming information can manipulate recall abilities and that the subsequent knowledge gleaned from exposure to information can inspire cognitive elaboration (Eveland, 2002). We did not find support for the previous claims, meaning there was no difference in counterargumentation levels between information manipulation conditions. Although exposure to information did successfully

manipulate overall knowledge levels (H3b) and provide respondents with recall abilities, such findings indicate that exposure to information may have only provided superficial results.

Despite the non-significant difference between information manipulation conditions, interesting patterns emerged after running an analysis for the moderating variable.

Results indicate that exposure to information does not exert a main effect on counterargumentation on its own; however, it does serve well as a moderating variable.

Yet, contrary to prediction, exposure to information in the humor condition *reduced* counterargumentation, while exposure to information *increased* counterargumentation for those in the non-humorous condition. The finding for the MSNBC condition corresponds with previous Elaboration Likelihood Model research which states those with higher levels of knowledge are more likely to centrally process a message and subsequently scrutinize, or counterargue, the message (Wood, Rhodes & Biek, 1995; Wood & Kallgren, 1988). On the other hand, findings for the *Colbert* condition contradict the assumptions of ELM. Since high levels of knowledge (dictated by exposure to information) about an attitude object should increase argument scrutiny (either through enhanced ability or motivation), we must explore possible reasons why counterargumentation was not increased in the context of the *Colbert* clip.

One explanation for the results may lie with the information manipulation. The information manipulation highlighted important biographical and policy-related information about Paul Ryan in order to build on Popkin and Dimock's (1999) theory that once exposed to information on a topic, a knowledge level is then established.

Accordingly, an individual's knowledge becomes the basis for interpretation of new information that may affect subsequent evaluations of an attitude object. By priming the respondents with unbiased information, we thought we were providing them with the foundation they needed to later incorporate the information from the video clip into their knowledge base. The prime was expected to shape respondents' subsequent evaluations of Paul Ryan.

What may have happened is a moderating effect of political identity, where exposure to information that Paul Ryan does not support policy issues such as same-sex marriage or the Affordable Care Act (of which respondents may have been affected by) caused respondents to form initial negative evaluations of Rep. Ryan based on the respondents' own personal beliefs. When they went into the *Colbert* clip which bombasts Ryan for his inexperience in public speaking, his inability to "relate to the young people," and his attempt at setting the "world record for the most amount of blatant lies ever told in a political speech," the respondents most likely agreed with Stephen Colbert, based on their own biases, that Paul Ryan's performance at the RNC convention was unethical. Recall that a majority of our respondents aligned with the Democratic Party, which makes this scenario quite plausible. A follow-up analysis controlling for political ideology confirmed that ideology significantly moderated counterargumentation levels in the *Colbert* condition after exposure to information. Given the scope of the thesis, between-group differences were not explored. Understanding the differences between ideology groups could possibly re-substantiate the idea of "seeing what you want to see" in the messages of *The Colbert Report* based on an individual's political preference (e.g.

LaMarre et. al, 2009). Regardless, the significant role played by ideology in the context of this study is important and contributes to our understanding of the hypothesized outcomes.

Another issue we still need to consider may be the humor of the *Colbert* clip changed the impact of exposure to information. LaMarre and Walther (2013) manipulated respondents' ability level with an information prime and found that message scrutiny was lower in the political humor condition, despite high ability, causing them to believe that increased consideration of the satire component (e.g. resource allocation theory) as opposed to how they would discount the message resulted in lower scrutiny scores. We may have seen the same effect here.

### **Processing Ability, Motivation, and Depth**

Due to the study's successful manipulation of a respondent's overall level of knowledge (H3) and the increase in counterargumentation found in the non-humorous condition once we controlled for information exposure, we expected to find processing ability and motivation to also be increased in the face of information. However, given that we did not see an increase in elaboration in the face of information alone, it should come as no surprise that exposure to information did not result in significantly higher levels of processing ability or motivation (H6 and H6b).

Further tests were conducted to uncover whether information exposure served as a moderating variable that would affect ability and motivation levels in the face of humor. Interestingly, results for the interaction term were significant for ability and motivation, indicating an increase in ability and motivation after exposure to information for those in

the *Colbert* condition. Given the results, in tune with previous research conducted in the ELM, we should have expected increased counterargumentation for those who viewed *Colbert*. Since we did not, further analyses into message depth processing were conducted. At first, findings were insignificant, but when we controlled for perceptions of “confusing” using the video condition as a predictor, we were able to extrapolate significant results, indicating that perceptions of “confusing” led to more depth processing in the MSNBC condition and less depth processing in *Colbert*. Since respondents had to pay closer attention to the confusing argument, it should come as no surprise that depth processing in the non-humorous condition was reportedly increased. This would also explain why counterargumentation was higher in the MSNBC condition when we controlled for perceptions of confusion.

Nabi et al. (2007) found that when respondents find a message humorous, they are more likely to pay attention to the message, but are less motivated to argue against the message. In this study, we found the opposite - high motivation and low depth processing in the face of a humorous message. The best explanation for the significant difference in depth processing between the humorous and non-humorous condition is the confounding element of confusion. If respondents weren't confused, we may have seen higher depth processing in the face of humor. And if depth processing had been higher for the *Colbert* condition, we may have seen higher counterargumentation.

The results also indicate that depth processing is a required key element in exploring individual argument scrutiny. Although the information manipulation served to increase ability and motivation in the face of humor, the increases we saw were

essentially superficial given the lower depth processing we found in the face of humor. Despite this conclusion, this study found that changes in processing ability, motivation, and depth were confounded by the presence of confusion. In other words, the significant findings regarding the moderating impact of information were actually confounded, leaving us to conclude that the differences reported between the MSNBC clip and *Colbert* clip may not be attributable to information alone.

### **Favorability Outcome**

Although a large portion of this study focused on counterargumentation and processing depth in the face of an information manipulation, outcomes of exposure to information on candidate evaluations were also addressed. Given the difference in overall knowledge levels between the two information manipulation conditions, we asked whether the difference in knowledge levels would impact how people scrutinized a persuasive argument regarding Paul Ryan, and whether that scrutiny would then impact favorability ratings of Rep. Ryan. We know from past research that introducing information provides respondents the opportunity to think about the attitude object, which may then impact the respondent's attitude about the object to become more extreme in either direction (Wu & Shaffer, 1987). In our case, having higher levels of knowledge after exposure to information did not provide respondents with the fuel necessary to ponder a persuasive argument, nor did it provide enough fuel to ponder their opinions of the joke target. This indicates the findings are contrary to the belief that knowledge leads to unique evaluations of the attitude object (e.g. Popkin & Dimock, 1999). This may also

have something to do with the conflated outcome of information on processing ability and motivation.

We also hypothesized that those who are exposed to critical humor about a candidate will have more negative perceptions of the candidate in terms of favorability and character trait ratings (e.g. Becker, 2012). In fact, both the humorous and non-humorous videos reduced favorability of Rep. Ryan, which was supported by a post hoc analysis of the mean score difference in favorability ratings from pre- to post-test. This raises the question whether the inherently critical message, regardless of who delivered the message, affected respondents' opinions of Rep. Ryan, or if there is a confounding element of political ideology at play. Given the results, it is not surprising that when exploring the moderating role of exposure to information on favorability of Rep. Ryan, no significant results were found. It appears our information manipulation did not give respondents anything further to think about in terms of evaluating Paul Ryan. If counterargumentation was so low in the *Colbert* condition after exposure to information, we would have assumed that candidate evaluation outcomes would have been more negative than the non-humorous condition as a result. However, based on how far removed candidate evaluation outcomes are from the goals of counterargumentation, we should not have discounted the probability that we would not see any differences in evaluation levels of Paul Ryan between video conditions or information manipulation conditions.

## **Implications**

The present study adds to the growing body of literature illustrating that humorous persuasive messages mitigate the likelihood of a message recipient to scrutinize an argument (Nabi et. al, 2007; LaMarre and Walther, 2013; Polk et al., 2009; Young, 2008). This study attempted to explicate the means through which counterargumentation of a persuasive message is affected by humor and the introduction of an information manipulation. The findings suggest while information can be manipulated to increase recall abilities, it does not serve well as a means to mitigate the effects of humor. This may speak to the idea that one's political ideology impedes one's capacity to counterargue a critical argument once they receive information about a candidate that is opposite of what they personally believe. Thus, when high knowledge individuals digest political humor that may reinforce their political beliefs, they do so for the experience of having those beliefs flattered. This may even speak to the process of selective viewing of political humor as a function of ideology. The implications of the moderating effect of knowledge and possible intervention of political beliefs highlights that political humor is a critical vessel of the political process and does not necessarily cause negative repercussions on its viewers. As for those who are political news viewers, the findings speak to the capacity of high knowledge individuals to be more critical processors of political news, which is a positive societal impact.

The Elaboration Likelihood Model indicates that likelihood to scrutinize a message is dependent on an individual's level of processing ability and motivation. By manipulating one's level of knowledge to increase ability and motivation, this study

created an opportunity for us to understand how varying levels of knowledge may impact how individuals interact with political news and political humor. We know from previous research that an individual's ability and motivation tend to be lower when interacting with humor, which this study explicated the importance of knowledge in the relationship between cognitive processing and humor. We found that high knowledge allows political comedy viewers to further interact with the satirical message above and beyond the interaction of those who watch political news. Knowledge is the key component in an effective electorate, which this study provides further insight into the importance of knowledge.

Another implication of the study's findings lies in the importance of depth processing as a means to aid understanding in the function of high ability and motivation levels. It appears that all three of the components need to be high after exposure to information in order to "conquer" the mitigating effects of humor. Although this study did not mitigate the effects of humor on counterargumentation, we now have a better understanding regarding an individual's capability to process a persuasive message in the ELM and what best serves an individual's likelihood of counterargumentation. Finally, the research suggests that our perceptions of how political humor might foster negative candidate evaluations may not be dependent on message format (i.e. satire or news), but dependent on the message content. If both clips in this study relayed the same inherent argument, then we can conclude that formations of negative candidate evaluation are not necessarily attached to the critical nature of political humor, but instead to critical media

exposure in general. This could even have further implications on the impact of cable news.

### **Limitations and Future Research**

As with any study, this experiment had limitations. First of all, the statistically significant difference in perceived confusion between the video conditions confounded findings in counterargumentation and depth processing. As a member of the validated “perceived humor” scale, research has yet to discuss what role perceptions of confusion may play in counterargumentation.

In our pilot study and in the “perceived humor” manipulation check for the final study, we found there was a significant difference in levels of confusion between the two videos. While one would expect perceptions of confusion to relate more to humor since research has found that humor can confuse particular respondents (see Polk, 2009 and LaMarre et. al, 2009), we found a higher mean increase in confusion for those in the non-humorous condition. Such findings raise questions relating to the choices made for the study. Did choosing a non-humorous video that had two correspondents relay an issue? Did the focus of Chuck Todd’s report from the floor of the RNC convention counteract what host Rachel Maddow shared at the beginning of the clip? Or was the overall message of the non-humorous clip confusing in general?

Due to the inability to a) find a non-humorous clip from the campaign that did not include several correspondents reporting from the scene of the RNC or b) find an array of coverage with the same inherent argument of the *Colbert* clip, we chose the MSNBC clip for this study as the most appropriate non-humorous control clip. This selection and the

resulting confusion brings up several questions that future researchers must consider when using campaign news clips as a control in a political humor effect study.

Another limitation to this study involves whether the use of validated perception and processing scales were the most appropriate means to evaluate the expected outcomes of this experiment. Since the original scales were constructed to measure reaction more towards a humorous text and not a video, as well not geared towards the complexities of Stephen Colbert's and even Jon Stewart's satire, it is questionable if the scales are still appropriate in their original conception. Given the troubles we found with the perceived humor, ability, motivation, and depth processing scales, future research may want to update the scales and base their questions deeper into the Elaboration Likelihood Model. As well, it is suggested that research conducted in advertising may serve as inspiration for more complete ability, motivation, and depth scales.

Finally, this study utilized a convenient sample of undergraduate college students. Although research has indicated the age group is more likely to be consumers of political humor, our findings showed that viewership of *The Colbert Report* and *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* were actually low, meaning future research should reevaluate their definition of who is more likely to watch political humor. Other potential problems posed by using a student sample include low diversity in gender, age, and race; as well, the probability of polling a more liberal sample. Students may also be higher in their levels of knowledge, news viewing, and political interest than non-college students. It would wise for future political humor effects studies to sample from a more generalizable participant pool to avoid such problems.

## **Summary and Conclusion**

The current study reveals important findings regarding the relationship between knowledge and counterargumentation in the face of political humor. Ultimately, this research suggests that although information can moderate the relationship between counterargumentation and a non-humorous persuasive message, more work needs to be done to explicate how information thwarts the mitigating effects of humor. This study did not necessarily find support for Nabi's (2007) claims that humor discounts argument scrutiny; nor did it support resource allocation theory (Young, 2008) strictly on the basis that results were confounded. This study validated the notion that increasing knowledge impacts processing ability and motivation in the face of humor, yet it did not contribute to the idea that high ability and motivation levels alone fully impacts one's elaboration of a persuasive message. Interestingly, we also found that in the face of humor when moderating for knowledge, there was no difference in candidate evaluation outcomes between conditions, indicating that a critical message will have an impact on favorability no matter the delivery. This has further societal implications on how news media represents candidates to its viewers. Updates to the utilized research design will help us further understand how higher levels of knowledge may impact the cognitive processing at play when one is exposed to a humorous persuasive message. Despite the limitations of this study, this research adds new and important findings to the literature about the role played by knowledge in political comedy effects.

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## **Appendix A**

### **INFORMATION MANIPULATION ARTICLE**

Representative Paul Ryan has been a member of Congress since 1998 and represents Wisconsin's 1st Congressional district. Born and raised in Janesville, Wisconsin, he is the son of Betty and Paul Murray Ryan. In 2000, he married Janna Little and together they have three children: Liza, Charles and Sam. A member of the Catholic faith, Ryan once served as an altar boy.

Rep. Ryan affiliates with the Republican Party and his policy positions have been consistent with the conservative Tea Party movement. He once considered himself a disciple of author Ayn Rand, before denouncing her philosophy in April 2012. In 2012, he was the Vice Presidential candidate of the Republican ticket, running alongside Presidential candidate Mitt Romney. They lost to incumbent President Barack Obama and Vice President Joe Biden.

As chairman of the House Budget Committee, Rep. Ryan has purposed a budget bill almost every year since 2008. In 2008, he purposed "The Roadmap for America's Future Act of 2008," which called for the replacement of Medicare with a voucher program. In 2010, he introduced "Roadmap for America's Future Act of 2010," a modified version of his previous bill. The act aimed to reduce federal income tax rates and privatize a portion of social security.

Paul Ryan is a known opponent of same-sex marriage and previously supported a constitutional ban on same-sex marriage. He also does not support The Affordable Care Act of 2010 and voted to repeal it in 2012.

## **Appendix B**

### **CANDIDATE KNOWLEDGE QUESTION BATTERY**

**1. Paul Ryan represents which state:**

- a. Wisconsin
- b. Massachusetts
- c. Ohio
- d. Arizona
- e. I'm not sure

**2. Paul Ryan identifies as a member of which political party:**

- a. Democrat
- b. Republican
- c. Neither
- d. I'm not sure

**3. Which of the following best describes the office currently held by Paul Ryan:**

- a. Vice-President of the United States
- b. US Senator
- c. US Congressperson
- d. Governor
- e. I'm not sure

**4. To the best of your knowledge, how many children does Paul Ryan have?**

- a. Two
- b. Three

- c. Four
  - d. Zero
  - e. I'm not sure
- 5. Paul Ryan has publicly stated that his political philosophy is closest to that of which author:**
- a. Mark Twain
  - b. Ayn Rand
  - c. Kurt Vonnegut
  - d. George Orwell
  - e. I'm not sure
- 6. Which of the following best describes Paul Ryan's religious affiliation:**
- a. Evangelical Christian
  - b. Catholic
  - c. Protestant
  - d. Jewish
  - e. I'm not sure
- 7. What national office did Paul Ryan run for in the 2012 election:**
- a. President
  - b. Vice President
  - c. Governor
  - d. Senator
  - e. I'm not sure
- 8. To the best of your knowledge, did Paul Ryan support or oppose the passage of the Affordable Care Act (sometimes called Obamacare):**
- a. He supported the Affordable Care Act
  - b. He opposed the Affordable Care Act

c. I'm not sure

**9. To the best of your knowledge, does Paul Ryan support or oppose the privatization of social security?**

a. He supports the privatization of social security

b. He opposes the privatization of social security

c. I'm not sure

**10. To the best of your knowledge, does Paul Ryan support or oppose the introduction of a voucher system to replace Medicare?**

a. He supports the introduction of a voucher system

b. He opposes the introduction of a voucher system

c. I'm not sure.

**11. To the best of your knowledge, does Paul Ryan support or oppose the reduction of federal income taxes.**

a. He supports reducing federal income taxes

b. He opposes reducing federal income taxes

c. I'm not sure

**12. To the best of your knowledge, does Paul Ryan support or oppose the federal recognition of same sex marriage.**

a. He supports the recognition of same sex marriage

b. He opposes the recognition of same sex marriage

c. I'm not sure

**Appendix C**  
**IRB APPROVAL LETTER**



**RESEARCH OFFICE**

210 Halliburton Hall  
University of Delaware  
Newark, Delaware 19716-1551  
Ph: 302/831-2136  
Fax: 302/831-2828

DATE: February 27, 2014

TO: Michael Myers  
FROM: University of Delaware IRB

STUDY TITLE: [525849-3] Manipulation check/pilot study for Myers graduate thesis

SUBMISSION TYPE: Amendment/Modification

ACTION: DETERMINATION OF EXEMPT STATUS  
DECISION DATE: February 27, 2014

REVIEW CATEGORY: Exemption category # 2

Thank you for your submission of Amendment/Modification materials for this research study. The University of Delaware IRB has determined this project is EXEMPT FROM IRB REVIEW according to federal regulations.

We will put a copy of this correspondence on file in our office. Please remember to notify us if you make any substantial changes to the project.

If you have any questions, please contact Nicole Farnese-McFarlane at (302) 831-1119 or [nicolefm@udel.edu](mailto:nicolefm@udel.edu). Please include your study title and reference number in all correspondence with this office.