

The Impact of Real News about “Fake News”: Intertextual Processes and Political Satire

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Abstract

This study builds on research about political humor, press metacoverage, and intertextuality to examine the effects of news coverage about political satire on audience members. The analysis uses experimental data to test whether news coverage of Stephen Colbert’s Super PAC influenced knowledge and opinion regarding *Citizens United*, as well as political trust and internal political efficacy. It also tests whether such effects depended on previous exposure to *The Colbert Report* (Colbert’s satirical television show) and traditional news. Results indicate that exposure to news coverage of satire can influence knowledge, opinion, and political trust. Additionally, regular satire viewers may experience stronger effects on opinion, as well as increased internal efficacy, when consuming news coverage about issues previously highlighted in satire programming.

Introduction

The 2010 ruling by the U.S. Supreme Court in *Citizens United versus Federal Election Commission* dramatically altered the financing of American political campaigns. Of particular importance, the decision allowed Super Political Action Committees, or Super PACs, to raise and spend unlimited amounts of money on behalf of political candidates so long as they do not coordinate with the candidate’s own committee. The following year, comedian Stephen

Colbert created his own Super PAC to satirize the decision and its consequences. This Super PAC not only raised more than \$1 million but also provided a running theme for Colbert's late night comedy television show, *The Colbert Report with Stephen Colbert*. At the same time, it became a news story in and of itself, drawing considerable attention from more traditional news outlets.

This intersection of late-night comedy and finance reform reflects shifts in the growing body of literature on the nature and effects of televised political satire programs such as *The Colbert Report* and its "parent" program, *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*. Thus far, however, researchers have paid little attention to the potential effects of news coverage *about* political satire. In developing a framework for doing so, this study draws on two distinct literatures: social scientific research on metacoverage and critical research on intertextuality. Research on "press metacoverage," or "news about the press and publicity processes" (Esser and D'Angelo, 2006, p. 44), has tended to focus on news coverage of conventional political content. This project extends the concept to consider news coverage of political entertainment—specifically, traditional news coverage of Colbert's Super PAC—and the effects of such coverage. The project also draws on the concept of "intertextuality," which emphasizes how meaning is derived, not from isolated messages, but from the synergistic dynamics among multiple messages. Put simply, intertextuality is the notion that a text's ultimate meaning is inherently tied to myriad texts in the symbolic environment (Gray, 2006). Therefore, the meaning—and impact—an individual derives from a message is contingent on that individual's interactions with other texts.

The analysis uses experimental data to test whether, and if so, how, exposure to news coverage of Stephen Colbert's Super PAC could have influenced knowledge and opinion about the *Citizens United* decision itself. Furthermore, it considers the potential effects of such coverage on two broader attitudes about the political system: political trust, or faith in government, and internal political efficacy, or confidence in one's own ability to comprehend—and participate meaningfully—in politics.

Televised Political Satire and Its Effects

Both *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report* combine features of traditional television news programs with those of late night talk shows (e.g., *The Tonight Show with Jay Leno* and *The Late Show with David Letterman*). Baym (2007, p. 361) describes the two programs as "discursively integrated" in how they break down "divisions between news and entertainment, public affairs and popular culture, affective consumption, and democratic discourse." (Hollander, 2005) *The Daily Show* is modeled as a fake evening news show,

with host Jon Stewart playing the role of anchor (Baym, 2005). In contrast, *The Colbert Report* is modeled as a fake conservative political talk show in which Colbert takes on the persona of a Bill O'Reilly-like figure (Baym, 2007).

Compared with traditional late night talk shows, which tend to focus on personality and physical characteristics of public officials rather than on policy issues (Niven, Lichter, & Amundson, 2003), dedicated political satire programs such as *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report* focus extensively on such issues. Young's (2004) content analysis of *The Daily Show*'s “Headlines” section showed that Stewart's jokes were more likely to mention policy issues than were the monologue jokes of Jay Leno or David Letterman. Meanwhile, Brewer and Marquardt (2007) found that more than half of *The Daily Show*'s news stories addressed policy issues—a result that dovetails with Fox, Koloen, and Sahin's (2007) conclusion that the substance of the program's content rivals that of traditional evening news.

A growing body of research indicates that political satire programs can influence audience members' knowledge, opinions, and beliefs. For example, Xenos and Becker (2009) showed that people with lower levels of self-reported political interest who watched *The Daily Show*'s coverage of a foreign policy issue were more likely to access foreign policy information than those who watched a network news story. Cao (2010) found that politically inattentive viewers of *The Daily Show* were more likely to follow issues discussed on the program than were similarly inattentive non-viewers. Cao (2008) also found that watching late-night comedy programs was associated with greater campaign knowledge, particularly among young people. In addition, according to a recent study by Young and Hoffman (2012), exposure to *The Daily Show* can lead to the acquisition of current events knowledge.

In regard to political opinions and attitudes, Baumgartner and Morris (2006; see also Morris, 2009) found that college students exposed to *The Daily Show* reported more negative views of particular political candidates and the electoral system than did those not exposed. They also found, however, that exposure to the program increased viewers' internal political efficacy. The authors posit that this positive effect on efficacy is due to the fact that *The Daily Show* “simplifies politics for its audience in a humorous manner” (p. 353), thereby making viewers more confident in their ability to understand their political world. Hoffman and Thomson (2009) also found that increased political efficacy resulting from exposure to political satire programming mediated a positive effect on political participation. Meanwhile, a study (Baumgartner & Morris, 2008) of the effects of exposure to *The Colbert Report* suggests a potential reduction in political efficacy after viewing the show. The authors attribute this finding to the complexity of Colbert's ironic approach, which may confuse viewers and thereby decrease their evaluations of their own political competence.

The same study (Baumgartner & Morris, 2008) indicated that exposure to Colbert's ironic criticism of Democrats increased support for Republican policies. This finding is consistent with the work of LaMarre, Landreville, and Beam (2009), which found differing interpretations of Colbert's intended target as a function of audience members' own political ideologies. Conservatives believed that Colbert was merely presenting an exaggerated version of his own perspective, whereas liberals believed that Colbert was ironically presenting exaggerated conservative arguments to advance a liberal perspective. Given that individuals can interpret the meaning of Colbert's arguments differently, the effects of exposure to Colbert's ironic style are likely to vary across individuals as well.

Conceptualizing News about Political Satire

Thus far, research on the impact of televised political satire has focused on its direct effects. But what effects, if any, might traditional news coverage *about* political satire produce? To address this question, the present study synthesizes the research described earlier in the text with the literatures on metacoverage and intertextuality.

Metacoverage

Previous research has identified two dimensions of press metacoverage: "news about the role, presence, and behaviors of the news media in campaign events and outcomes" and "news about the publicity efforts of candidates that take place in media formats not traditionally allied to the mainstream press but whose strategic intent is to garner coverage from the mainstream press" (Esser and D'Angelo, 2003, p. 619). This study focuses on the first dimension, press metacoverage. Research suggests that such "news about news" is common in traditional print and broadcast news coverage of politics and has remained a stable component of campaign coverage across a number of election cycles (Esser & D'Angelo, 2003; Johnson, Boudreau, & Glowaki, 1996; Kerbel, 1998; Kerbel, Apee, & Ross, 2000; Wise & Brewer, 2010). Political satire programs also present substantial levels of press metacoverage (Brewer & Marquardt, 2007; Wise & Brewer, 2010).

Young (2011) argues that the more general concept of "press metacoverage" should include coverage of non-traditional political content such as political humor. Citing traditional news outlets' extensive coverage of comedian Tina Fey's parody of Governor Sarah Palin on *Saturday Night Live* in 2008 as a "central aspect of (the news media's) meta-coverage game-frame" (Young, 2011, p.262), she suggests that news producers can strategically use coverage of political entertainment to attract viewers, reduce production costs with the

introduction of pre-existing footage, and introduce alternative narratives into election coverage.

There is evidence from the literature on traditional press metacoverage literature that news about news has important consequences for audiences. Research by D’Angelo and Lombard (2008) indicates that exposure to “press frames” can influence recall of story topics as well as opinions about the news media. De Vreese and Elenbaas (2008) identified patterns of enhanced political cynicism among politically knowledgeable viewers as a function of exposure to press metacoverage. If news about news can shape viewers’ recall, opinions, and attitudes, then it is plausible that news about political satire could influence these constructs as well. To date, however, scholars have yet to explore the potential impact of press metacoverage in the context of political satire. The current project addresses this gap in the literature.

Intertextuality

Underlying the concept of press metacoverage is a phenomenon commonly explored in the critical-cultural literature: Intertextuality. Theorists in this field have recognized that individual texts cannot be interpreted on their own. As explained by Gray, Jones, and Thompson (2009), “Texts do not take on meaning for any reader in a vacuum. Rather, a reader will always make sense of texts relative to other texts, ‘socially’ or intertextually” (p. 18). Such an assumption complicates the work of media effects scholars given the infinite permutations of intertextual processes that may be at play at any given time. Allen (2000) observes that, viewed through the prism of intertextuality, “. . . meaning becomes something which exists between a text and all the other texts to which it refers and relates, moving out from the independent text into a network of textual relations” (p. 1). Likewise, Gray (2006, p. 3) argues that a singular text is nothing more than a “non-existent entity, wished into creation by analysis,” thereby highlighting the “fundamental and inescapable interdependence of all textual meaning upon the structures of meaning proposed by other texts” (p. 4).

These observations suggest that to truly understand the effects of a message, one cannot consider that message in isolation. To do so ignores a fundamental principle governing the construction of meaning in our post-modern media environment. Within the framework of intertextuality, one can conceptualize press metacoverage as a set of texts (news stories) that help infuse meaning into another set of texts (news stories again). Similarly, political satire programs interpret other media texts by satirizing them (hence, informing their ultimate meaning). Meanwhile, traditional news offers metacoverage of political entertainment in its inclusion of political satire and caricatures in news reports—adding another layer to this intertextual process.

Although the dynamics among texts shape the meaning of political messages, the audience also plays a role, as recognized by Gray, Jones, and Thompson (2009) in their observation that readers make sense of texts “socially.” Audience members impose meaning on political messages through the understanding they bring to the text. The “systems, codes, and traditions” (Allen, 2000, p. 1) that inform the meaning of a text originate from broader cultural and social contexts as well as from previous works. As these factors vary, so also do the constructions of meaning derived from a text. For instance, a politically attentive viewer of Colbert will likely interpret his program differently than someone who pays little attention to news, as the “intertexts” brought to the viewing experience will vary. By the same token, a regular viewer of Colbert’s program will likely experience different effects through exposure to traditional news coverage of issues that have already been highlighted and satirized by Colbert on his show. As Gray explains, “intertextuality prepares us . . . so that any resulting meaning, power, or effects that ‘the text’ may be seen to possess are in part a function of those already read” (Gray, p. 26).

In discussing the future of research on political entertainment, Holbert and Young (forthcoming) emphasize the importance of identifying and understanding intertextual processes and urge political communication scholars to “integrate the role of multiple messages (intertextuality) in the effects process (either directly through measurements of exposure or indirectly through measurements of audience perception, or content hybridization).” Given the absence of quantitative research on these intertextual processes, the current project systematically explores them in the context of press metacoverage of political satire.

Citizens United, the Colbert Super PAC, and the News Media

In examining the effects of press metacoverage about political satire and the intertextual processes occurring among these texts, the present study focuses on Stephen Colbert’s satire of the *Citizens United* decision and the Super PACs that emerged in its wake. The decision prompted considerable news media coverage, as well as criticisms from a range of public interest groups concerned about its potential impact on the political process. It also inspired an elaborate, long-running satirical effort on the part of Stephen Colbert and his television program. In March 2011, he started his own PAC, called the “Colbert PAC,” with the help of his attorney, Trevor Potter (formerly the chairman of the Federal Election Commission). In April of that year, Colbert learned that Viacom (which owns his network, Comedy Central) was concerned that it might be making an illegal contribution if he had a PAC. To avoid this problem, Colbert replaced his PAC with a Super PAC, called

“Americans for a Better Tomorrow, Tomorrow.” After this, Colbert also gained media exemption so that he could talk about his Super PAC on his show—which he did, extensively. A search of the video archives from *The Colbert Report’s* website (www.colbertnation.com) identifies 128 segments tagged by the site for “Colbert Super PAC” from March 2011 to April 2012 (when the experiment for the present study took place).

When the Republican presidential nomination campaign began in earnest, Colbert’s Super PAC responded with a series of satirical television advertisements. As the same campaign reached its peak in January 2012, Colbert announced on his show that he was running for “president of the United States of South Carolina.” Given the prohibition against a candidate controlling a Super PAC, he handed over control of his Super PAC to Jon Stewart of *The Daily Show*. Stewart then announced that the Super PAC’s new name was “The Definitely Not Coordinating with Stephen Colbert Super PAC.” That same month, the Super PAC released an ad encouraging South Carolinians to vote for Herman Cain, who was no longer a candidate for that state’s Republican presidential primary but whose name was still on the ballot. On January 30, 2012, Stewart handed control of the Super PAC back to Colbert. During this one month alone, *The Colbert Report* ran 24 segments on Colbert Super PAC.

As all of this was taking place the traditional news media began to cover Colbert’s Super PAC, thereby adding a new layer of intertextuality to the comedian’s satire. For example, the *New York Times* ran 14 items mentioning Colbert’s Super PAC in the period between March 2011 and April 2012 (as identified by a Lexis-Nexis full text search for ([“*Citizens United*” or “Super PAC”] and “Colbert”). During the same period, the *Washington Post* ran 21 items mentioning it. In the key month of January 2012, the *New York Times* mentioned Colbert’s Super PAC in 7.5% of all items mentioning *Citizens United* or Super PACs (8 of 107); for the *Washington Post*, the percentage was 8.1% (9 of 111). In short, Colbert’s satire was one—although not the only—lens through which these leading sources examined the ruling and its implications.

Taken collectively, the press metacoverage in such traditional news outlets provided a wealth of information about Colbert’s Super PAC, including details about its creation, the comedian’s campaign for president of the United States of South Carolina, and the advertisements created by his Super PAC. Many items also used Colbert’s satire to illustrate points about Super PACs in general, including what they are, how they are regulated, and how they might affect the political process. A number of items suggested that Colbert’s Super PAC was educating the public about campaign finance reform and/or exposing negative consequences of the *Citizens United* decision. A few items presented a more critical view; for example, one story criticized

Colbert for making a mockery of the Supreme Court, and others suggested that Colbert's Super PAC was having a negative effect by disrupting the electoral system.

Colbert, in turn, used the news coverage of his Super PAC to further his own satire. For example, he cited two different stories about it in a March 29, 2012, segment of his program:

My Super PAC is having a super impact. According to the *Houston Chronicle*, "more Texans have donated to Americans for a Better Tomorrow, Tomorrow than to the pro-Romney Restore Our Future"... According to none other than the Congressional newspaper *The Hill*, a "Super PAC craze" is sweeping the nation," and "the explosion of Super PACs is likely being fueled by a surge of media interest" because "Stephen Colbert has brought the issue to late-night television."

Thus, Colbert exploited press metacoverage to add yet another layer of intertextuality to the public discourse surrounding *Citizens United*, Super PACs, and his own Super PAC.

Hypotheses and Research Questions

This study's hypotheses and research questions address the effects of news about Colbert's Super PAC on political knowledge, issue opinions, political trust, and internal political efficacy. Previous research has identified each of these outcomes as being important to democratic health (e.g., Kenski & Stroud, 2006). Some research (e.g., Gamson, 1968) also suggests that they may interact to shape political outcomes, for example, when political trust is *low*, but internal political efficacy is *high*, individuals may engage in *unconventional* (system-challenging) political acts such as protests.

The first hypothesis addresses political knowledge, building on previous evidence that political satire can produce learning effects (Cao, 2008; Hollander, 2005; Young & Hoffman, 2012):

H1: Individuals who read a news story about Colbert's Super PAC will know more about *Citizens United* than those who read no news story about campaign finance.

Exposure to a more "conventional" news story about public interest groups' criticisms of *Citizens United* and Super PACs should also increase knowledge about *Citizens United*, relative to the control, but it is less clear which type of story, if either, should have a greater effect. Thus, the study also addresses the following research question:

RQ1: How will knowledge about *Citizens United* compare between those reading a news story about Colbert's Super PAC and those reading a conventional news story about criticism of *Citizens United* and Super PACs?

A second hypothesis focuses on opinion about the *Citizens United* ruling, building on previous evidence that political satire can influence public opinion (Baumgartner & Morris, 2006; Morris, 2009). One possibility is that audience members exposed to news about Colbert’s satire will not “get the joke” (see Baumgartner & Morris, 2008). To the extent that they do, however, one would expect exposure to such news to reduce support for the Court’s decision:

H2: Individuals who read a news story about Colbert’s Super PAC will hold more negative opinions about the *Citizens United* decision than those who read no story about campaign finance.

Exposure to a conventional story about public interest groups’ criticisms of *Citizens United* and Super PACs should produce a similar effect. Again, however, it is unclear which story, if either, should have a greater effect. As before, a research question is more appropriate here:

RQ2: How will opinion about the *Citizens United* decision compare across those reading a news story about Colbert’s Super PAC and those reading a conventional news story about criticism of *Citizens United* and Super PACs?

Two more hypotheses focus on the effects of news about Colbert’s satire on political trust and internal political efficacy:

H3A: Individuals who read a news story about Colbert’s Super PAC will report less political trust than those who read no news story about campaign finance.

H3B: Individuals who read a news story about Colbert’s Super PAC will report less internal political efficacy than those who read no news story about campaign finance.

The former hypothesis follows from previous research suggesting that both political satire (Baumgartner & Morris, 2006) and press metacoverage (de Vreese & Elanbaas, 2008) can foster political cynicism. The latter hypothesis builds on evidence that that exposure to Colbert’s satire can reduce internal political efficacy (Baumgartner & Morris, 2008). The study also addresses the following research questions:

RQ3A: How will political trust compare between those reading a news story about Colbert’s Super PAC and those reading a conventional news story about criticism of *Citizens United* and Super PACs?

RQ3B: How will internal political efficacy compare between those reading a news story about Colbert’s Super PAC and those reading a conventional news story about criticism of *Citizens United* and Super PACs?

An additional set of hypotheses addresses the potential for “intertextual processes.” Although critical-cultural scholars have explored intertextuality through qualitative approaches, no research to date has used quantitative methods to examine it as a media effects process. The following account

conceptualizes intertextuality processes in empirical terms as a set of interactions between exposure to a given text and previous exposure to other related texts (although acknowledging that this is undoubtedly a simplistic operationalization given the infinite possibilities for relationships among messages and previous exposures). Specifically, the hypotheses here presume that previous exposure to *The Colbert Report* will predispose audience members to understand and accept Colbert's satirical messages, thereby magnifying the impact of exposure to news about his Super PAC on opinions and attitudes (note that these hypotheses focus on the implications of intertextual processes for meaning-making rather than learning):

H4A: The effect of reading a news story about Colbert's Super PAC on support for the Court's decision will be greater among regular Colbert Report viewers than among non-viewers.

H4B: The effect of reading a news story about Colbert's Super PAC on political trust will be greater among regular Colbert Report viewers than among non-viewers.

H4C: The effect of reading a news story about Colbert's Super PAC on internal political efficacy will be greater among regular Colbert Report viewers than among non-viewers.

A final set of research questions addresses the potential for other sorts of intertextual processes involving previous exposure to *The Colbert Report* or traditional news:

RQ4A: Will the effects of a reading a news story about Colbert's Super PAC on support for the Court's decision, political trust, and internal political efficacy be greater among those regularly consuming traditional news than among those seldom consuming traditional news?

RQ4B: Will the effects of reading a conventional news story about criticism of Citizens United and Super PACs on support for the Court's decision, political trust, and internal political efficacy be greater among regular Colbert Report viewers than among non-viewers?

RQ4C: Will the effects of a reading a conventional news story about criticism of Citizens United and Super PACs on support for the Court's decision, political trust, and internal political efficacy be greater among those regularly consuming traditional news than among those seldom consuming traditional news?

Testing the Effects of News Coverage about Colbert's Super PAC

The data for this study came from an online, post-test only experiment conducted in April 2012. A total of 454 students at a public university in the Mid-Atlantic participated in the experiment. Of the participants, 75.5% were women and 24.5% were men. The median age was 19 years. In regard to race/ethnicity, 89.1% of participants self-identified as white, 7.8% as

Asian/Pacific Islander, 4.8% as Hispanic, 2.0% as African American/black, and 1.4% as other (participants could choose more than one category).

Each participant read three articles. These always appeared in the same order, with the key article coming third. The first two articles covered topics unrelated to the true purpose of the experiment and served to help disguise this purpose. The first and second articles were not identical for all respondents, but were randomized independently from the third article. For the third (treatment) article, participants were randomly assigned one of three conditions. To enhance ecological validity, the articles used here, including their headlines, were real stories, although they were edited for length and to control as best as possible for extraneous factors (by removing material tangential to the concepts being manipulated). The two treatment stories originally appeared within 6 days of one another in January 2012, and each reflected a different way of covering critical perspectives on *Citizens United* and Super PACs. Neither story came from a source that many experimental participants were likely to have read; furthermore, any previous exposure would have been randomized across conditions.

Participants in the first (control) condition ($N=152$) read a news story about the issue of slow Internet speeds in Idaho. Those in the second (Colbert) condition ($N=140$) read a news story covering Colbert's satirical treatment of *Citizens United* and Super PACs. This story, titled “Stephen Colbert: Thank You, God Bless You, and God Bless *Citizens United*,” described the episode of *The Colbert Report* in which Colbert announced his bid for “president of the United States of South Carolina” and transferred control of his Super PAC to Jon Stewart. The story called Colbert's announcement “a stunt in his long running narrative to call attention to the problems of the super PACs—the independent expenditure committees with unlimited fundraising ability—which are so prevalent in this election cycle.” Those in the third (conventional) condition ($N=154$) read a news story about public interest groups' criticisms of the *Citizens United* decision and Super PACs. This story, titled, “Did *Citizens United* Ruling Create a Monster? Opponents of Super PACs Ready the Pitchforks,” described how activist groups such as Public Citizen and Common Cause have decried the decision and launched efforts to overturn it. All three stories were identical in length (288 words) and were attributed to the *Washington Post* (using its masthead).

After reading the three articles, the participants took a post-test survey. The survey included numerous questions about topics unrelated to the study's true purpose to help disguise that purpose. Measures of the dependent variables for the study are noted later in the text.

Knowledge about Citizens United was measured by one question: “Which of the following best describes the decision that the Supreme Court reached in

the case of Citizens United versus Federal Election Commission?" The choices were as follows: "The government can limit campaign spending by independent groups," "The government can limit campaign spending by political parties and candidates," "The government cannot limit campaign spending by independent groups" (the correct answer, chosen by 42% of participants), and "The government cannot limit campaign spending by political parties and candidates".

Opinion about the Court's decision was measured by the following question: "A 2010 Supreme Court decision allows corporations and individuals to spend as much as they want on political advertisements for or against candidates as long as they do not coordinate with the candidates or campaigns. Do you favor or oppose this decision?" Response options included "strongly oppose," "oppose," "favor," and "strongly favor," and were coded to range from 0 to 3 ($M = 1.23$; $SD = .66$).

Political trust and internal political efficacy were measured using Likert items. Political trust was measured using two items: "Generally speaking, I trust the government in Washington to do what is right" and "The government is pretty much run by a few big interests looking out for themselves." Responses to these two items were used to create an additive index ($r = .44$; $p < .01$; $M = 1.99$; $SD = .77$) after reverse-coding the second item. Internal political efficacy was measured by one item: "Sometimes politics and government seem so complicated that a person like me can't really understand what's going on" ($M = 1.64$; $SD = 1.20$). Response options included strongly disagree, disagree, neither agree nor disagree, agree, and strongly agree. Each variable was recoded to range from 0 (minimum) to 4 (maximum). Caution is warranted in interpreting the results for the single-item efficacy measure; this measure, however, is identical to one used in previous research regarding political satire effects on internal political efficacy (Baumgartner & Morris, 2006; 2008).

In addition, the post-test included measures of the participants' self-reported media use, thereby allowing for tests of whether the effects of the treatments on the aforementioned variables depended on previous media exposure.

Colbert Report viewing ($M = 1.03$; $SD = .79$) was measured by an item asking participants how often they "watch *The Colbert Report with Stephen Colbert*." Response options included "never" (coded as 0), "less than once a week" (1), "once a week" (2), "a few times a week" (3), and "every day" (4).

Traditional news consumption was measured by asking the participants how often they "read the daily newspaper," "watch the national nightly network news on CBS, ABC, or NBC," and "watch CNN." Response options followed the same format at the measure for *Colbert Report* viewing. Responses were averaged to create an index ($\alpha = .64$; $M = 1.03$; $SD = .79$).

Results

H1 predicted that those reading a story about the Colbert Super PAC would know more about the *Citizens United* decision than those not exposed to any story about campaign finance. Indeed, 45% of the participants in the former condition correctly identified what the Court ruled in the case, compared with 35% of those in the latter condition. This difference was marginally significant ($\chi^2 = 3.12$; $p < .10$). Similarly, participants who read the conventional story about criticism of the Court decision and Super PACs were marginally more likely than control participants to know what the Court ruled in the case ($\chi^2 = 3.15$; $p < .10$). The percentage of participants in the conventional condition who provided the correct answer (45%) was identical to the percentage for those in the Colbert condition. In regard to *RQ1*, then, there was no discernible difference in knowledge across these two conditions ($\chi^2 = .001$; $p = \text{n.s.}$).

H2 posited that those reading a story about the Colbert Super PAC would be less likely to support the *Citizens United* decision than those not exposed to any story about campaign finance. The results supported this prediction: participants in the Colbert condition reported marginally less support for the ruling ($M = 1.19$; $SD = .61$) than control participants ($M = 1.34$; $SD = .79$; $t = 1.87$, $p < .10$). A similar contrast emerged between control participants and those in the conventional condition ($M = 1.17$; $SD = .79$; $t = 2.15$, $p < .05$). In answer to *RQ2*, support did not differ significantly across the Colbert and conventional conditions ($t = .32$, $p = \text{n.s.}$).

H3A and *H3B* predicted that political trust and internal political efficacy, respectively, would be lower among those reading a story about the Colbert Super PAC than among those not exposed to any story about campaign finance. The evidence was consistent with the first of these hypotheses, as participants in the Colbert condition ($M = 1.91$; $SD = .71$) reported lower political trust than control participants ($M = 2.09$; $SD = .77$; $t = 2.03$, $p < .05$). On the other hand, internal political efficacy was not significantly lower in the Colbert condition ($M = 1.76$; $SD = 1.16$) than in the control condition ($M = 1.67$; $SD = 1.22$; $t = -.70$, $p = \text{n.s.}$); here, the difference was not even in the expected direction. Turning to *RQ3A* and *RQ3B*, political trust did not differ significantly across participants in the Colbert condition and those in the conventional condition ($M = 1.96$; $SD = .83$; $t = .59$, $p = \text{n.s.}$), but the former did report marginally greater internal political efficacy than the latter ($M = 1.50$; $SD = 1.19$; $t = 1.92$, $p < .10$).

To explore the role of intertextual processes, a series of regression analyses tested whether previous viewing of *The Colbert Report* and traditional news consumption moderated the effects of the treatments on opinion about the decision, political trust, and internal political efficacy. The first model for each dependent variable included dichotomous measures (0 if no, 1 if yes) capturing

exposure to the story about Colbert's Super PAC and exposure to the conventional story. The results of these analyses paralleled the results of the tests described earlier in the text (see the first, third, and fifth columns of Table 1). More importantly for the purposes at hand, the second model included not only the measures capturing exposure to the treatment stories but also the measures for *Colbert Report* viewing and traditional news consumption, as well as a series of multiplicative terms capturing the extent to which the effects of each treatment varied with each form of media consumption.

H_{4A} predicted that the impact of reading a news story about Colbert's Super PAC on support for the Court's decision would be greater among regular *Colbert Report* viewers than among non-viewers. As the second column of Table 1 reveals, this was the case: previous exposure to Colbert's program magnified the negative effect of the Colbert story on support ($b = -.15$; $p < .10$). Figure 1A illustrates this interactive effect by plotting the predicted level of support for the decision across different levels of *Colbert Report* viewing for participants in each condition (with traditional news consumption set at its mean). Among participants who said they never watched the show, support in the Colbert condition (1.01) differed little from support in the control condition (1.04). Among those who said they watched *The Colbert Report* every day, however, support in the Colbert condition (.39) was dramatically lower than support in the control condition (1.02).

The results offered no support for H_{4B} , which predicted that the effect of reading a news story about Colbert's Super PAC on political trust would be greater among regular *Colbert Report* viewers than among non-viewers. As indicated by the fourth column of Table 1, the Colbert condition \times *Colbert Report* viewing term failed to attain statistical significance for this dependent variable ($p = \text{n.s.}$). In contrast, the results yielded support for H_{4C} , which posited that the impact of reading a news story about Colbert's Super PAC on internal political efficacy would be greater among regular *Colbert Report* viewers than among non-viewers. As the sixth column of Table 1 reports, the interaction between exposure to the Colbert story and previous *Colbert Report* viewing was significant and positive ($b = .43$; $p < .01$), so that exposure to this story led to *increased* efficacy among regular viewers of the show. Figure 1B illustrates this interaction. As it shows, internal political efficacy among those who never watched *The Colbert Report* differed relatively little from the Colbert condition (1.41) to the control condition (1.66). Among regular viewers of the show, however, such efficacy was substantially greater in the Colbert condition (3.07) than in the control condition (1.62).

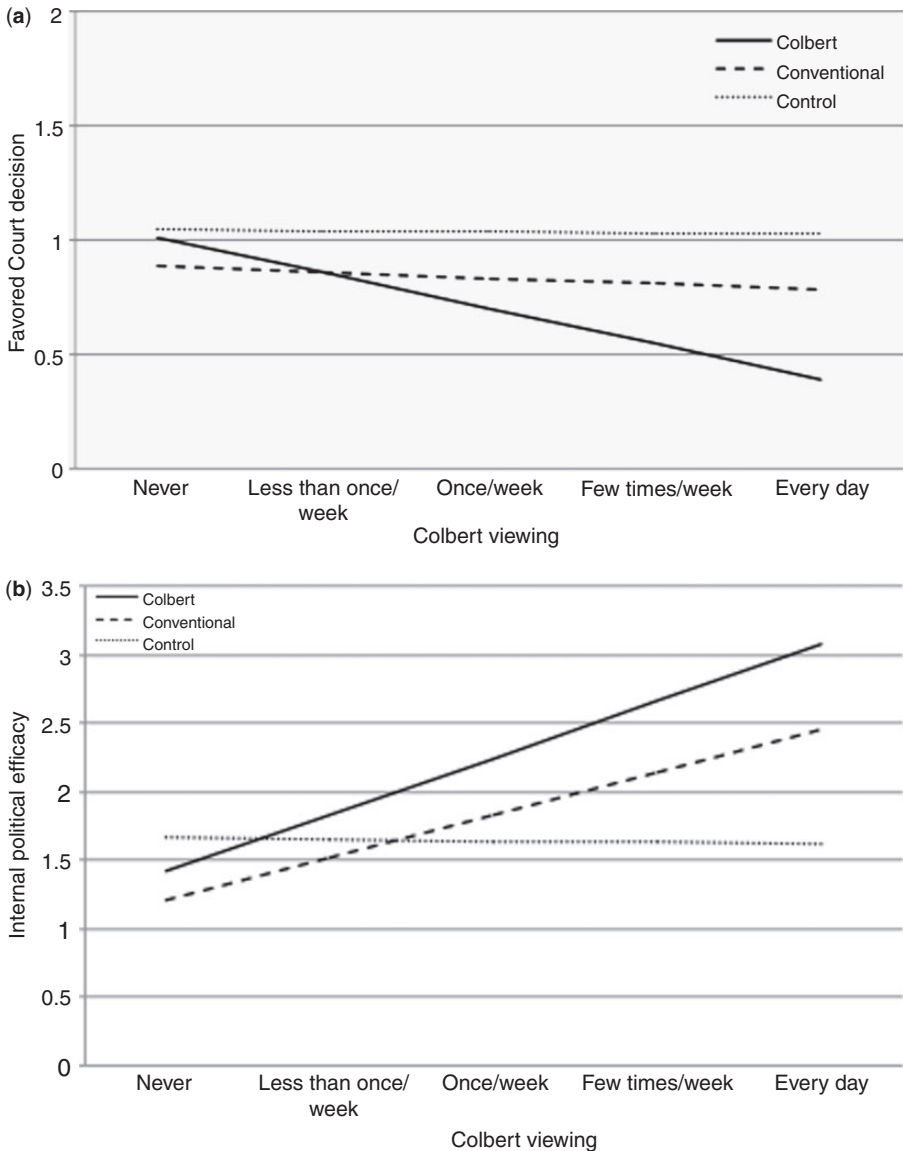
In regard to RQ_{4A} , the results reported in Table 1 yield no evidence that previous exposure to traditional news significantly moderated the impact of the Colbert story on opinion about the Court decision, political trust, or internal political efficacy ($p = \text{n.s.}$ in each case). On the other hand, the results

Table 1
Predicting Opinion and Attitudes as a Function of Experimental Condition and Media Use

	Favored Court decision		Political trust		Internal political efficacy	
	1	2	1	2	1	2
Colbert story	-.15* (.08)	-.17** (.08)	-.18** (.09)	-.20** (.09)	.07 (.14)	.14 (.13)
Conventional story	-.18** (.08)	-.18** (.08)	-.13 (.08)	-.12 (.09)	-.18 (.14)	-.16 (.13)
Watches <i>Colbert Report</i>	—	-.06* (.03)	—	-.10** (.04)	—	.24*** (.06)
Follows traditional news	—	-.05 (.04)	—	.03 (.05)	—	.26*** (.08)
Colbert story x watches <i>Colbert</i>	—	-.15* (.08)	—	-.03 (.05)	—	.43*** (.14)
Conventional story x watches <i>Colbert</i>	—	-.02 (.08)	—	.07 (.09)	—	.33*** (.13)
Colbert story x follows news	—	.01 (.11)	—	.07 (.09)	—	-.22 (.18)
Conventional story x follows news	—	.04 (.10)	—	.05 (.12)	—	-.41** (.18)
Constant	1.34 (.05)	1.45 (.07)	2.10 (.06)	2.16 (.08)	1.68 (.10)	1.16 (.12)
R^2	.01	.04	.01	.03	.01	.14
N	443	437	443	437	442	436

Notes. Table entries are OLS regression coefficients; standard errors are in parentheses. Independent variables are centered on their means.
 * $p < .10$; ** $p < .05$; *** $p < .01$ (two-tailed tests).

Figure 1
(A) Interaction of condition *x* Colbert viewing on support for the Court decision. (B) Interaction of condition *x* Colbert viewing on internal political efficacy



provide a mixed answer to *RQ4B*. Previous viewing of *The Colbert Report* did not significantly moderate the impact of the conventional story on support for the decision or political trust ($p = \text{n.s.}$ in each case). The interaction between exposure to the conventional story and previous *Colbert Report* viewing,

however, was significant and positive ($b = .33$; $p < .01$), meaning that exposure to this story led to increased efficacy among regular *Colbert* viewers. In response to *RQ4C*, the results offer no evidence that the impact of the conventional story on opinion about the Court’s decision or political trust depended on previous exposure to traditional news. Meanwhile, there was a negative and significant interaction between exposure to the conventional story and previous exposure to traditional news for internal political efficacy ($b = -.41$; $p < .01$), suggesting that this story was particularly likely to undermine such efficacy among those following traditional news.

Discussion

As evidence for the effects of political satire mounts, it is important for scholars to consider the broader mediated processes surrounding this non-traditional form of political information. By integrating the critical concept of intertextuality into an empirical analysis of political humor and press meta-coverage effects, the present study has moved beyond testing the direct effects of isolated messages to unpack a phenomenon that is at the heart of our diverse media landscape. One of its key findings—namely, that the interactions between the mediated messages to which one is exposed can shape one’s issue opinions and broader political attitudes—resonates with the argument, drawn from the literature on intertextuality, that the meaning of an individual message is contingent on other related messages in the information environment. In the context of inherently hybrid forms of political information, such as political entertainment and press metacoverage, the opportunities for intertextual processes abound. When dealing with forms of political communication that are based on other texts, audience members’ previous engagements with those other texts can inform the meanings they ultimately construct.

The main effects captured by this experiment indicate that exposure to news coverage of *Citizens United* fostered greater knowledge of and more critical opinions about the decision, whether that coverage discussed Colbert’s Super PAC. In addition, exposure to coverage that discussed Colbert’s Super PAC eroded political trust. The interaction analyses, in turn, paint a fuller picture of how these media effects might play out in the context of the real world media experience. Regular viewers of *The Colbert Report* experienced enhanced effects of exposure to news coverage of *Citizens United* when that coverage featured discussion of Colbert’s Super PAC. This was true for both opinion about *Citizens United* and internal political efficacy. Even when news reports did not explicitly invoke Colbert’s Super PAC, regular Colbert viewers exhibited significantly increased internal political efficacy. In contrast, regular consumers of traditional news experienced significantly

lower internal political efficacy when exposed to the traditional news story about *Citizens United*. These findings suggest that conceptualizing intertextuality as an effects mechanism holds promise for quantitative research.

At the same time, the study's findings suggest that intertextual processes may produce clearer effects in some contexts than in others. For example, no interactions emerged between exposure to the treatments and Colbert viewing for political trust, whereas strong interactions emerged for internal political efficacy. It is worth noting here that internal political efficacy involves an evaluation of one's self, rather than an external attitude object such as the government. Thus, it may be that intertextual processes related to political satire work differently for self-beliefs than for beliefs about others.

Future studies could advance our understanding of these intertextual dynamics by exploring the cognitive mechanism(s) underlying them. For example, one could conceptualize such intertextual processes in terms of priming and enhanced attention at the time of message encoding. In such a model, *frequent* and *recent* exposure to Colbert's program, as well as stories about *Citizens United* and/or Colbert's Super PAC, would activate these constructs, making them more readily accessible. The residual excitation resulting from such activation would then increase the likelihood of audience members using the same constructs in later judgments (see Price & Tewksbury, 1997). For example, reading a news story about *Citizens United* could activate existing thoughts about Colbert's satire among regular viewers of his show.

To be sure, there are limitations to the present study. Perhaps the most significant is the case-category confound shared by so many media effects experiments. Given that this study used one text per condition to represent larger theoretical constructs (news coverage that incorporates political satire versus new coverage that does not), it is possible that other aspects of the texts contributed to the differential effects observed. A key strength of the study's stimuli, however, is the authenticity of their content. Because they were actual (albeit edited) news stories, one can be confident in their ecological validity. Future examinations of intertextual processes should diversify the stimuli selected to represent these underlying constructs and thereby isolate which message features interact with previous media exposure to produce effects. Such research could also examine such processes among more diverse samples, more diverse than the one used here.

From the perspective of democratic politics, this study's findings suggest that political entertainment can contribute to citizens' political understanding and self-confidence through its synergistic dynamics within the broader information environment. When political satirists address policy issues, news media can then present metacoverage of their humor in ways that amplify citizens' knowledge and internal efficacy while possibly reducing their trust. Building on Gamson's (1968) argument that low political trust in conjunction with high

internal efficacy encourages unconventional forms of political participation, one could speculate that these outcomes of high knowledge and efficacy along with reduced trust may fuel such forms of political engagement. From an industry perspective, covering political satire provides news organizations with a potential avenue to introduce substantively important but complex policy issues while simultaneously entertaining their audiences. Of course, the extent to which effects emerge in response to such coverage may depend on the issue in question, the nature of the satirical treatment of that issue, and the ways in which news outlets engage in metacoverage of political satire. The economic pressures that reward hybrid political entertainment metacoverage (Young, 2011), however, could make this dynamic process a particularly appealing path to serve the values of both democracy and post-modern journalism.

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