

# A Comprehensive Analysis of Political Perceptions of Host Negativity in Late-Night Comedy

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## Abstract

*Scholars propose that late-night comedy programming serves as a medium through which political discourse has evolved. Previous studies have analyzed the increasing politicization that has consumed late-night programming and the potential effects such commentary has on viewership and political learnings from this type of soft news coverage. This study examined video clips on the YouTube channels of Jimmy Fallon, Jimmy Kimmel, and Stephen Colbert during the first nine months of the Donald Trump presidency, and found that the hosts and the nature of their videos influenced the engagement of the audience. Upon examining the engagement metrics on each of the selected videos, it is evident that a host's negativity toward Trump helped enhance viewers' engagement metric.*

## I. Introduction

The job of late-night talk show hosts was once uniform and forthright, giving Americans something to ease their minds and laugh away the workday worries after the daily grind was done. After all, Johnny Carson, an entertainer by birth and a late-night host by profession, built an empire on the premise of doing just that. Today, it appears that the lines have blurred between the friendly comedic acts of the past and the unbridled political satire of present late-night programming. Perhaps “late-night comedy has moved further away from the old broadcast network imperatives—safe, not offensive—to seek broader audiences of political persuasions” (Rutenberg). A decades-long debate surrounding the role of late-night comedy, as a soft news medium, through which the political process has become intertwined, prevails as the late-night landscape continues to evolve along with its equally turbulent hard news counterparts.

Defined as “market-centered journalism that blurs the line between information and entertainment,” soft news has become an ever-expansive genre in the current news media landscape. In comparison, hard news, which is commonly defined as programs centered on highlighting the “circumstances of a recent event or incident considered to be of general, local, regional, national or international significance,” is still a prominent contender in the array of news genres (Millis-Brown). This distinction held far greater validity in the context of the American news industry prior to the emergence of such vastly popular entertainment programs that have taken on the role of delivering stories that embody a multitude of political commentary and satire.

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One explanation for this amalgamation is that late-night comedy has always played off of conventional hard news networks, and these days hard news has become predominantly political (Rutenberg).

Rob Burnett, the long-time executive producer for David Letterman, confessed that “late-night shows of the past, like Letterman’s, Carson’s, and Jay Leno’s, made mostly ‘toothless’ political jokes, meant to elicit laughs, not change minds” (Carter). Today, however, these shows have become about something that is actually “making a difference, changing opinions, shaping public discourse” (Carter). Perhaps never before has there been such an influx of soft news programs catering their content to address political issues as there has been since the start of the 2016 presidential campaign season.

Coined after the renowned and widely successful Oprah Winfrey, the “Oprah Effect” suggests that exposure to politicians or political rhetoric on soft news programs can have an impact on the political knowledge and attitudes of voters (Baum). This paper explored this theory in the context of late-night TV programming.

At a time plagued by controversies surrounding political education and fake news hysteria, it is crucial to understand the news consuming habits of the American people and how soft news ties into political knowledge. Examining various late-night TV programs as a medium of soft news, examining the viewer engagement and response to each host, and observing the content of the show allow for a more thorough understanding of the American electorate and its reaction to media bias in this genre of programming.

## II. Literature Review

An extensive body of literature offers a variety of insights into the soft news genre, agenda-setting, priming theories evident in late-night comedy, the political tendencies of such programming, the news consumption habits, and opinions of the American public influenced by exposure to these shows. Many of these studies discussed relevant topics and often expand on one another in both the scope and direction of a particular idea. Though at times contradictory, it is evident that this topic garners a plethora of scholarship and examination aimed at understanding this perpetual phenomenon.

### *Theoretical Analysis*

Essential to understanding the sensation spawn by late-night comedy shows of late is the notion that agenda setting and priming theories play vital roles in the study of news consumption behavior and learnings from such soft news sources. Agenda setting “refers to the idea that there is a strong correlation between the emphasis that mass media places on certain issues (e.g., based on relative placement or amount of coverage) and the importance attributed to these issues by mass audiences” (Scheufele 11). This theory postulates that consumers “learn not only about a given issue, but also how much importance to attach to that issue from the amount of information in a news story and its position...that is, the media may set the ‘agenda’” (McCombs 176). Therefore, “as the primary sources of national political information, the media is in a position to define what people should be thinking about, if not quite what they should be thinking” (Peick 15). As such, with heightened media exposure, people’s “ranking of various issues’ importance more closely lines up with the amount of coverage devoted to those issues” (Peick 16).

In the context of soft news exposure, one modern-day example of this is the media coverage of Donald Trump during the 2016 presidential election. Though perhaps counterintuitive due to the excessively negative press coverage Trump received, the earned media exposure the future U.S. president garnered allowed him to confidently declare that he could “stand in the middle of 5th Avenue and shoot somebody and wouldn’t lose voters” (Diamond). A Harvard study showed that, compared to Clinton, Trump received 15 percent more coverage than she did; yet his coverage was significantly more negative than hers, despite the negative tone apparent in much of her coverage as well (Patterson). For reference, news reports focusing on his personal qualities were 82 percent negative to 18 percent positive, policy stands were 85 percent negative to 15 percent positive, and leadership qualities and experiences were 93 percent negative to 7 percent positive (Patterson). This proposes that perhaps “the mass media sets the agenda for each political campaign, influencing the salience of attitudes towards the political issues,” and thus resulting in Trump’s victory on the premise of heightened, and more visceral media coverage (McCombs 177).

Priming relates to the “changes in the standards that people use to make political evaluations” and “occurs when news content suggests to news audiences that they ought to use specific issues as benchmarks

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for evaluating the performance of leaders and governments” (Scheufele 11). As a study on the priming effects of late-night comedy suggests, in the context of the 2000 presidential election, “there was a main effect of watching late night comedy on evaluations of candidates; more importantly, viewers were more likely than non-viewers to base their evaluations of George W. Bush on character traits after he appeared on *The Late Show with David Letterman*” (Moy 198). This study sought to evaluate how “media coverage can increase not only the salience of issues, but also the salience of certain image characteristics” (Moy 200). It is evident that the actual appearance of candidates on these outlets “allow them to be more personal and potentially convey messages directly to an audience, without working through journalist’ lenses of interpretation and sound-bites” (Moy 199). However, character traits were the only measurement in which a priming effect was noted.

### ***The Power of Hosts***

Though the priming effects of late-night may be beneficial to a candidate’s likeability by appearing on such shows, this does not explain the effect such programming has on audience learnings from ingesting the political content of many hosts’ dialogues. Perhaps the question underpinning this notion is “how do the late-night comedians get away with ridiculing presidents, taunting Democrats and Republicans, and mocking Congress on network TV” (Peterson 90)? Possible explanations “derive from the peculiarities of the genre,” such as the “production schedule—five nights a week, all year round—makes topicality not just a possibility but a practical necessity” (Peterson 90). Others argue that the late hour at which these shows air allows them to deal with more “adult” concerns (Peterson 90). Or maybe “there is more to the late-night host’s special dispensation to discuss politics than the expediencies of production or the lateness of the hour” (Peterson 91). At its core, “the basic principle of comic license is simple enough: opinions that might be too provocative if expressed in a straightforward manner are permissible when presented as jokes” (Peterson 92). After all, research suggests that “humor may be a particularly effective means of communicating influential political messages” since “messages with humor are more easily remembered” (Niven 120).

In our “democratic system with commercial media, the license to mock the nation’s leaders is bestowed by the public;” after all, it is argued that it is the television viewers themselves who “have granted the tiny elite of late-night hosts the jester’s privilege” (Peterson 92). If so, are the American people to blame for the politicization and subsequent polarization of late-night broadcasting and slew of other soft news programs? Perhaps it is the easy targets our elected officials have become that serve as ammunition to the fiery commentary of a host’s dialogue.

### ***Late-Night Political Rhetoric***

The hosts and networks of these shows may vary, but previous studies suggest that depictions of politicians and the topics surrounding them remain the same. Findings indicate that “among the thousands of jokes told each year on late night comedies, few will involve two of the three branches of federal government, state level government, or city level government; rather late night comedy is predominantly directed at the executive branch, encompassing the president, major presidential candidates, the first family, select cabinet officials and advisors, and presidential accusers” (Niven 130). It is evident that “while joke subjects change with the events of the day, the nature of late-night humor is determinedly non-issue oriented,” and among the major late night shows, similar patterns exist in the “choice of targets, partisan ratio of targets, and the subject matter of their jokes” (Niven 130).

### ***Infotainment***

The amalgamation of entertainment and news gave birth to the neologism “infotainment,” in the late 1980s. Infotainment “refers to an explicit genre-mix of ‘information’ and ‘entertainment’” and is intended to both entertain and inform (Thussu 7). The formulation of this concept may be rooted in the idea that our present state of “too much news is creating an information overload,” leaving consumers “unable to differentiate between public information and corporate propaganda” (Thussu 8). Therefore, the concept of infotainment emerged as a means of “‘privileging’ soft news at the expense of news about political, civic, and public affairs” (Thussu 8). Some argue this notion of infotainment goes “beyond the debate about dumbing down” news programs, but rather proposes it serves as a “powerful discourse of diversion, in both taking away from, and displacing from the airwaves such grim realities” (Thussu 9).

Expanding on the idea that perhaps soft news programming is the “effect of market differentiation (or fragmentation)” rather than “the ‘dumbing down’ of audiences of media content,” Markus Prior addresses

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the popularity of soft news, why people like that genre of news, and whether political insight can actually be gained from consuming such programming (167). Results indicate that “people like soft news for its entertainment value but that soft news programs are still not very popular compared to hard news and pure entertainment” (Prior 149). With regards to political learnings from consumption of such shows, there is “limited evidence that viewers actually learn from soft news” (Prior 149).

### ***The ‘Effects’ of Late-Night***

The hostile media effect (HME) is another measure by which scholars assess the political content of late-night comedies. HME occurs when “partisans on opposing sides of an issue perceive an identical news story about the issue as biased against their own side and in favor of the opposing side, while those without partisan views rate the very same story as neutral or more balanced” (Arpan 159). The growing role of late-night comedy in the democratic process raises “questions about its ability to influence attitudes towards candidates, increases cynicism toward mainstream news and the democratic process, and stimulates increased democratic participation and/or further learning about political issues” (Arpan 159).

A study on the general perceptions of bias in late-night comedy in comparison to hard news reveals that “a hostile media effect was found for political content about three topics across five comedy shows, with Republicans, Democrats, and Independents reporting significantly different perceptions of the extent of bias in the content” (Arpan 158). General perceptions of bias in late-night comedy as compared to traditional hard news sources further reveal that “late-night comedy coverage across all three topics was perceived as more biased than hard news coverage” (Arpan 166). This, however, does not translate directly to learnings as other research suggests, and in fact, “the positive correlation between comedy and traditional news viewing” evident in this study “suggests comedy viewing is not a substitute for, but rather a complement to, hard news consumption” (Arpan 167).

Matthew A. Baum and Angela Jamison were first to propose the notion that perhaps the “Oprah Effect” explains the alleged effects that soft news has on “*attention* to and *knowledge* about politics,” as well as “*political attitudes* and *behavior*” (Baum). In the context of their analysis, the Oprah Effect is defined as “the influence of consuming soft news political content on vote choice” (Baum). The four subsets of this theory are attention, knowledge, attitudes, and behavior as they pertain to politically oriented soft news consumption. Their 2006 study analyzed the learnings from soft news sources with the goal of accessing a potential correlation with voting behavior. They addressed the “effects on different types of consumers (low vs. high political awareness) of exposure to different types of news (soft vs. hard)” and more specifically, “the effects of exposure to entertainment-oriented, daytime talk shows—a quintessential, and highly popular soft news format” (Baum).

Underpinning this research is the “interaction of the supply and demand sides of soft news” (Baum). The way in which politicians understand and subsequently take advantage of soft news, and the way audiences seek, react, and interact with such programming have offered insight into the critical role soft news is playing in the democratic process.

### ***Participatory Culture on YouTube***

An analysis of this issue is not complete without interjecting the influence that participatory culture on YouTube has on user engagement with late-night soft news coverage. Since this study used late-night content posted to a particular host’s YouTube channel, it is crucial to examine the engagement methods this social media platform warrants. YouTube affords the “opportunity to confront some of participatory culture’s most pressing problems: the unevenness of participation and voice; the apparent tensions between commercial interest and public good; and the contestation of ethics and social norms that occurs as belief systems, interests, and cultural differences collide” (Burgess). The use of likes, comments, ratings, and views present a vast array of engagement tools that offer explanations pertaining to audience perceptions towards a particular show.

Studies have found that in analyzing the use of these participatory mechanisms, responses like “favoriting, commenting or rating was a stronger indicator of popularity than simply viewing a video” (Madden). This is presumably because such engagement requires logging on and perhaps even going as far as reading other people’s comments first before deciding to inject one’s opinion. Further, “reaction strength tended to be stronger amongst less-viewed videos” (Madden). This postulates that perhaps in the realm of this study, more

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participation may be correlated to less viewed videos and potentially more salient or controversial content matter within these shows to merit such engagement.

The literature alludes to the vast scope of this topic and array of conclusions that explain the multifaceted nature of the current news media landscape, and more specifically the realm of late-night comedy as a medium for political commentary. This study expands upon this previous research and seeks to serve as a model for further investigation into this topic.

For this research, the author raised the questions: What types of engagement did late-night shows elicit from the audience? Does the content and degree of negativity in which various late-night hosts engage in politically oriented topics result in differing reactions from a viewer?

### **III. Methods**

This study utilized content analysis to obtain an “objective, systematic and quantitative depiction of the manifest content of communications” (Rosenberry 42). The author categorized messages based on an established set of criteria and quantified audience behaviors and host negativity present in the observed shows.

#### ***Sample***

The study analyzed video clips posted on the YouTube channels of Jimmy Fallon, Jimmy Kimmel, and Stephen Colbert between January 20 and October 26, 2017. These dates were selected to align with the day Donald Trump started his term as president, to nine months into the presidency, or two weeks from the one-year anniversary of his election into office. Clips with the name “Trump” or “Donald Trump” in the title, or videos with a preview showing an image of Trump were selected. All video clips meeting the aforementioned criteria in each channel were selected, and only 10 for each host were randomly selected for analysis in this study.

#### ***Procedure***

The author coded each clip for the following variables: number of subscribers, number of views, likes, dislikes, the like/dislike ratio, like/view ratio, dislike/view ratio, the use of hard news sources within the video clips, number of comments, and the number of positive and negative comments out of the top 10 comments for each selected clip. These metrics were selected to gauge host negativity toward Trump, viewer engagement, and the political perceptions of viewers.

#### ***Analysis***

The political opinions of viewers were classified into negative comments when they contained profanity, vulgarity, disapproval, or distrust toward Trump, more specifically pertaining to his character, policies, behaviors, appearance, dishonesty, and the like; and comments were classified as positive when they contain praise for Trump, approval of his character, policies, behaviors, appearance, honesty, and the like, or those that talked negatively of anti-Trump sentiment.

Host negativity was calculated like the following: clips that were strictly policy-based were coded as 1 for low negativity, those that were strictly personal in nature were coded as 2 for medium negativity, those that contained both policy-based and personal critiques intensified the strength of the argument thus were coded as 3 for possessing high negativity.

Viewer engagement was coded by likes, dislikes, the like/dislike ratio, views/likes ratio, dislike/view ratio, and the number of comments.

Clips that contained actual footage or articles from hard news sources were coded for the number of sources borrowed. For example, 1 for one source and 2 for two sources. Clips that did not contain the aforementioned were coded 0. Examples of hard news sources can be CNN, MSNBC, Fox News, *The Washington Post*, *The New York Times*, and other similar broadcasts and publications.

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## IV. Findings and Discussion

This section summarizes the findings of this study by analyzing the selected variables, mostly engagement metrics by hosts and by negativity levels of videos.

### ***Analysis by three hosts***

As shown in Table 1, Fallon has the largest number of total subscribers among the three on his YouTube channel, followed by Kimmel and Colbert. The total subscriber numbers don't seem to influence viewers' engagement. Colbert, who had the smallest number of subscribers enjoyed the largest viewers, followed by Kimmel, then Fallon. The same trend was confirmed by other engagement metrics such as likes, dislikes, or comments.

**Table 1. Individual Host Viewer Engagement Metrics**

| Individual Host Metrics             |            |            |           |
|-------------------------------------|------------|------------|-----------|
| Host                                | Fallon     | Kimmel     | Colbert   |
| Number of Subscribers               | 14,623,412 | 10,162,683 | 3,286,102 |
| Number of Viewers                   | 177,759    | 394,412    | 1,371,555 |
| Likes                               | 1,400      | 3,299      | 15,500    |
| Dislikes                            | 141        | 404        | 1,065     |
| Likes / Dislikes                    | 10         | 8          | 15        |
| Number of Comments                  | 121*       | 541        | 1,678     |
| Host Bias                           | 2.5        | 2.4        | 2.4       |
| Clips containing Hard News          | 1.3        | 1.4        | 1.3       |
| Positive comments out of the top 10 | .6         | .5         | .1        |
| Negative comments out of the top 10 | 1.5        | 2.2        | 2.4       |

*Notes:* All numbers indicate mean values per video except for the number of subscribers.

\*Average comments on Kimmel's clips were based on 9 clips instead of 10.

This trend is more obvious when these numbers are represented in charts, as shown in the four charts below. The engagement level did not seem to be influenced by the level of host bias either, since the three hosts' bias levels were almost the same.

The use of hard news was not a predictor of the engagement level either, since the three hosts incorporated a similar level of hard news in their clips. All three hosts used at least one hard news clips from the traditional media and sometimes even two clips (30 or 40% of the times). As Rutenberg proposed, late-night comedy has always played off of hard news programming and, in today's modern world, hard news is primarily consumed by politics. Presumably, the engagement level was related to the quality of videos, but further studies have to be done to confirm this conjecture.

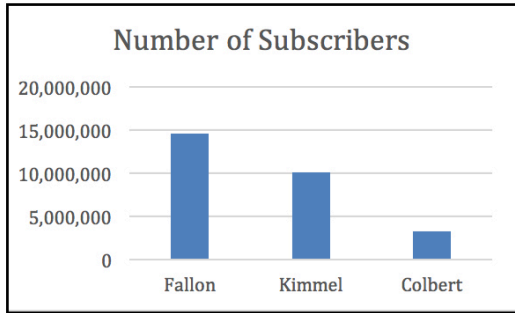


Figure 1. Number of subscribers

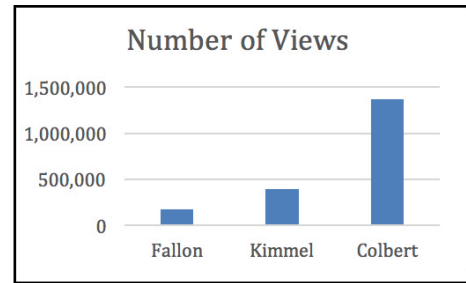


Figure 2. Number of views

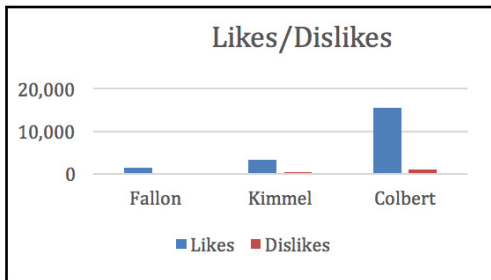


Figure 3. Number of Likes/dislikes

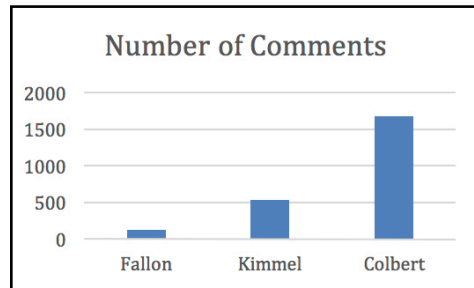


Figure 4. Number of Comments

In terms of favorability of shows, measured by the nature of 100 comments, Colbert received the highest level of negative comments and the lowest level of positive comments, as shown in Figure 5. Colbert warrants further investigation since he had the lowest subscribers, but enjoyed the largest viewers and the strongest engagement. On the other hand, viewers' attitudes toward his clips were more negative, in comparison with the two others. Since the study analyzed 10 clips for each host, this trend may be due to sampling error. In other words, this sample may not represent Colbert's video collection as a whole. Or it could be due to his ability to reach a niche market that was specifically looking for the type of the commentary Colbert offers.

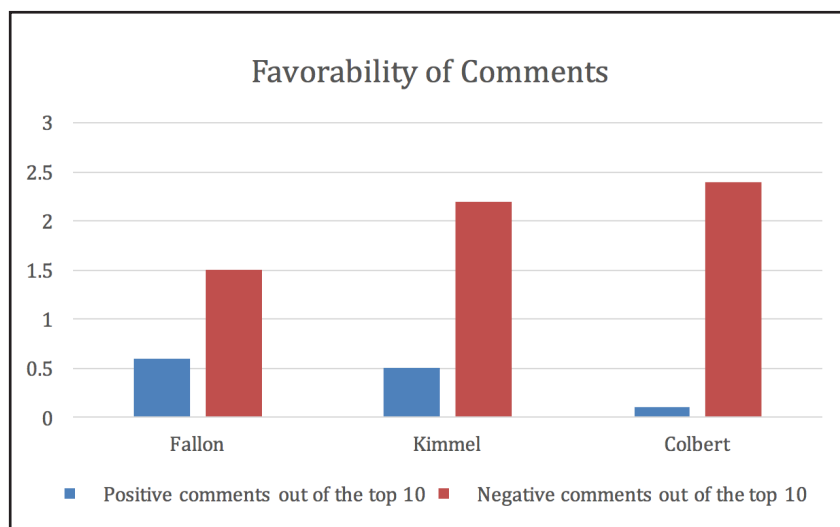


Figure 5. Favorability of comments toward videos viewed.

**Host Biases and Political Sentiment**

This section analyzed viewer engagement by the level of host biases that were measured by the type of video contents. As shown in Table 2, the three hosts predominantly produced high bias videos (57% of 30 videos), followed by 9 medium bias videos and 4 low bias videos.

**Table 2 The impact of Host Bias on Engagement**

| Host Biases Across All Shows |                      |                         |                     |
|------------------------------|----------------------|-------------------------|---------------------|
| Host Bias                    | Low (or Policy) Bias | Medium (or Person) Bias | High (or Both) Bias |
| Total Number of Clips        | 4                    | 9                       | 17                  |
| Number of Views              | 236,102              | 377,798                 | 887,804             |
| Likes                        | 2,250                | 2,889                   | 9,823               |
| Dislikes                     | 254                  | 170                     | 798                 |
| Likes / Dislikes             | 9                    | 17                      | 12                  |
| Number of Comments           | 324                  | 240*                    | 1180                |
| Top 10 Positive Comments     | 0                    | 0.6                     | 0.4                 |
| Top 10 Negative Comments     | 1.3                  | 1.9                     | 2.3                 |
| Hard News                    | 1.75                 | 1.33                    | 1.24                |

*Notes:* All numbers indicate mean values per video clip except for the number of clips.

\*Comments on medium bias videos were based on 8 clips instead of 9 because of one missing data.

A positive relationship exists between some engagement metrics and host’s bias that reflects the negative level of contents toward Trump, but not all metrics. When clips contain more negative contents toward Trump as a person and his policies, metrics for viewership, likes/dislikes, the total number of comments, and viewers’ negative comments increased dramatically, as shown in Figures 6, 7, 8, and 9.

But the lowest level of negativity did not necessarily receive the lowest engagement metrics. For example, dislikes in Figure 7 and number of comments in Figure 8 were not lower than the medium biased clips.



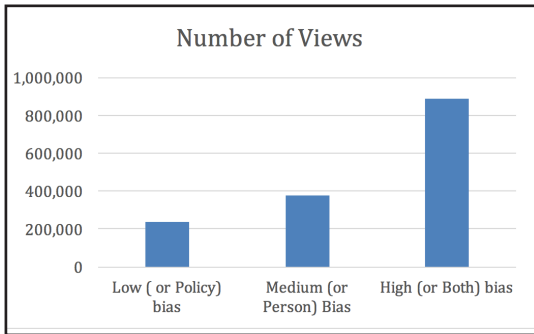


Figure 6. Number of views against hosts' bias

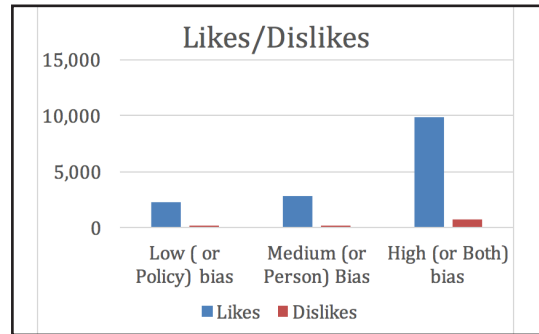


Figure 7. Number of likes/dislikes against hosts' bias

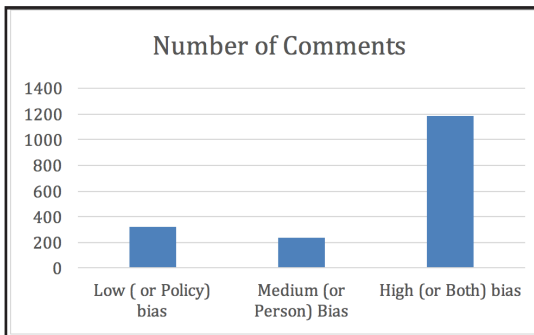


Figure 8. Number of comments against hosts' bias

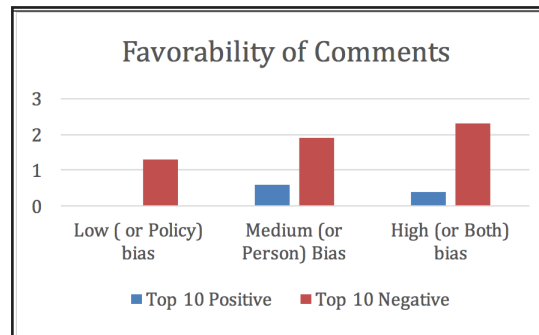


Figure 9. Favorability of comments against hosts' bias

When the hosts attacked Trump on both a political and personal front, they could achieve a higher audience engagement. The high bias clips enjoyed a higher level of engagement across most of engagement metrics. In response to high bias videos, viewers seemed to be more inclined to participate or voice his or her opinion.

Policy-based low bias clips relied more on traditional hard news sources than the other types. This type did not get a lower level of negative comments (Figure 8) and any less positive comments (refer to Figure 9) than the other two types. Further studies should be done to determine whether this low level of engagement is due to a high level of borrowed hard news clips or the nature of content.

As the limitations of this, the author analyzed only 10 videos per channel within the designated timeframe. Additionally, the timeframe of the study did not allow for a complete analysis of the first year of the Donald Trump presidency.

## V. Conclusions

Upon analyzing a small selection of the vast number of video clips posted on the YouTube channels of Jimmy Fallon, Jimmy Kimmel, and Stephen Colbert, it is evident that some relationship exists between hosts and viewer engagement on the one hand, and another relationship between host bias and viewer engagement on the other.

These findings indicate that Colbert not only received the greatest mean number of views, but he also saw higher mean engagement per video post in terms of numbers of views, likes, dislikes, and comments than the other two hosts, even though the total subscribers to his channel is the lowest. This suggests that YouTube channel subscriptions do not necessarily convert to number of viewer engagement.

Overall, the host bias across the three bias shows remained relatively consistent, at around 2.5, meaning that overall, each show was employing content that leaned toward both policy-based critiques and personal attacks of Trump at an almost equal rate. The high level of video bias was generally successful in engaging more viewers.

As seen in this paper, soft news like late-night comedy programming can be an influential player in the realm of the news media genre and possess the power to engage audiences in political discourse, especially if it is negative to a political power like the president.

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