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The Relationship Between Late Night, Twitter, and Political Literacy in 2020

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Abstract

Political humor has played a role in politics since ancient Egypt, Greece, and Rome. From plays to newspaper comics to late night comedy, these bits of political criticism and commentary on current events have been there to provide the public with relief, reinforcement of views, and in some cases information. Since the late 2000s, social media started to take on a similar role of providing reactions to political commentary, but rather than a television network and professionally crafted scripts, it is any person who possesses an account and may write up to 280 characters. Previous research has looked at political literacy and Twitter, but there are inconsistencies in findings as Twitter is a fast-paced media with the potential to be ever changing in influence. This project aims to reveal whether humorous political communication on Twitter follows similar patterns and content as late-night comedy and clarify Twitter's role in political literacy. It does so through comparing past literature on late night comedy and Twitter, conducting a content analysis of late-night comedy and tweets during the 2020 U.S. election, and analyzing political literacy data from 2020 to see whether there are any trends from the past literature to now. There are many similarities between the two forms of political humor with their main differences coming from the openness of participation and lack of market drive on Twitter. From this, it is evident that Twitter humor is an extension of late-night humor as late night television was of newspaper comic humor. Twitter humor is more extreme and prone to false information, which leads it to be potentially more negative impacts on political knowledge and cynicism than late night comedy.

Keywords: Political communication, social media, humor, Twitter, late night comedy, 2020 election, political knowledge and literacy

About the Author

Sally Burkley is a Senior Political Science and Communications and Digital Studies student at the University of Mary Washington. She has done previous research on political communication, late night comedy and politics, elections and media, COVID-19 and advertisements, crisis communication and humor, and policy strategies.

The Relationship Between Late Night, Twitter, and Political Literacy in 2020

Introduction

Political humor has played a role in politics since the days of ancient Egypt, Greece, and Rome. From plays to newspaper comics to late night comedy, these bits of political criticism and commentary on current events provide the public with comic relief, reinforcement of existing views, and in some cases new information about candidate character or policy shortcomings. Despite the fact that *Saturday Night Live* was creating a caricature of President Trump, or *the Daily Show with Trevor Noah* mocks real news networks, they were still focused on major news events (Farnsworth and Lichter, 2019). Even if viewers did not pick up the newspaper or turn on NBC, they would get part of what was happening in their political system from watching late night comics joke about recent events. This is evident as late night comedy was the third most common source of campaign news for individuals age 18-29 in 2012 (Pew, 2012). The University of Mary Washington's 2021 Virginia statewide survey found that 25% of respondents utilize late night comedy for newsgathering (University of Mary Washington, 2021).

Since the late 2000s, social media has started to take on a similar role of providing reactions to political commentary. Rather than a television network with professionally crafted scripts, Twitter allows any person with an account to write up to 280 characters. This provides the potential for information from these posts not only to be partisan and short, but also blatantly incorrect. Twitter particularly has had an increasing role in shaping news, political discourse, and elections in recent years (Molyneux and McGregor, 2021). News outlets now look to Twitter for information on current events (Molyneux and McGregor, 2021), President Trump rallied his supporters over Twitter, and the social media platform had around 37 million active users in the United States as of November 2021 (Statista, 2021). In a democratic system, it is important to

have not only active voters, but informed voters. Thus, it is imperative to understand how citizens are getting their information and what impacts new technologies have on their political literacy. Any time politics is a topic, it is an opportunity to learn, but also to misinform.

The risk of misinformation also plays into worries about the younger generation's political knowledge and participation. The majority of users of late night comedy and Twitter for news consumption are Democratic leaning Americans ages 18-29 (Farnsworth and Lichter, 2019; Mitchell et al., 2020a). Thus, both mediums receive criticism of fostering cynicism and antipathy towards politics in young individuals but offer positive potential for sparking civic engagement and interest (Kolluri, 2015; Penney, 2020).

There is little research on Twitter humor and politics specifically, despite its prevalence as a comedic outlet. When registering for a Twitter account, the site askes what some of the user's interests are and they offer a selection entitled "Funny Tweets" which provides the user with an algorithmic feed of pre-determined "funny" Tweets. Humor is also a part of political discourse on Twitter (Davis et al., 2018) and, thanks to Twitter's format, humor is more likely to be retweeted and appropriated by other accounts and thus live longer than other Tweets (Highfield, 2015).

This project follows previous research on social media and grassroots campaigns, social media algorithms influence on elections, late night comedy and election humor, and internet humor being used for messaging amidst the chaos of COVID-19. This background in media and humor studies provides this project with the foundation to now look at Twitter's specific role in political humor and news.

With these apparent similarities from recent events, previous studies of media and humor, and evidence of prevalence of Twitter in politics, the need to dig deeper into the relationship between Twitter and late night comedy was evident. This research aims to reveal whether the Twitter-verse of information and humor is a new phenomenon, or whether it is a rendition of late night comedy with reactions and mocking of political events. With that, if Twitter is a new generation's late night comedy, then do they both negatively affect political literacy in the same way due to bias, cynicism, and false information despite the positive effects of engaging younger individuals in politics?

Furthermore, does Twitter's participatory nature exacerbates both sides? To investigate the similarities, late night comedy and its political influence will first be discussed, and then the paper offers current research on Twitter's role in political discourse. Then a comparison of the two will be drawn through a content analysis of humorous tweets and late night jokes during the 2020 election to analyze whether Twitter posts originate and operate in a similar manner to late night comedy through previous literature. With those results, a content analysis of the humorous Twitter data for false information is conducted to understand the possible implications of Twitter humor on political literacy and knowledge.

Literature Review

Late Night Humor

Political humor and commentary develop as responses to dysfunctions in the political information environment (Young, 2020). They also develop in a partisan manner, generally late-night comedy leans towards liberal views and talk radio and talk TV on Fox News, such as *the Sean Hannity Show* and Tucker Carlson, offer conservative content. An exception to this pattern

is Fox's late-night comedy show *Gutfeld,* which has been on the air relatively briefly thus far. Late-night comedy shows create a spectacle designed to appeal to the views of their target viewer. This reinforces the partisanship of the viewer as there are not generally opportunities for critical thought in a one-liner and there is a lack of cross-party criticism in most monologues. This was seen in the 2020 election cycle as late night comedy shows, *The Tonight Show* and Stephen Colbert, featured only 49 jokes about President Biden in contrast to 1,618 jokes about former President Trump (Farnsworth et al., 2021). Political humor on late night specifically tends to appear in three categories, superiority-oriented (laughing at others), catharsis (release of tension in a situation), and incongruent humor (unexpected but acceptable resolution). These all tend to be used for not only entertainment but therapeutic purposes. When citizens feel that they do not have control over government decisions, they can release stress or discomfort by watching late night shows and thereby laugh out their frustrations (Farnsworth and Lichter, 2019).

While the audience does not make the jokes, late night comedy is still participatory as their jokes are often enthymemes, which require the audience to understand the unmentioned context of the joke for the joke to have meaning (Young, 2004). Especially when it comes to incongruent humor, the listener has to be able to bridge the gap in information provided within the joke to understand it. With that comes a need for late night comedy jokes to be accessible, familiar, and based on the expected audience's level of political knowledge to succeed (Young, 2004). Late night also encourages the acquisition of political knowledge so the viewer can understand the context of the jokes made. Late night comics strategically craft their jokes from experience and expertise to give themselves latitude to make a statement. They remain in the "safe place" between the lines of funny and critical without going "too far" and offending a politician or the audience.

Late night comedy is known for its mocking and parody one-liners, and tapping into comedy surrounding not-so-substantive matters. Such as pretending the fly on Pence's head during the VP debate was President Biden supporting Vice President Harris (*Saturday Night Live*, 2020). More substantive issues are more often covered in a mock newsroom fashion with critical humor. For example, *Last Week Tonight with John Oliver* (2020), which specializes in policy deep dives, covered the mail in ballot controversy during the 2020 presidential election via lighthearted pop culture references.

When citizens use late night comedy as news, the comedic content shapes their preferences and their views of the political system as well. Negative criticism of Vice President Al Gore and George W. Bush during the 2000 election caused less knowledgeable viewers to assess the candidates more negatively. Critical political humor also lowered public assessment of the system in general and the candidates who were targeted by jokes (Farnsworth and Lichter, 2019, 114). Late night comedy is also critiqued as fostering cynicism and antipathy in their primarily younger viewers, but supporters argue that it allows for younger voters to connect with the issues and stay engaged in politics and public service (Kolluri, 2015).

In 2012, 15% of for individuals age 18-29 used late night comedy making it the third most common source of campaign news for young voters (Pew, 2012). In comparison, 12% of young adults used national nightly network news (Pew, 2012). This trend continues into 2016 with 6% of respondents age 18-29 reporting late night comedy as the most helpful source of information (Farnsworth and Lichter, 2019). Most recently in 2021, 25% of Virginians surveyed utilized late night comedy for newsgathering (UMW Survey, 2021). Late night comedy also appeals more to Democratic voters (Young, 2004). Lastly, in 2016, 29.0% of viewers who

classified themselves as Democrat or leaning Democratic said they learned from the programs while only 13.5% of Republicans did (Farnsworth and Lichter, 2019).

Late-Night Comedy and Fake News

Late-night comedy was called "fake news" back in the late 1990s and early 2000s by comics themselves prior to the rise of social media and Trump's appropriation of the term (Li and Su, 2020). At first, the term was used to label genres that use irony and humor while imitating the style of traditional news to implicitly critique politics and social issues. This definition stemmed from Jon Stewart's *The Daily Show* where he called his own show "fake news" (Young, 2020). While the most common use of the term "fake news" in recent years is Trump's discrediting label, these shows were not debased as the term was referring "fake" to their mimicry rather than falsehood, and the label as "news" being validating. Jon Stewart was even called one of the most admired journalists in America by survey respondents in 2007 during his run as the host of *The Daily Show* (Baumgartner and Morris, 2011).

Individuals were also found to claim that transcripts from *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* are equally credible with news transcripts whether the name was associated with it or not (Shanks, 2010). Therefore, despite comics calling themselves "fake news", individuals see some late night comedy shows as credible sources of news and use it as such. Hosts also tend to connect the policy dots more than they let on, leading them to be more credible than casual viewers may think.

The term "fake news" was weaponized by Trump starting in 2016 to discredit a traditional news source, like the *New York Times* or CNN, or a political opponent. Utilizing it for his campaign, he stirred distrust in the media with his discussion of bias and credibility (Li and

Su, 2020, 2). Following Trump's weaponization of the phrase, the opposition also decided to use the term against him. The American left would call Trump "fake news" and media such as *The New York Magazine's* would report a "fake news list" which generally included conservative leaning media outlets (Li and Su, 2020, 2). This led the way for Russian propaganda on social media to take hold as Americans did not know what to trust (DiResta et al., 2019). Now Americans on both sides of the aisle utilize the term "fake news" against each other, often without basis.

Despite its critics, late night comedy remains a reactive release of stress which has been and is favored by younger and Democratic voters. Late night comedy maybe is faulted by some for fostering cynicism, antipathy, and framing politics and its figures in a negative light, but comedic content has also created civic action and attention (Kolluri, 2015).

Twitter

In the 2012 election, social media began influencing political information, preferences, and community in a profound way (Garrett, 2019). But it was not until the 2016 election that researchers began to focus intently on these potential influences (Penney, 2020). Twitter entered the limelight thanks to its use by candidate and then President Trump. In 2017 67% of individuals reported using social media to get at least some of their news, which was up from 62% in 2016 (Shearer and Gottfried, 2017) and 49% in 2012 (Gottfried and Shearer, 2016). This volume of use has only slightly decreased since President Trump's banning from Twitter in 2021, Facebook whistleblowers, and Twitters self-aware algorithmic research. According to Pew Research surveys in 2021, 48% U.S. adults get their news from social media often or sometimes (Walker and Matsa, 2021). Furthermore, 19% of Americans get news on social media often. In

that study, 23% of the interviewees used Twitter and 13% used it for news, thus 56% of those who use Twitter also use it for news (Walker and Matsa, 2021).

In "Seriously funny: The political work of humor on social media," Jenny Davis, Tony Love, and Gemma Killen (2018) debate whether the intersection of humor and politics on social media provides meaningful information, discourse, or civic action or if it is purely just for laughs. To do so, they searched Twitter data from the 2016 US presidential election focusing on references to Hillary Clinton referring to Trump supporters as a "basket of deplorables" and Donald Trump calling Hillary Clinton a "nasty woman" during a televised debate. That fall, nearly 70% of their data revealed meaningful political engagement, specifically defined as discrediting the opposition, identifying as political subjects, and exercising civic support through voting, fundraising, and other collective action (Davis et al., 2018, 15). They also acknowledge that this research is important because of the shift in communication power in political news towards social media and attention from other news sources (Davis et al., 2018, 2-3). Less than a third of Americans (27%) reported watching television news content daily in 2021, compared to 37% in 2020 (Watson, 2021). In the post-broadcast dominant era, elites and journalist no longer have control of the cascade of information. Rather, citizens may get involved to create and distribute their own narratives to fellow citizens over social media.

Forms of Persuasion

Joshua Troy Nieubuurt analyzed memes as the new generation of leaflet propaganda in "Internet Memes: Leaflet Propaganda of the Digital Age" (2021). He found that social media humor utilized ideology appeal, personal gratification appeal, communal values-focused appeal, and information dissemination akin to South and North Korean leaflet propaganda (Kim and Haley, 2018; Nieubuurt, 2021). Nieubuurt also claims that their "success and failures are highly

dependent upon the cultural and linguistic limits of their targeted audience" (Nieubuurt, 2021).

He continues on to elaborate on the human understanding of memes as we increasingly

communicate faster and faster. Internet memes and information rely on confirmation bias,

homogeneity bias, and popularity bias to tap into the desire to understand information quickly.

Therefore, social media humor taps into viewers' cognitive biases and reinforces them.

Utilizing biases to connect with media consumers is not a new tactic, but political

knowledge is negatively impacted when the public does not question the information presented

to them, especially when these are created by peers and accounts that do not represent certified

news networks. There is conflicting research on this subject. Two thirds of Pew survey

respondents reported that they check the facts of news stories themselves and 32% reported

publicly flagging or reporting a story that they thought was made up (Mitchell et al., 2019). But

Geeng, Yee, and Roesner in "Fake News on Facebook and Twitter: Investigating How People

(Don't) Investigate" (2020), found quite the opposite in practice, through a usage tracking

experiment and a post-experiment survey.

Geeng et al. (2020) found that Twitter users tended to trust information based on their

relationship with the poster, political affiliation of the information, and like and retweet numbers.

They found most did not question the fake news stories due to political burnout, lack of interest,

time consumption, challenges of mobile searching, and overconfidence that they would

immediately recognize misinformation. The users did not consult the "verified" tag and some

tried to retweet the fake news. Researchers also found inconsistencies with choosing to

investigate and claims of truth. One participant said they did not trust the source but did take the

post at face value because it was not "critical information" (Geeng, et al., 2020, 8). Between

Geeng et al.'s (2020) and Mitchell et al.'s (2019) studies, it seems that Twitter users had a more

positive assessment of their Twitter news use practices than they actually practiced and were more influenced by the content than they thought. The results are comparable to a third person effect, where consumers believe other news consumers are the ones swayed by news content (Conners, 2005).

This discrepancy between what twitter users say they do and what they actually do begs the question of whether the public uncritically trusts information on Twitter despite their claims to investigate and avoid misinformation. The muddle between true information and misinformation from Twitter accounts has led the public to cross specific outlets off their list of providers and reduce the amount of news they get on their feeds in general (Mitchell et al., 2019). Furthermore, of the 76% of Americans who reported ever getting news through social media, half have blocked a news source because they thought it was posting made-up news or information, the same proportion who say they have blocked someone they know for that reason.

Renee DiResta, Kris Shaffer, Becky Ruppel, David Sullivan, and Robert Matney (2019) reported that the Internet Research Agency, a Russian company who engages in online persuasion for Russian political interests, utilized the bias tactics discussed by Nieubuurt (2021) effectively through 109 news-related Twitter accounts. From 2014 through 2017, they gained following, support, and ultimately their information was shared by previously viable media outlets as well. Furthermore, they demeaned long standing news networks such as CNN and Fox (DiResta et al., 2019, 66-67). The IRA is also evidence of Nieubuurt's (2021) concept of online humor reflecting leaflet propaganda. Their accounts frequently used memes, text including "lol", and sarcastic comments about the investigation into their involvement to gain follows, retweets, and believers (DiResta et al., 2019, 73-74).

Political Tweets thus influence the public by tapping into biases, partisanship, and personal trust, but it is highly debated whether the validity of the information consumed plays a role. This is evident in the case of the Internet Research Agency, which the fake Twitter accounts were trusted based on partisanship (DiResta et al., 2019), and in research findings on when, why, and how individuals decide to investigate social media content (Geeng, et al., 2020).

Potential Influences

Li and Su (2020) look at how Twitter users construct and interpret conversations about "fake news" through a social identity framework and whether an "us against them" rhetoric is perpetrated. They used the Twitter Premium Search API to see when participants interacted with Tweets containing the phrase "fake news" from October 8, 2016 to January 20, 2018, 234,893 Tweets, and then looked for identity language such as ""we," "our," "they," and "their" and conducted a sentiment analysis of the entire tweet. The definition of this use of "fake news" is claiming false information is masquerading as the truth (Li and Su, 2020) rather than late night's self-mockery use. Over the time span, they found an increase in use of the identity language towards the out-group, "they" and "their", and they had the sentiment of contempt, blame, and hatred with absolutist language. Thus, a very negative in-group and out-group rhetoric was reinforced through Tweets that utilized the terms "fake news" generally containing news information.

Kelly Garrett, in "Social media's contribution to political misperceptions in U.S. Presidential elections" (2019), looks into misperceptions caused by false information shared on social media during the 2016 election. Garrett acknowledged the potential for division and misinformation due to social media use for news but found surprising results regarding political literacy. Garrett conducted a pair of three-wave panel surveys during the 2012 and 2016 U.S.

Presidential Elections on social media use and belief accuracy of candidate and issue information

for those two years respectively. Garrett found that an increase in social media use came a

decrease in belief accuracy of information surrounding President Obama, and this also revealed

that Republicans tended to hold less accurate beliefs about President Obama than Democrats.

Despite a decrease in candidate belief accuracy, Garrett (2019) found an increase in accuracy

with use of social media which suggests a potential for social media to benefit political

knowledge. But they noted that Republicans tend to be less accurate, especially when the issue is

a key part of Republican campaigns. This research revealed that social media does have an

influence, potential bad or good, and that other external factors, such as partisanship, play a

stronger role in information accuracy than scholars previously thought.

The tie between the in-group and out-group nature of political discussion of news on

Twitter and political literacy is furthered by findings that there was only a very small proportion

(4.02%) of Twitter users who engaged in cross-retweeting from the opposite political view (Li

and Su, 2020). Partisans stick to their viewpoints through choice in retweet and choice of

following despite the Twitter algorithm not considering partisanship in feed display (Chowdhury

and Belli, 2021). Thus Twitter users tend to follow and share information that they already

politically agree with rather than gaining exposure to other viewpoints. This has the potential to

lead to more polarization as they further grow an "in-group" environment around political

beliefs.

Twitter as participatory media also allows for a larger sheer quantity of news information

which may causes the burnout and lack of interest (Geeng et al., 2020). Potentially caused by the

information overload, surveys show that those who rely most on social media for political news

are less likely than other news consumers to closely follow major news stories, such as the

coronavirus outbreak and the 2020 presidential election (Mitchell et al., 2020a). And, perhaps tied to that, social media news consumers also tend to be less knowledgeable about these topics. As of early June 2020, just 8% of U.S. adults who get most of their political news from social media say they are following news about the 2020 election "very closely," compared with about four times as many among those who most often use cable TV (37%) and newspapers (33%) for news (Mitchell et al., 2020a).

<u>Humor and Twitter</u>

Like traditional news and late night comedy, Twitter also has entered the political comedy world in a participatory and responsive manner. Humorous political content is more retweeted and liked than non-humorous content (Davis et al., 2018), given more attention (Geeng et al., 2020), and humorous-news mixed Tweets that were from non-news accounts have a longer attention lifespan (Highfield, 2015). "Together, these theories of politics on the internet point to humor as a widely used and highly valued practice within political deliberations as they take shape through intersecting social platforms" (Davis et al., 2018, 3).

Twitter humor tends to be one-liners that mock, parody, and/or "talk back to" the opposite party, candidate, or news producer (Davis et al., 2018). After a salient news release, political debate, campaign speech, or even a random, unplanned happening, Twitter lights up with opinions and commentary. During the 2020 presidential election, when a fly landed on former Vice President Mike Pence's head during the debate, images and jokes flooded Twitter, and "'The Fly' was a top trending term on Twitter before the debate ended, with more than 400,000 Tweets shared containing the term during the event" (Williams, 2020).

Davis et al. (2018) also found that about 68% of humorous Tweets maintained a political agenda and noted that tones of relief or release of tension/anger and superiority were frequent when discussing the opposition. One Tweet they supplied as an example of anger and superiority stated, "What half of #LoserDonald Trump supporters are REALLY pissed off about is that they had to look up what "deplorable" means" (Davis et. al., 2018, 11). They found that two thirds of the Tweets contained humor aimed at discrediting the opposition through mocking, parody, and talking back. Highfield also found that news-humor Tweets may have a longer lifespan because they are more likely to be appropriated or plagiarized, where a follower finds it funny and creates their own Tweet with near-alike content. Thus a joke can keep a political development trending for a longer period of time.

In comparing Twitter humor to other social media platforms, humorous images on Twitter specifically were only slightly different from those on Facebook, Tumblr, and Instagram. They tended to be a bit more partisan, invoke more masculine stereotypes in portrayals of candidates, and were less likely to use emotionally evocative content (Belt, 2018). Belt found that across social media platforms there was a lack of policy information and jokes were primarily attacks.

Penney also discusses political internet humor and specifically the use of it by younger demographics. The positive outlook presented by their focus group included enhancing participation, bonding with peers and developing community identities, coping with political issues, and accessibility. The negative outlook looked at political internet humor as opposed to informational content, trivialization of political issues, and detracting from exchange of factual knowledge.

Since Twitter is participatory and available for anyone to use, from politicians to news sites and companies to individuals, there is also the risk of political humor on Twitter going too far or being offensive, rather than being innocently funny. Political discourse is one of the most common contexts for offensive language to arise on Twitter (Mansour, 2017) and is used to degrade candidates, such as President Trump, in forms of civic protest as well (Graefer et al., 2018). Insulting jokes, personal attacks, and simple mistakes are more likely on Twitter than on late night comedy since there is not a check system involved. Late night comics are concerned with viewership, profit, and any potential risk to their careers. They also have Federal Communications Commission guidelines and corporate requirements to follow. Many Twitter humor creators do not have comparable market pressures or regulations to follow and in fact are often rewarded with likes and shares for being more offensive. There are community guidelines which may delete or suspend accounts (Twitter, 2021), but these are enforced only for extreme cases. In the case of a Twitter ban, anonymous accounts can simply be recreated. Anonymity allows for mistakes and greater hostility, whereas comics are not afforded such latitude. Performer Kathy Griffin was ostracized, fired, and put on the no-fly list for holding a likeness of a severed head of Donald Trump (Rosman, 2022).

Highfield (2015) and Davis et al. (2018) each utilized manual qualitative coding to determine whether a tweet was humorous based off of content and intentions. They looked for jokes, sarcasm, wordplay, irony, and mockery, and overall "feel" of the Tweet. Highfield used a smaller dataset while Davis et al. divided a larger dataset amongst more authors. Overall, Twitter humor is found to be highly shared, offensive, emotional, and "talk backs" to current events. Twitter humor lacks restrictions that late night comedy faces, potentially trivializes of politics, and has more accessibility to participate in creation and reaction.

Demographics of Twitter Users

Twitter users may be divided into three groups: users, creators, and consumers. These groups are not distinct, as oftentimes they overlap since the format is designed to be highly participatory. All creators and consumers are users, but not all users are the latter two. For the sake of this paper, the definitions are as such based on Pew Research Center's data:

Users: uses Twitter.

Creator: creates original political news content.

Consumers: views, reads, likes, and/or retweets said political news content.

Users

As of 2019, 22% of Americans reported using Twitter ever (Hughes and Wojcik, 2019). According to a Pew survey in 2018, Twitter users are nearly three times as likely to be younger than 50 (73%) as to be 50 or older (27%). 42% of users have at least a bachelor's degree and 41% report having a household income above $75,000 (Wojcik and Hughes, 2019). Twitter users also tend to be more Democratic, especially within younger demographics. "Nearly two-thirds (63%) of Twitter users ages 18 to 49 identify as Democrats or lean toward the Democratic Party, compared with the 55% of 18- to 49-year-olds who identify the same way," (Wojcik and Hughes, 2019). Older users see slimmer but similar trends with 53% of users age 50 or older identifying as Democrats or lean Democratic while the general public at this age range is 47%. That being said, their views as a whole are more distinctively Democratic as well.

Creators

In this 2018 survey, they also found that creators reportedly post more about political issues than other users. "Fully 69% of the top 10% most prolific Tweeters say they have Tweeted about politics, compared with 39% of Twitter users generally. And 42% say they have Tweeted about politics in the last 30 days, compared with just 13% of other users," (Wojcik and Hughes, 2019). Over the course of the study, 97% of Tweets from U.S. adults that mentioned national politics over the study period came from just 10% of users. Those who strongly disapprove of Trump created the most Tweets, with 80% of all Tweets from U.S. adults and 72% of Tweets mentioning national politics containing negative content about Trump.

Those who Tweet about politics also extend their political activity beyond rallies and contacting elected officials more than users who do not engage in political Tweeting (Hughes et al., 2019). Despite Twitter's largely younger demographic of users, creators who are 50 and older contribute to 73% of Tweets about national politics, while those age 18 to 29 create only 4% of political Tweets. Creators also tend to have a more negative view of opposite party members and are more likely to follow accounts who share political views. 48% of creators expect the news they see on social media to be largely accurate, while 51% expects it to be largely inaccurate (Hughes et al., 2019). These trends are consistent going into 2020, with 10% of users creating 92% of all Tweets from U.S. adults from November 2019 to September 2020, and 69% of them identify as Democrats or Democratic-leaning independents (Shah et al., 2020). This statistic may be impacted by a growing number of fake accounts or "bots", that do not post. 15% of Twitter accounts were deemed bots in 2017 (Varol et al., 2017).
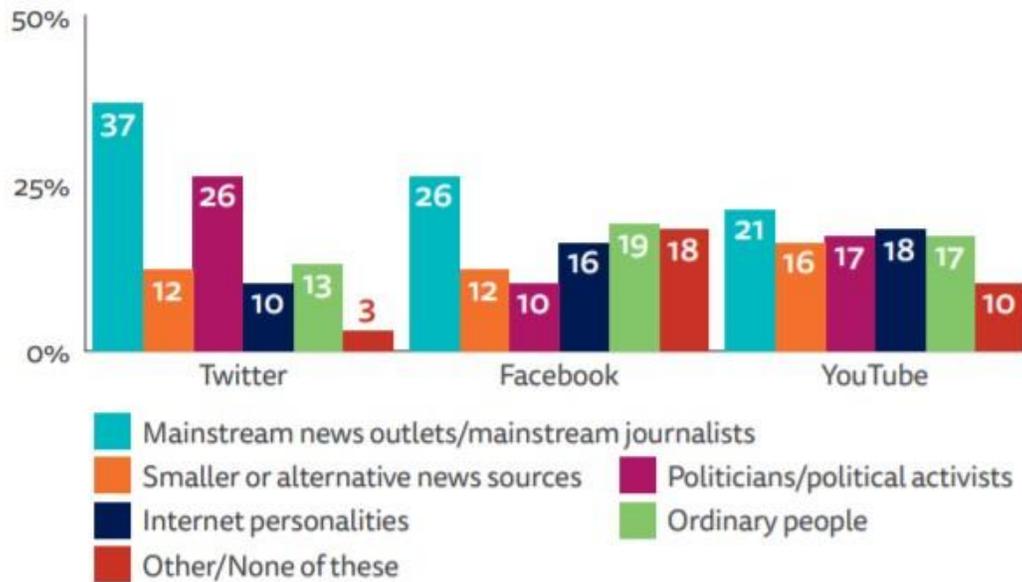
Consumers

In the United States, more than half of Twitter users are consumers and get news on the site regularly. 13% of Americans were surveyed and 55% of Twitter users get their news from Twitter regularly in 2021, down slightly from 59% in 2020 during the presidential election (Walker and Matsa, 2021). The remaining number of Twitter users do not use the platform to look for news or political information and may rely more on another outlet. They tend to be younger individuals, ages 18-49, with some college education or more. 51% of Twitter news consumers are white and 67% are Democrats or lean Democratic – consistent with prior analysis of Twitters average users.

In Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2021, surveyed American Twitter users said that they gave most of their attention to mainstream news outlets (37%), politicians and political activists (26%), ordinary people (13%), and celebrities (10%). When asking consumers in all markets, personalities such as celebrities and influencers increased in attention to match the same amount as politicians (18%) (Newman et al., 2021).

"U.S. adults who rely most on social media for news tend to be younger, are less likely to be white and have lower levels of education than those who mainly use several other platforms," and pay less attention to the news in general (Mitchell et al., 2020a). Only 8% of those who consume news on social media said they were following the 2020 election closely. When asked 29 different fact-based questions on a range of topics related to the news, 57% of social media news consumers scored with "low political knowledge" and only 17% scored in "high political knowledge" (Mitchell et al., 2020a). They are also more likely to have heard about a number of false or unproven claims but are less worried about the impact of false information on the 2020 election.

WHO PEOPLE PAY MOST ATTENTION TO WHEN USING EACH SOCIAL NETWORK FOR NEWS – USA

Twitter: 37, 12, 26, 10, 13, 3
Facebook: 26, 12, 10, 16, 19, 18
YouTube: 21, 16, 17, 18, 17, 10

Legend:
- Mainstream news outlets/mainstream journalists
- Smaller or alternative news sources
- Politicians/political activists
- Internet personalities
- Ordinary people
- Other/None of these

Q12_Social_sources. You said that you use <social platform> for news ... When it comes to news on <social platform> which of these do you generally pay most attention to? *Base: Randomly selected Twitter/Facebook/YouTube news users: 167/399/307.*

Source: Newman et al., Reuters, 2021, pg. 54

Demographic profiles and party identification of regular social media news consumers in the U.S.

*% of each social media site's **regular** news consumers who are ...*

	Facebook	YouTube	Twitter	Instagram	Reddit	TikTok	LinkedIn	Snapchat
Men	35%	56	56	36	67	30	54	40
Women	64%	43	43	63	31	68	44	59
Ages 18-29	23	27	43	44	44	52	25	63
30-49	41	40	38	37	47	34	46	32
50-64	22	22	14	13	8	12	20	3
65+	14	11	5	5	1	2	8	1
High school or less	41	37	25	33	26	42	18	50
Some college	31	35	31	36	33	40	24	35
College+	28	28	43	30	41	17	57	14
White	60	46	51	36	54	38	45	31
Black	11	16	14	20	7	18	18	21
Hispanic	20	24	22	33	21	34	20	37
Asian*	5	10	9	7	15	8	13	7
Rep/Lean Rep	44	41	30	33	23	32	41	32
Dem/Lean Dem	52	54	67	62	74	63	54	61

*Asian adults were interviewed in English only.
Note: Twitch and WhatsApp not shown due to small sample size. White, Black and Asian adults include those who report being only one race and are not Hispanic; Hispanics are of any race.
Source: Survey of U.S. adults conducted July 26-Aug. 8, 2021.
"News Consumption Across Social Media in 2021"

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

Summary of The Literature Review

Twitter graced the political media landscape in 2012 and came to into greater prominence in 2016. It is used by mainstream news sites, political officials, and the public alike. Its primary users are younger, more Democratic individuals with a college education and a moderately high income. Consumers tend to be younger and Democratic as well, but have lower levels of education. Those who create political Tweets (creators) are generally older than 50 and constitute only 10% of users. Creators are also more politically active, anti-Trump, Democratic, and view the opposite party more negatively than other users.

As noted, literature on political literacy and Twitter is limited and inconsistent. Social media users report fact checking their information and, in the past, have had increased issue accuracy, but when analyzed are found to not fact check stories and tend to push away politics all together. Pew also found lower levels of political literacy in Twitter news consumers, but Reuters found that Twitter users primarily reported looking at mainstream news more than ordinary people (Newman et al., 2021). Internet humor and Twitter posts are reactionary, utilize biases, and create a "us vs. them" rhetoric.

This begs the question of whether the phenomenon of political humor on Twitter is new or a continuation of what is seen in late night comedy. Late night comedy research finds democratic leaning, cynicism, and jokes about themselves being fake news but also trust and policy education. Meanwhile Twitter research finds more propaganda-like biases, in-grouping, and false information but also still the same qualities of democratic leaning and cynicism. Connecting Twitter humor to late night comedy may reveal more clarity in how Twitter impacts the public as it grows as a base for news consumption.

Research Questions

1. Are political Tweets focusing on the personal, emphasizing the same news events, and following similar topics and patterns as late-night comedy?

2. If they are similar in content, are Tweets impacting political literacy in the same way as does late night comedy? Are people more informed, views reinforced, or more misinformed? Is there more bias/polarization and cynicism?

Comparison Analysis

To answer these questions, this research project compares late night comedy humor and Twitter humor during the 2020 election to determine whether they originate and operate in a similar manner as partisan, reactive, therapeutic entertainment. To do so, this research utilizes data from Stephen Farnsworth et al. (2021) who quantitively analyzed two late night shows, *The Late Show with Stephen Colbert* and *The Tonight Show Starring Jimmy Fallon,* throughout the 2020 election cycle. This data consists of who their jokes targeted and whether they were policy or personal focused. These definitions were based on the text of the joke and which candidate was mentioned.

To find the variables of target candidate, humor, and topic focus of Tweets during the 2020 election, two methods will be used – large quantitative data analysis and smaller qualitative data analysis. Amir Karami, Spring B. Clark, Anderson Mackenzie, Dorathea Lee, Michael Zhu, Hannah R. Boyajieff, and Bailey Goldschmidt (2021) provide data on Twitter usage during the course of the 2020 election in "2020 U.S. Presidential Election: Analysis of Female and Male Users on Twitter." They analyzed 300,000 tweets posted by individuals in swing states from June 1, 2020 until November 3, 2020 using computational, human coding, and statistical

analyses to identify the topic and weight (amount of interaction and popularity of use of the topic) of each political tweet.

This previous study somewhat different this project's purpose because Karami et al. does not focus specifically on humorous tweets. To focus on humorous tweets, this study employs a manual human coding process on unique, not deleted or suspended, election related tweets from October 10, 2020 provided by GitHub data (Chen, Deb, and Ferrara, 2020). While it would be ideal to analyze all the tweets collected for humor and content across the fall campaign, this study is limited by time and resources. October 10, 2020 and October 11, 2020 are selected as the days of tweets being analyzed here as it is prior to formal election day and after the first Presidential and Vice Presidential debates. With an unprecedented number of early ballots (54% voted in person early, 46% voted by absentee or mail-in ballot, 27% voted in person on election day according to Pew Research Center (2020)), tweets were even more influential early on but after the debates rather than right before Election Day.

This is also around the time Americans begin to start paying attention to the election due to the debates and approaching Election Day. By October 2020, 75% of individuals claimed they plan to follow the election results whereas in September 66% said they planned to do so (Mitchell et al., 2020b). To further narrow the analysis to a manageable size, this research looks at the first 20,000 tweets of October 10, 2020 at 7:00pm EST and the first 20,000 tweets from October 11, 2020 at 4:00pm EST for mentions of the presidential candidates. The two different times account for the different time zones in different parts of the country. In the search for humor, the number is further reduced to the first 500 of each set of 20,000 to account for time-consuming manual coding. In summary, 40,000 tweets were analyzed for counts of mentions of Biden and Trump and 1,000 tweets were used for analysis of humor.

To access the data, a machine learning process was used. The data was transferred to a CSV (Excel accessible file) by a program provided by Documenting the Now on GitHub (2021). This program read the tweet IDs and then listed the tweets' content in rows. That information was then went through a machine learning program which organized the data into columns of: creation data, hashtags, urls, favorite count, id, possibly sensitive (true or false), retweet count, text, tweet url, user id, user description, user favorites count, user followers count, user friends count, user listed count, user location, user name, user screen name, user statuses count, and user verified (true or false). The program then parsed the data for mentions of Trump and Biden. See the appendix for further details on the programming of this process.

To analyze the 1,000 tweets, this research will follow the same method as its predecessors, Highfield (2015) and Davis et al. (2018), employing a manual qualitative coding to look for humor based off of content and intentions and a quantitative analysis of text. Items such as jokes, sarcasm, wordplay, irony, and mockery will be the main focus and then considering feel and responses to the Tweet. To reaffirm the Tweets are considered humorous, two students from the University of Mary Washington with opposing political views were asked to read the text of the Tweets and mark them as intended to be funny or not. The quantitative portion will look for mentions of candidates and topics once the Tweet has been defined as humorous. I will then take this data and compare it to that of the Karami et al. (2021) and the late night comedy data for patterns and similarities. Taking these three sets together, this research will see if the topics and presidential candidate focus are similar or not across late night comedy and Twitter.

Political Literacy and Knowledge Analysis

With those results, an analysis of data on political literacy and knowledge of Twitter users during 2020 is conducted to understand the possible implications of Twitter humor on

political literacy. In "Characterizing Online Engagement with Disinformation and Conspiracies in the 2020 U.S. Presidential Election", Karishma Sharma, Emilio Ferrara, and Yan Liu (2021) use the same dataset that this research utilizes (Chen, Deb, and Ferrara, 2020) and looks for engagement such as replies, retweets, and quotes of content from June 20, 2020 to September 6, 2020. They then look at whether that material is false information by cross referencing the tweets with fact checkers such as Media Bias/Fact, NewsGuard, and Zimdars (Sharma, Ferrara, and Liu, 2021, 3). To analyze the impact of this on political literacy, they looked at the retweets for similar political leaning and thus furthering dissemination of false information to a supporting crowd. This research utilizes their results, cross referenced with the findings of this project's humorous tweet analysis, to see whether the humorous material contains the same information and whether it received more retweets/replies or not.

These findings will be related to past literature to understand how political humor on Twitter may have affected political literacy during the 2020 election and whether it is consistent or reveals any change. They will also be considered in comparison with late night comedy's impacts on political knowledge discussed in the literature to uncover whether Twitter humor's impact is overall new or just an extension or a new version of television humor impacts.

Taking it all together, the potential political literacy impact of Twitter humor will be shown through combining prior research on the same dataset and the humorous comparison analysis with the context of why people choose to spread information. Lastly, the discussion will consider whether these findings are similar to the impacts of late-night comedy on political literacy, how users interact with humorous political material, and whether these findings are consistent with previously discussed literature or not.

Findings

Twitter Data

October 10, 2020 and October 11, 2020

Starting with the data from October 10, 2020 and October 11, 2020, of the 40,000 election related tweets 21,153 mentioned President Trump and 7,784 mentioned candidate Biden. The remaining 11,063 mentioned the election but not explicitly include the candidates' names. The divide between the two different times also came out relatively equal with 10,273 and 10,880 mentions of Trump and 3,362 and 4,422 mentions of Biden from 10/10/20 7:00 PM and 10/11/20 4:00 PM respectively.

Entering into the specifically humor data analysis, of the 1,000 Tweets, 102 were deemed humorous by the primary coder. The two additional coders agreed that 56% of the 102 tweets intended to be funny, but the Biden supporter found 96 of the 102 tweets identified by the author as intended to be funny (94%) while the Trump supporter found only 60 intended to be funny (58%). The different assessments of the tweets by these outside evaluators serves as a reminder of the partisan dynamics of humor. Looking at the author-identified humorous Tweets, Trump was the target for the majority of tweets, 77 to be exact. Biden is the target of 23 and both are the target of 2 tweets.

Trump accounts for the majority of 'target'.
2%
23%
75%
Trump
Biden
biden and trump
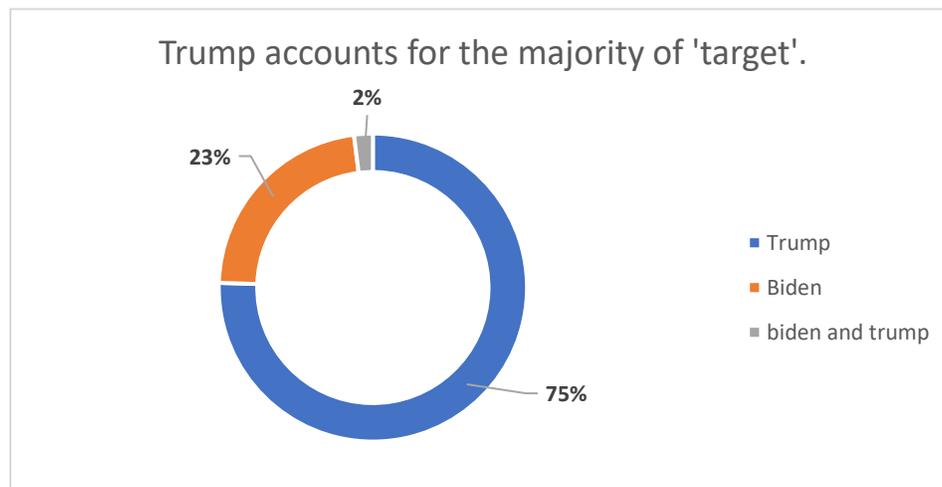
Source: Author Data

70% of the humorous tweets were directed at personal issues rather than policy issues, and the most common types of humor were satire, irony, visual humor (memes), hyperboles, and sarcasm.
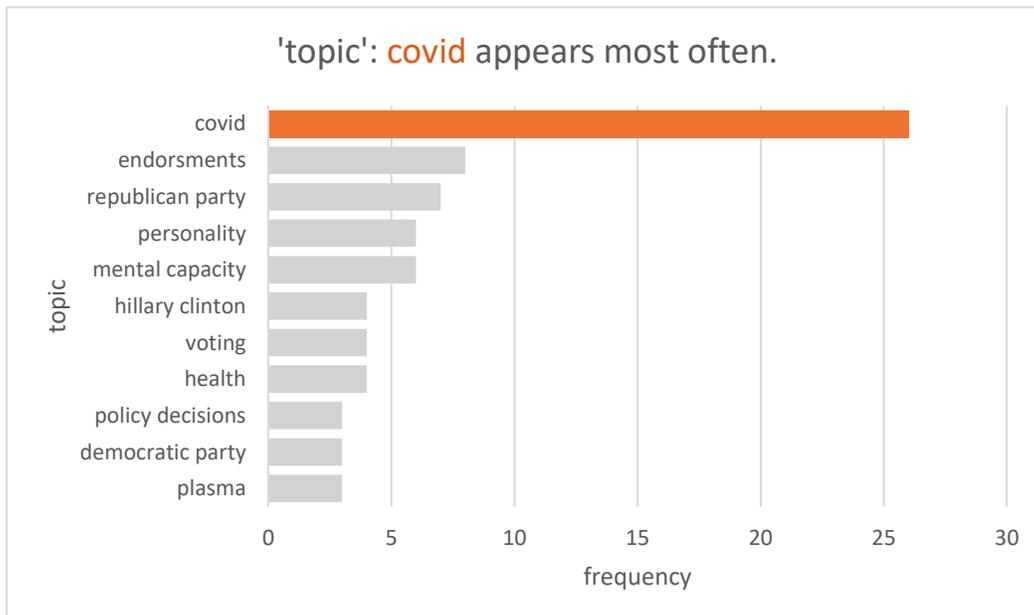
Row Labels	Count of humor
satire	19
irony	19
visual humor	16
hyperbolic	13
sarcasm	10
aggressive	8
Association humor	7
wordplay	3

Source: Author Data

PERSONAL ACCOUNTS FOR THE MAJORITY OF 'POLICY OR PERSONAL'.

30%

70%

■ personal
■ policy

Source: Author Data

The primary topic of these tweets was COVID-19 and the President's relation to it (25) and following behind it was endorsements of the presidents, the Republican party, their personalities, and their mental capacities. Despite being a policy topic, the majority of COVID-19 mentions, 17 of 26, were about the President personal connections to COVID-19. Such as, "*Trump's superhero name is #CaptainCovid. Pass it on,*" (@Alyssa_Milano, 2020) with a retweet count of 8,092.

'topic': covid appears most often.

topic	frequency
covid	26
endorsments	8
republican party	7
personality	6
mental capacity	6
hillary clinton	4
voting	4
health	4
policy decisions	3
democratic party	3
plasma	3

Source: Author Data

June 1, 2020 - November 3, 2020 (Karami et al.)

Karami et al.'s (2021) data reveals the most common topics on Twitter in swing states throughout the 2020 election. From their analysis they found that "the top-3 most popular topics indicate that users were very interested to follow polls, promote their candidate, and talk about how Trump administration responded to COVID19," (Karami et al. 2021, 6). After polls, candidate promotion, and COVID-19, the next most popular topics were Trump's behavior, anti-Trump, vote for Trump, election analysis, taxes, pro-Trump, and left Democrats (Karami et al. 2021).
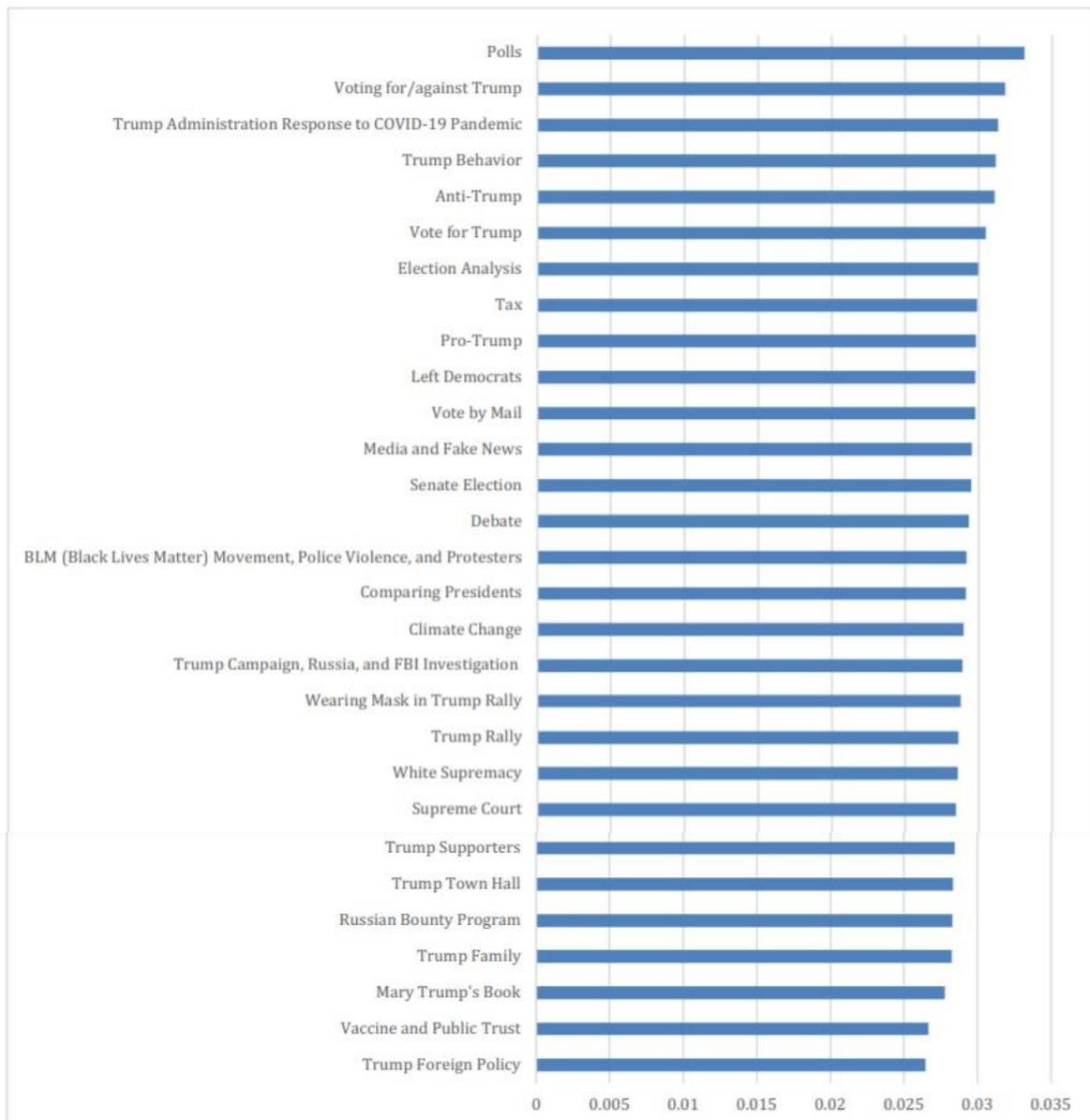
Source: Karami et al., 2021

Late-Night Comedy Data

Late-night comedy followed the same pattern. Trump was the target for the majority of jokes on the *The Late Show with Stephen Colbert* and *The Tonight Show Starring Jimmy Fallon* based on data collected by Farnsworth et al. (2021). This margin is much larger than that of Twitter's, as 97% of jokes were about Trump and only 3% were about Biden throughout the entire election.

With regards to personal or policy focus, 254 of the jokes were focused on political policy issues while 1407 were non-political personal focus of 1688 total jokes. For affiliation, the majority of the jokes focus on Republicans at 96% and the remaining 4% focus on Democrats. The topic of jokes on late night comedy followed recent events relatively closely. This includes main focuses on COVID-19 updates, the debates, Trump catching COVID-19, Trump rallies, and the Supreme Court nomination. A separate study of the once-a-week comedy shows revealed similar patterns of political humor. On *Saturday Night Live*, *Full Frontal with Samantha Bee*, and *Last Week Tonight with John Oliver*, they focused aggressively on calling Trump racist, incompetent, and on mocking his appearance (Farnsworth et al., 2021). Meanwhile, Biden was rarely mentioned and while the programs joked about his mental capacity and old age, it was done in a softer supportive manner (Farnsworth et al., 2021).

Looking at the late night jokes from just October 9th, as there were not episodes on the 10th, the trend remains the same. All of the jokes were about Trump (23), and none were about Biden. Furthermore, none of the jokes during this timeframe were policy focused. The topics of jokes on *The Late Show with Stephen Colbert* (*LSWSC*) on October 9th followed Twitter relatively closely but did not touch on the more niche topics. The episode the day before the start of this study of Twitter Humor opened with a skit entitled "The West Wing" – similar to the

television show – and calling Trump the "corona-virus in chief". The jokes were focused on Trump's mental capacity, COVID-19, supporters, lies, and health. There were no jokes targeting Biden and mentions of the Democratic candidate were in a positive light.

Political Literacy and Knowledge

When looking at the research done by Karishma Sharma, Emilio Ferrara, and Yan Liu (2021), out of 1.2 million active Twitter accounts, 610,430 of the accounts were left leaning and 500,804 right-leaning. Of the tweet cascades, groups of tweets based on topic, 3,162 were found to be unreliable or conspiracies, 4,320 were reliable, and 192,103 were undeterminable. They found that the main topics for false claims were mail-in voter fraud, COVID-19 and pushing hydroxychloroquine as a cure for COVID-19, and protests concerning law enforcement and Black Lives Matter (Sharma, Ferrara, and Liu, 2021, 6). Other topics included specific candidates and entities, such as social media platforms censoring accounts, conspiracies and allegations against former president Obama, or targeting the democratic party, and misleading claims about jobs and economy. The rest of their findings were related to QAnon conspiracies.

In their pursuit of looking for spread of disinformation, they also focused on keywords used by QAnon. They found that 92,065 accounts had used QAnon associated words and 7,661 were left leaning, for 10,085 undetermined, and the remaining 74,319 were right leaning. 65.58% of active accounts had some type of interaction with QAnon tweets. They found that overall, "82.17% of left-leaning in 1.2 million have not retweeted/quoted QAnon accounts, but only 28.35% of right-leaning have not endorsed content from QAnon accounts" (Sharma, Ferrara, and Liu, 2021, 8). But, they found that QAnon did have active conversations with left-leaning accounts through replies.

When looking at the humorous data, there is a large amount of topic overlap, especially COVID-19 and specific candidate/party attacks. This may be due to the saliency of COVID-19 and the imminent election. To look at the humorous tweets for similar misinformation, the same approach is used: looking for references to false stories/new sources and keywords connected to QAnon.

Cross referencing the stories referenced in the tweets with fact checkers, 46 of the humorous tweets featured partially or completely false narratives and 30 featured truths. The remaining 26 were undeterminable as they were simply opinions or random statements such as "@*realDonaldTrump But your a MAJOR LOSER TOO ! Guess it takes one to know one huh…*" (@ScholtensAlbert, 2020). Name calling and random statements are not necessarily false, but are not politically productive either. The false narratives largely surrounded the two candidates' health, debates, and the more niche stories such as plasma donation and endorsements. Including, "*Retweet if you think the reason Trump cancelled the debate is because he can't have a chance to infect Biden,*" (@ReallyAmerican1, 2020). This is an original statement which sparks an idea for Trump's reasoning with no supporting information.

When it came to accurate information, many of the jokes were an extreme or sarcastic take. For example, "*Attention: next POTUS super spreader event featuring Typhoid Donny! The chills! The coughs! The aches! Come one! Come all!*" (@BrianKarem, 2020). President Trump was planning to host a rally, but to call it a super spreader and Trump "Typhoid Donny" is a sarcastic partisan take.

There was little overlap in the Twitter humor with the QAnon reported list from the timeframe and parameters collected. There were two jokes about mail-in voting which followed the views of QAnon spread information – the polls are rigged against Trump and that Europeans

are voting through the mail-in process for Biden. Other right-leaning false jokes were centered around Biden's mental capacity and the Democratic party plotting to replace Biden with Harris through the 25th Amendment. As most of the humorous tweets were targeted at Trump in general, the false or primarily inconclusive narratives surrounding him included his plasma donation, his nomination for the Nobel Peace Prize, and Taliban endorsement.

With respect to the target, both candidates had more false than true narratives being spread. False narratives accounted for 48% of jokes about Trump and 39% for jokes about Biden. In terms of spread of information, the true statements had a higher total of retweets (91,347), but a tweet by Pete Buttigieg accounted for 37,100 of those retweets. The false narratives received fewer retweets overall (54,334) but had more retweet distribution with the third highest having 6,666 retweets but coming from an anonymous account named Angry Staffer (@angry_staffer).

Therefore overall, there were more false jokes directed at Trump, but proportionally there was an even amount directed at each candidate. True information was more highly retweeted, but accounts without fame received more retweets for false information than true. All of the jokes were short and extreme whether true, false, or random.

Discussion

1. <u>Are political Tweets focusing on the personal, emphasizing the same news events, and following similar topics and patterns as late-night comedy?</u>

From this analysis there is an apparent correlation between the mentions of presidents from Twitter to late-night comedy. Throughout the three data sets, Trump was the most mentioned candidate. But, on Twitter, there were more jokes targeting Biden and Pro-Trump

material than in the late-night comedy shows. While Trump is by far the most frequent target, 23% of the jokes on Twitter were about Biden while only 2% of the jokes on late night comedy shows were.

Looking at the demographics of who uses Twitter versus who views late night comedy, both are generally young, Democratic individuals. The key difference is the availability for creation of content and need for audience appeal. Late-night comics know their key demographics, left leaning young adults, and thus appeal to them to gain viewership and success. Meanwhile, Twitter, as a participatory media, does not encourage the need to appeal to primary users and anyone can create a joke. Creators of tweets are more polarized, older, follow accounts with their same views, and 69% identify as left leaning. They only have to appeal to their followers if they would like to rather than the majority of overall users. Thus, more jokes about Biden, which almost exactly matches the proportion of not left-leaning creators, is seen.

Another clear correlation of data is that the majority of the issues were focused on personal behavior, appearance, and health despite surrounding recent news topics. Response to COVID-19 topped the charts of all three datasets, but for the overall look at Twitter rather than just at humor they saw a more polling focused crowd. Neither late night nor Twitter comedy focused on polls, but Twitter humor honed in on three topics that general Twitter and late night comedy did not – Trump donating plasma, Trump vying for a Nobel Peace Prize, and endorsements of the two presidential candidates.

There were 8 humorous tweets about the Taliban endorsing Trump or Greta Thunberg endorsing Biden. The story cited by tweets regarding the Taliban was a CBS interview with Taliban spokesman Zabihullah Mujahid (Yousafzai, 2020). While it is a news story, the editor made a note the following day stating that it was incorrect in referring to Mujahid in stating the

Taliban's support for Trump. The story also included statements from the President's team

disavowing any support from the Taliban. Those two reasons and lack of prevalence of the story

are most likely reasons for late night comedy's choice to not react to it. After all, late night

comedy requires the viewer to understand the context for the jokes to land successfully

(Farnsworth and Lichter, 2019), therefore the event or news story must be prominent enough for

mass familiarity. Furthermore, false information is avoided, as late night comics are

professionals. Endorsements of Biden from Ms. Thunberg were used in support of him and

against him, "*Greta Thunberg endorsed Joe Biden today while Donald Trump was endorsed by*

the Taliban. Tells you all you need to know" (@Weinsteinlaw, 2020), "*Brat who lives in another*

country; isn't even old enough to vote endorses Biden. Riveting," (@stclairashley, 2020).

The jokes surrounding the Nobel Peace Prize and donating plasma were both sowed in

anti-Trump sentiment. Neither of these stories were featured on late night comedy, also

potentially due to lack of knowledge, niche appeal, and potential for falsehood. Trump shared

with Fox News that he intended to donate his plasma to save other COVID-19 patients (Ankel,

2020). Twitter users latched on to it quickly, but as it was a singular statement to one news outlet

with no bearing of validity rather than an event or speech, late night comedy did not. Similarly,

Trump was nominated for a Nobel Peace Prize in September of 2020, but so was Biden (Folley,

2020). Twitter users joked only about Trump saying things such as "*It's not enough that Trump*

didn't win a Nobel Peace Prize. They should have awarded him the dumbbell violence prize"

(@davematt88, 2020). In contrast, late night comedy and the rest of Twitter largely left the

Nobel Prize nomination topic alone.

A possible explanation for late night comedy's and the Twitter dataset's difference from

Twitter comedy in topic percentages is the timeframe. For Twitter comedy, one day was

considered. With Twitter's instantaneous nature of reaction, the Tweets concentrated on hot news topics of that specific day. Meanwhile, the other two datasets looked at the election as a whole over a longer period of time, which provides more diversity in news topics. But when the timeframe difference is removed the trends of late night comedy focusing solely on Trump and personal aspects is deepened. Furthermore, the overlaps of COVID-19, Trump's mental capacity, and both candidates' health, and the entire lack of mention of the smaller stories on general Twitter and late night comedy shows a focus on the bigger more well-known topics on those two mediums.

Late-night comedy is known for its entertainment and therapeutic qualities, releasing stress in a situation where individuals lack control over political developments (Farnsworth and Lichter, 2019). Twitter humor is known as a channel for opposing voices to "talk back" to candidates, parties, or news reports (Davis et al., 2018). But based on this study both mediums may similarly operate in a therapeutic way. For instance, one tweet simply stated, "*shut up*" using a gif from "Mean Girls" (@Merganszerinc, 2020) to respond to claims of harassment from Trump to Kamala Harris. Instead of viewing content and feeling relief at the humor in late night comedy, the individual themselves makes a joke, or share a gif or meme, for the therapeutic feeling of having a say in the matter – a sense of control. Thus ultimately Twitter has a similar therapeutic effect to late night.

One major difference between the two media formats is the type of humor most frequently used. Due to the short "talk back" nature of Twitter humor, some of them are both jokes and harsh responses. Sarcasm had the highest amount of retweets totaling 46,252. An example of one of these sarcastic tweets is by @erichirshberg and has 157 retweets,

But yeah, man, I'm sure the Nobel Committee was super torn on whether or not to give the NOBEL PEACE PRIZE to Donald Trump. Anyway, I'm sure you're super busy looking for a new illegal, teenage troll farm to replace the one that just got shut down on you, so I'll let you go. @erichirshberg

Reading this could be seen as an insult to Trump supporters, but the sarcastic use of "super" with the full capitalization of Nobel Peace Prize implies a humorous intent. Late night comedy is clear cut as humorous. It is labeled as such and generally follows the pattern of sketches or a single person offering responsive jokes mocking the news stories of the day.

Late night comedy aims to produce revenue and faces commercial pressures to stay "in line" with jokes and appeal to as large of an audience as possible. As seen with Stephen Colbert not accusing Trump of trying to get Biden sick during the debate, as many Twitter creators did (*LSWSC*, 2020). These pressures also push them to stay out of the more niche topics as they have a commercial incentive to draw more viewers, rather than discussing things that might matter only to specific individuals. Meanwhile, Twitter comedy does not have these same pressures. Creators want to share information their personal audience understands, or sometimes they simply express thoughts for their own relief. Creators also are less pressured to stay away from certain types of rant or offending humor as they do not have to fear offending a viewer and losing revenue or their job. But this does not apply to all creators. Creators who are public figures or want to reach a larger audience may be more inclined to stay in the same lines as a late-night comic. Further research on this area could reveal the different types of comedy within types of twitter creators.

As a participatory media format, Twitter has largely been recognized as a new phenomenon in political media. It allows everyday people to be authors, responders, and viewers

of any story they wish. When it comes to humorous content, based on this research it is clear that it is more closely related to late-night comedy than previously thought. A majority of the time, comedic tweets follow the same news events as late-night comedy and focused on Trump more than Biden. Because Twitter humor creators generally lack the commercial demand to appeal to the majority of users and the format allows for individual response by anyone, there were more niche events mentioned, such as Trump donating his plasma and vying for a Nobel Peace Prize, and there was more focus on Biden. Lastly, despite the format and type of humor being different, Twitter humor requiring creation, and being more insult focused rather than watching a professional show, it still operates in a similar manner; responding to events or statements to gain a sense of having a say or control.

Much of what is found in this study is consistent with that of previous literature examining the content of political humor and Twitter. The Tweets were responsive almost "talking back" to the news event or candidate as Davis et al. (2018) had found, and there was a focus on discrediting the opponent – especially with regard to the Taliban and Greta Thunberg endorsements. With this focus on attacking or discrediting, offensive or insulting language was frequent in the sarcastic humor on Twitter which follows Mansour's (2017) study of political discourse.

Davis et al. (2018) and Graefer et al. (2019) said there was a focus on discrediting and degrading the opponent; and due to the largely attacking nature of Twitter humor none of the tweets in this study were directly supportive of a candidate. But, they were implicitly supportive of a candidate by discrediting the opponent. For example, "*If You're Dumb Enough To Think Trump/Pence Did A Heckuva Job ON ANYTHING Then You're Probably A Republican... The Rest Of Us Will Be Voting #BidenHarris2020,*" (@RonHall46, 2020). This type of supportive yet

discrediting commentary resembles that of attack campaign advertisements, but is created by individuals instead. This differs from previous research which found primarily attacking, with little mention of the other candidate (Davis et al., 2018).

Lastly, this study revealed very little to no mention of policy information in humorous tweets as Belt (2018) had found. But while they did not include further policy information, these tweets were reactions to news events during the campaign. Having the event hyperlinked or mentioned may spark an interest in consumers to look deeper into the issue. This could be an effect of the nature of the 2020 election being during the COVID-19 pandemic and Trump, so future studies should analyze policy humor on Twitter post-pandemic and Trump.

2. <u>If they are similar in context, are Tweets impacting political literacy in the same way? Are people more informed, views reinforced, or more misinformed? Is there more bias/polarization and cynicism?</u>

Previous literature found that humorous content received more interactions, reactionary, utilizes biases, and creates a "us vs. them" rhetoric. Primary tweet creators are older than 50, anti-Trump, and colder towards the other party, while consumers are younger with lower levels of education. These consumers are less worried about the impacts of false information despite being more likely to know of false claims and 57% score as "low political knowledge" on fact-based questions related to the news (Mitchell et al. 2020). All of these ideas are reinforced by this research as the humorous tweets used antithesis rhetoric, were primarily against Trump, and contained more false or random information than true information. This leads to potentially low political knowledge due to the "it's just a joke" mindset and prominent false or random information.

With over fifty percent of the humorous tweets being false or completely random statements, humorous tweet viewers are slightly more likely to see false or irrelevant information than true information. Especially with the high retweet counts, false information is not only posted in humorous tweets but is highly spread. Based on the number of retweets, the question then leads to whether consumers are not fact checking the tweets they view prior to sharing them or if they are spreading it despite knowing it is false. Previous studies found most Twitter users report that they engage in fact checking but do not actually practice it (Geeng et al., 2020; Mitchell et al., 2019). Since humor is a therapeutic and entertainment tool, many jokes are outlandish for a laugh such as caricatures of Trump on *SNL* being painted completely orange. This may lead to viewers seeing extreme absurd claims and believing there is no harm in sharing it as it is "just a joke". Meanwhile, the process is one of actually spreading false information.

The extreme and partisan nature of the humorous tweets lends to the idea that they create in-groups and out-groups and thus more polarization. Karishma Sharma, Emilio Ferrara, and Yan Liu's (2021) findings showed that likes and retweets are done by supporters and responses are often done by the opposite party. This can be seen through humorous responses which are anti-Trump being done on news articles that are neutral or pro-Trump and the same towards Biden. Many of the jokes are attacking Trump through false stories meant to promote him which relates to Karishma Sharma, Emilio Ferrara, and Yan Liu's (2021) findings that there was a large amount of Democratic interaction with QAnon through responses. Twitter humor is highly responsive, so these left-leaning tweets are responding to right-leaning stories through humor, despite not agreeing with them. This spreads the story but also reframes it in a negative light.

With the extreme, partisan nature and grouping, it is possible to say that humorous tweets foster cynicism, as previous studies suggested. If politics is "just a joke" and everything is

extreme, a possible implication is viewers taking these views to the greater realm of politics overall. This concept is furthered by the findings that sarcasm and hyperbole made it harder for the two additional coders to agree on which tweets were funny. If a viewer does not know it is a joke, they could take it as true information; especially since Twitter is not a solely humorous platform. With news outlets, politicians, and citizens alike sharing information, feeds are mixed with humor and news and thus viewers may find it more difficult to separate the two.

Due to the focused nature of this study, a survey of political knowledge and cynicism of Twitter humor creators and consumers could not be conducted. Future studies could dive deeper into these humorous tweets, looking through each like and retweet for partisanship and association with groups such as QAnon. Furthermore, by expanding the overall Twitter dataset there would be more data points for falsehood and truth to see if the trends of the two day news cycle are consistent throughout the election.

Comparing Twitter to late night comedy, the greater participatory capacity and extreme nature of Twitter heightens the possibility of cynicism and polarization and there are more false statements. While late night comedy focuses on more headline broad topics and has to stay out of trouble with the FCC and broadcast executives, that also means they are more likely to focus on true stories. While their jokes are not necessarily "true" they are in the context of referring to true stories. Meanwhile Twitter humor is far looser and can include more falsehoods. Furthermore, the in-grouping and "us vs. them" creates more cynicism and polarization around topics. Late night comedy may aim to appeal to a left leaning demographic, but citizens cannot respond or attack back in the same way since it is a nightly show rather than real time statements with response capability. Also, since late night comedy is clearly identifiable as humorous, the jokes

made are seen as trivial because the audience knows it is a comedy show. In contrast Twitter contains a wide array of different creators and goals which are harder to separate.

One difference from past literature surrounds Davis et al.'s (2018) findings that Twitter discourse increased "meaningful political engagement". In their definition, this includes discrediting the opponent, identifying as political subjects, and exercising civic support through voting, fundraising, and collective action (Davis et al., 2018, 15). While most of these cannot be shown in this study, discrediting the opponent can be. A majority of the humorous tweets were attacking the opponent and name calling. But this study does not find this to be meaningful political engagement because it lacks the discourse and conversation of questioning and rather is one-word attacks with an antagonistic tone. It is not opening the door for discussion, rather it is polarizing and in-grouping, which is not politically healthy for a society.

The internet as a whole represents a marketplace of ideas, and Twitter follows this notion. Twitter humor is an opportunity for citizens with varying viewpoints to create entertainment and have therapeutic relief through getting to respond to politicians and news events on their own rather than watching someone else do it on late night comedy. While there are those benefits, it is a thin line to walk as Twitter possesses the dangers of cynicism and the risks of spreading misinformation. With the increasing use of Twitter for news, the risk of misinformation is critical to our democratic process to be sure. Informed and active voters are crucial to a democracy.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Twitter humor is an extension of late-night humor as late night comedy was of political newspaper comics prominent before television. Twitter humor is a cog in the evolving interactions the public have with political content, which is more open than late night

comedy to lay-person creation and extreme but diverse views. This study furthered past literature by looking specifically at Twitter political humor. It also differed from previous studies as there was more specific news reaction content and candidate supportive content while still attacking the opposition.

Twitter humor is found to be potentially worse for political knowledge and cynicism than late night comedy as it is more likely to feature false stories than late night comedy and has the greater tendency to involve attacks on the opposition. Though late night comedy is found to lower assessments of the government and targeted candidates (Farnsworth and Litcher, 2019), Twitter's participation allows for negative assessments to be deepened through repeated reinforcement. The spiral effect of responses, news usage of Twitter, and in-grouping/out-grouping patterns of use further polarizes the public. Rather than a show and viewers or a discussion, Twitter pits one group against another. Because humorous Twitter content is individually created and shareable, the notion of politics being "just a joke" is heightened. Furthermore, since it is more difficult to identify tweets as humorous and they are mixed on the platform with actual news sites, it is harder for viewers to determine what is a joke or not. The mix of information, in-grouping, no check on false information, and short offensive jokes leads to a increased possibility of cynicism and low political knowledge.

Future research on this subject could use more humorous Twitter data as this study was limited by time and resources. Furthermore, the question arises of whether Twitter humor was a phenomenon that surrounded Trump or if it is continuing into Biden's term and the future. Incorporating Twitter into the world of political humor research is critical to understanding how new generations interact with and gain political knowledge via comedic content over time.

Appendix

Twitter data processing: hydrated data from tweet IDs into a CSV file from Chen, Emily, Ashok Deb, and Emilio Ferrara's dataset on GitHub (Chen et al., 2020) through a GUI provided by Documenting the Now. (2020). Hydrator [Computer Software]. Retrieved from https://github.com/docnow/hydrator. To hydrate, open one of the tweet ID files from Chen et al. and select all and paste them into a text file. Upload the text file to the hydrator GUI and select CSV. Pandas Python library was used to organize, analyze, and process the data.

a_file = pd.read_csv("Tweet2020-10-10-01CSV")

a_file2 = a_file.drop(columns=['coordinates', 'place', 'source', 'retweet_id', 'quote_id', 'user_time_zone', 'user_urls',

'user_default_profile_image', 'retweet_screen_name', 'in_reply_to_status_id', 'in_reply_to_screen_name',

'user_created_at', 'lang', 'in_reply_to_user_id', 'media'])

a_fileLimited = a_file2.iloc[:20000]

Trump = a_fileLimited.loc[a_fileLimited['text'].str.contains("Trump", case=False)]

print("number mentions of Trump: " + str(len(Trump)))

Biden = a_fileLimited.loc[a_fileLimited['text'].str.contains("Biden", case=False)]

print("number mentions of Biden: " + str(len(Biden)))

Repeat this for the second dataset from 2020-10-10-21.

Determining false information: AllSides was used to determine the credibility of the mentioned news site. The particular story was searched on Reuters fact checker (Reuters, n.d.) and Sharma et al.'s (2021) fact checking for cross-examination.

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