“THE DUTY OF COMEDY IS TO AMUSE MEN BY CORRECTING THEM”:
ANALYZING THE VALUE AND EFFECTIVENESS OF USING COMEDY AS AN
INFORMATIONAL TOOL

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By

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ABSTRACT

Often in today’s culture, individuals seek information from comedy sources. From cable television programs to Internet sources, as well as interpersonal communication, the role and prominence of comedy content as a vehicle for news and information has been steadily growing throughout the past decade. Throughout my research I look into the communication areas of news—specifically political news—and education to determine the effectiveness and value of using comedy to convey information. Employing secondary analysis research, communication theory investigation, research in two elementary school classrooms, an online survey, and interviews with prominent members of communication industries, I look into questions of how and why humor is an effective method for conveying information. Among the research findings are that the power of the joke, as well as the attentive nature of comedy, contribute to the effectiveness of comedy as a vehicle of relevant news and information. This research helps expand our knowledge base of comedy and its role and effectiveness in information distribution.

KEYWORDS: Comedy, Humor, Communications, Education, Information Distribution
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The makers of Advil
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“I have always noticed that people will never laugh at anything that is not based on truth.” ~Will Rogers

Chapter 1: Introduction

Humor is a fundamentally undefined emotional response. It is subjective; what one finds funny about a joke or situation another may not. Humor is a universal response; everyone laughs. Humor makes us human. Humor sets us apart from robots, aliens, and fish (aside from skin, DNA, and the ability to breathe on land for extended periods of time). Aristotle said that laughter holds the ability to animate the human soul thus separating ourselves from animals (Sanders, 1995, 62). Humor is multi-faceted. It appears in all sectors of society; from television, movies, and literature to classrooms, churches, and businesses.

In today’s popular culture, a growing movement exists called “edutainment.” Edutainment is the melding of education and entertainment for learning purposes. This concept has been made popular through television programs ranging from Sesame Street and The Electric Company to The West Wing. Movies like Dead Poets Society, Night at the Museum, and even Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban have also employed edutainment techniques in their storylines. Following this trend is a growing movement to educate individuals through non-traditional media sources. Educational video games, blogs, and podcasts are now being developed to help inform users while simultaneously keeping them entertained.

Edutainment is an intriguing and important idea to the information distribution and cognition process, as well as a central concept to the development of humor research.
New forms of media and mediums utilize humor in their presentation of information on a daily basis. These sources are placing greater and greater emphasis on entertaining while educating.

In a culture where Internet technologies present new forums for news, entertainment, opinion, and research, humorous sites are routinely found inside this growing knowledge sphere. Sites like YouTube and Funny or Die openly encourage individuals to devise and post their own original comedy content. Blogs and sites such as Deadspin, Crooks and Liars, Wonkette, 236.com, and The Onion provide humorous commentary on current sports, political, and news events. These sites are only a small portion in the expansive Internet landscape. There are thousands, if not millions of sites devoted to humor and components of our society, feeding our culture’s growing desire for a comedic outlook of daily events and news.

The study of humor covers a number of different areas and subject matters. Previously, researchers studied the origin of humor and its benefits. One of the major areas in which the effect of comedy has been researched is in medicine. Past research on comedy has focused on its capacity to help individuals overcome illness and assist in rehabilitation, a study featured prominently in the 1998 movie, Patch Adams, featuring Robin Williams. The film, based on the experiences and lessons developed by the real Patch Adams, looked at how humor in the medical world affected patients and their quality of life inside the hospital system. This idea of using comedy to heal is a subject that has been discussed in the medical profession and popular culture for some time.
Television has long been a primary source of humor for millions of Americans and is now a prominent setting for comedic perspectives on daily events. Beginning in the 1960s with programs such as the Smothers Brothers Show and in the 1970s with Saturday Night Live, television became a place for humorous commentary on current events. Today, television programs, such as the Daily Show with Jon Stewart and The Colbert Report are the premier source for headline-mocking coverage of daily events. In dethroning programs such as Saturday Night Live, The Daily Show with Jon Stewart and The Colbert Report have become the forums that millions of Americans tune into on a nightly basis for perspectives on the news and newsmakers. As viewers have begun to identify these programs as important sources of news information at increasing rates. These shows are experiencing rapidly growing viewership, also thanks in large part to their coverage and perspectives on the 2008 Presidential race.

For more than 10 years, millions of television viewers have regularly tuned into Jon Stewart’s nightly program and his take on the important news and stories of the day. The show, in addition to its “fake news” correspondents, proved so popular and influential, that in 2005 a spin-off of the program was created featuring former The Daily Show correspondent-turned fake political pundit, Stephen Colbert. The new program focused around Colbert and his Bill O’Reilly-type persona and his tongue-in-cheek ultra-conservative analysis of political and news events. The popularity of both programs has reached beyond the television format and translated to books as well. Both Stewart and Colbert, in conjunction with their teams of writers, have created well-received and best-selling books.
With the growing importance of infotainment programs in our culture’s daily routine, the question then arises: what value, if any, do we take from them? Recent studies into this concept have not received the appropriate amounts of attention needed to fully comprehend this subject. Researchers have only begun to understand its value in educating the public. During the 2008 presidential election campaign, the Pew Research Center conducted a poll of 3,612 adults to determine which news audiences were better politically informed. In a month of surveying, the Pew Research Center asked participants about their regular news viewing habits and whether or not they could identify political leaders from the United States and around the world. Pew reported some interesting results (Pew, *Who Knows News?*, 2008).

Among all business and news programs respondents reported watching, viewers of *The Colbert Report* and *The Daily Show* proved to be some of the most informed of the audiences. Between the two programs, *The Colbert Report* viewers fared better in this particular survey. However, individuals who identified themselves as being regular consumers of either program were shown to be more knowledgeable than viewers of programs such as the *Nightly News with Brian Williams*, *World News Tonight with Charlie Gibson*, “Daily and Community newspapers,” and the *National Enquirer* (Pew, *Who Knows News?*, 2008).

The information that came out of this survey brings to light an interesting idea, central to this research. Can information presented through mediums such as *The Daily Show* and *Colbert Report*, along with other humorous sources, enhance an individual’s
ability to learn and understand a topic or piece of information? The result of this survey is evidence of the growing belief that people can learn through humor.

The Value in Comedy

Comedy is integral part of the daily lives of millions. Many individuals seek these forums to escape from their lives, using humor for its entertainment value. Others, as the study will demonstrate, use humor (knowingly or subconsciously) to help educate and enlighten themselves on a cornucopia of topics.

Both humor and comedy are not easy concepts to define. Among those who have attempted to construct parameters for a strict definition of humor is the Oxford English Dictionary, which describes it as “the quality of action, speech, or writing which excites amusement; oddity, jocularity, facetiousness, comicality, fun…The faculty of perceiving what is ludicrous or amusing, or of expressing it in speech, writing, or other composition; jocose imagination, treatment of a subject” (Martin, 2007, 5). Similarly, the Merriam-Webster dictionary tries to classify comedy by describing it as “a literary work written in a comic style or treating a comic theme,” as well as a “comic element” or “humorous entertainment” (comedy, 2009). However, while there are those who confine these terms to a definition, both represent much more than a standard definition. They are a subjective topic. Everyone’s definition differs on what is comical or funny; humor is impossible to label. This work is not to define humor or comedy, or what is funny; this examination seeks to determine its effects on our cognitive processes. Because the concepts of humor and comedy are so closely linked, they will be tied together throughout the course of this research.
It is important at this point to describe what humor and comedy entail. For the purposes of this examination, humor and comedy will be broadly defined as language or actions that make a person laugh or broad audiences amused. These can be located in a plethora of subjects, from stories, satire, contradictions, and slapstick, to conversational dialogues. In each of these areas the potential for learning exists. The purpose of this study is to identify these traits in information processing environments and to develop a greater understanding how and why such communication techniques are effective.

**Methodology**

This study analyzes the nature of comedy in our current society. Specifically, does humor have a place in teaching and information processing and distribution? This issue also opens the discussion on whether the emphasis on entertainment value actually creates a conducive setting for learning and understanding of the materials being presented. Can presenting information through a lens of humor be a more effective method of delivery than straight educational techniques? Furthermore, does such a presentation of data enable a listener to retain that information more effectively? Similarly, the issue at hand is this: Can the use of humor in communication information be an effective transport for that information? Through a multi-faceted examination of this subject, this study will demonstrate that comedy and humor can, in fact, be effective devices for information distribution and processing in the public sphere.

Primary research for this analysis will look at relevant texts and studies. Through this research, I elaborate on past understandings of the use of entertainment and analyze how they are attributed to today’s mediums and information systems. Additionally, a
review of relevant literature will clarify the communication theories that help to explain how and why comedy and humor can be an effective communication filter. Academic research will also be used to showcase how, in the past, humorous media programs and teachings have proven to be effective filters for distributing information.

A second course for determining the usefulness of humor is by means of survey research. Data came from a crafted Internet survey, released on public forums and social networking sites. The purpose of this survey was two-fold. Primarily, through exposing respondents to various types of text and images—both humorous and straightforward presentations of information—the survey diagnosed how well comedy and humorous mediums were used to educate the public on an issue or topic. Secondly, the survey acted to recognize respondents’ preferences for comedy mediums and any identifiers for those more likely to seek out these vehicles for learning, as well as potential reasoning for such directives.

A third aspect of this research follows classroom experience. Through a finely crafted classroom activity, I will identify the utility of humor in the classroom. Two kindergarten classes at a public elementary school in suburban Washington, DC were researched to study this application of humor. Specifically, the purpose of this path was to determine if applying comedy to a lesson in a class of kindergarten students helps them learn the information they are presented. While one class presented the lesson with humor infused into the lesson plan, the other utilized a traditional and straightforward teaching method to present the same lesson. The purpose of this study was to determine
the effectiveness of humor, not only in the classroom setting, but as it compares with the traditional teaching method.

The final exploration of this topic is observed through interviews. To establish first-hand accounts and perceptions of the utility of using humor in information distribution, I conducted interviews with individuals within communication spheres susceptible to humor’s influence. These include individuals who use humor in television programming, Internet information and commentary, academics, and religious practices. The intent of this research is to determine the effectiveness of humor in distributing information and to gain insight into the viewpoints of those who use humor in their daily communication practices.

Past research into entertainment and education have not been sufficient examinations. With the presence of comedy and humor in our daily routines, this is a subject that has premium value in the current communications field. Our ability to understand the nature of comedy in communication can have ramifications on many business, educational, and commercial practices.
Chapter 2: Literature Review

Humor and comedy are not new concepts. Issues and discussions of comedy have existed since man first discovered fire, created the wheel, and became a spokesman for GEICO Insurance. In the past century, there has been much research conducted and literature written about the nature of comedy. Insight into the nature of, effects on, and positions of comedy in our culture have been the subjects of these works.

Throughout this chapter, I will discuss those studies into humor and comedy. I will focus on how these concepts have been looked at throughout history, as well as trace its studied roots. Furthermore, I will look into the relevant research on the effectiveness of using humor as a medium for information distribution. Finally, I will track the literature detailing the understandings and reasoning behind utilizing comedy as a technique for communicating specific types of information. While this research will not answer the research questions definitively, each author’s analysis and research help contribute to developing the body of knowledge for this study into humor and comedy. These studies, as well as previous research, will help establish humor and comedy’s place in current forms of communication and communication studies. Analysis of these works will provide a strong background of information to the reader, as well act as a backbone for the research and discussions in the subsequent chapters. Additionally, by establishing how humor fits into different sectors of our culture, I will demonstrate how the research
and content of this thesis will enhance and further our understanding of their place in our culture.

_Humor through a Historical Lens_

In his book, _Sudden Glory: Laughter as a Subversive History_, Barry Sanders chronicles the development of laughter and its significance throughout history. Sanders establishes different histories among cultures all over the world, and how humor in particular is essential to their development. His research explores the historical and relevant debate of comedy’s place in culture. There are cultures throughout history that believed that life began with laughter. As Sanders explains, the ancient Egyptian cultures believed that laughter, specifically that from the Egyptian Creator, was the basis of creation. According to their history, the Creator confronted the Egyptian god Chaos, and laughed at it. The resulting joy and exuberance were turned into light and seven gods to rule the world were born. Additional outbursts of laughter created water. Finally, on the seventh burst of laughter, as the story goes, the human soul was created (Sanders, 1995, 1).

Continuing his chronicle of laughter through history, Barry Sanders discusses the use of humor in the works of Geoffrey Chaucer. In _The Canterbury Tales_, Chaucer uses humor to punctuate his stories and give them greater social significance than they appear to have on their surface. For example, Sanders demonstrates that Chaucer made the explicit decision not to include characters of nobility along the trek to Canterbury (Sanders, 1995, 28). Sanders identifies this as a social joke being played on nobility, a slap in the face to the aristocracy of the period. Chaucer uses this absence from his story
to create a “political joke” crafted towards his medieval audiences. Furthermore, in his tales, Chaucer uses female characters prominently as subjects to tell or illustrate the tale. In his stories, female characters are strong, manipulative, and funny, traits not seen in other pieces of literature during his medieval time period. By using women in a non-traditional form of story telling, Chaucer is making a strong comment about society and the role of women in education (Sanders, 1995, 28). By describing and featuring these characters, Chaucer’s tales highlight one of the first examples of using humorous literature and comedy to convey culturally relevant information.

Discussions by sociologists Erving Goffman and Mary Douglas help to enhance and embolden Sanders argument: laughter, and the agents who create it, hold the ability to inform and break down topics in a way not normally achieved in casual dialogues. Evoking Erving Goffman, Sanders extends his discussion on the nature of laughter to the human expression. “One of the heroes [of conversation],” as Goffman says, “is the wit who can introduce references to wider, important matters in a way that is ineffably suited to the current moment of talk” (Sanders, 1995, 46). Sanders further explores the issue by focusing on research conducted by Mary Douglas. In reference to the court jester or joker, she says that he is “one of those people who pass beyond the bounds of reason and society and give glimpses of a truth which escapes through the mesh of structured concepts” (Sanders, 1995, 46). Sanders establishes the role of said fool in both ancient Greek and the medieval courts. “The jester attempts to educate and purify with his fiery tongue” (Sanders, 1995, 78). Because of the prominent position of the joker in front of
the court, with his ability to speak the truth without fear of repercussion, the jester wielded great powers of communication in the public square.

In another area of focus for Sanders, along his chronicle of laughter, he presents the story of Charlie Chaplin and his film *The Great Dictator* (1940). The film’s premise, as was Chaplin’s purpose, was to set up and tear down German dictator Adolf Hitler and his regime. In the film, Chaplin was said to have worn “the dictator like a clown suit, and by so doing declaw and defang the Emperor of Evil” (Sanders, 1995, 266). As a result of his portrayal, Chaplin was able to educate the public about the dictators atrocities, as well as modify public perceptions about German aggressions. The audiences would “never again sit through newsreel footage of Nazis marching in parade without seeing through the Third Reich. [Chaplin] showed Nazis for what they were: a high proportion of gesture and rant” (Sanders, 1995, 267).

This example, like Sanders’ others, helps illustrate how humor has played a role throughout the history of civilization. Whether through the story of creation, informing the public of the disparities between the sexes or classes in society, or enlightening the public of the news from around the world, Sanders enforces the role of humor and its place in communications. While his depiction of comedy’s use throughout ancient and modern cultures provides firm background information, it lacks in-depth analysis.

*Edutainment*

Thus far, we have looked at the historical use of humor as communication tools, as well as touched on its utility in the education practice. To further develop the idea of “edutainment,” editors Arvind Singhal, Michael J. Cody, Everett M. Rogers, and Miguel
Sabido have contributed to knowledge in this field in their book, *Entertainment-Education and Social Change: History, Research, and Practice*. In the book, the authors set out to develop the idea of “entertainment-education,” its effectiveness, and how it has been cultivated and implemented around the world.

Entertainment-education, according to authors Singhal and Rogers, “is the process of purposely designing and implementing a media message to both entertain and educate, in order to increase audience members’ knowledge about an educational issue, create favorable attitudes, shift social norms, and change overt behavior” (Singhal, 2004, 5). Furthermore, the authors establish entertainment-education as a communications theory; while there are communication theories that can be used to explain it, it is in fact a communications strategy (Singhal, 2004, 5). The authors’ exploration into the subject is limited however; their work and studies solely revolve around the use of television and movies to convey messages. While enlightening and helpful to the discussion, the focus on television only glazes over the subject of humor as an effective communications medium.

Singhal and Rogers are most concerned with the use of entertainment-education as a function of bringing attention and knowledge to social issues. Cultural entertainment-education strategies began in developing countries in the form of radio and television soap operas. The focus of these programs was more for health-related topics in countries that lack adequate financial and media support (Singhal, 2004, 8). The first of these types of programs was *The Lawsons* (1944), produced and presented in Australia (Singhal, 2004, 12). *The Lawsons* was an immensely popular program that followed a
traditional Australian family, living their lives in “Wongalee,” Australia. The show centered on the family’s coping with children at war and the everyday struggles of life (National Library, 2006). While focusing on telenovelas as sources of social change, as the theories presented by the authors do, they also demonstrate manners in which humor can be used to influence and inform a media audience.

\textit{Humor and Cognitive Processing}

Rod A. Martin, in his book, \textit{The Psychology of Humor: An Integrative Approach}, sets forth an expansive explanation of the motivations, uses, and understandings behind humor. According to Martin, humor has very distinct origins. “Humor and laughter in humans are a product of natural selection. Laughter appears to have originated in social play and to be derived from primate play signals” (Martin, 2007, 3). From this point in evolution, human abilities evolved from those laughter-generated activities into mental and emotional play, resulting in our current understandings of humor and laughter (Martin, 2007, 3). Martin also notes that the evolutionary trend of humor seems to have shown great importance for social-emotional functions (Martin, 2007, 4). Throughout the process of humor and language’s evolution, our current use and understanding of these topics remain very broad. Humor holds many functions in social and interpersonal functions: it can be a social bonding device or act as a social deconstruction device, it can help people work together or create barriers between individuals, or humor can strengthen bonds between people or uproot power and status. Martin concludes, “Humor has evolved in humans as a universal mode of communication and social influence with a variety of functions” (Martin, 2007, 5).
Similar to earlier discussions by Lewis and Freud, when describing cognitive and perceptual processes of humor, Martin writes, “To produce humor, an individual needs to mentally process information coming from the environment or from memory, playing with ideas, words, or actions in a creative way, and thereby generating a witty verbal utterance or a comical nonverbal action that is perceived by others to be funny” (Martin, 2007, 6). When we receive humor, Martin notes that we absorb the information, process its meaning, and evaluate the message as whether it is “nonserious, playful, and humorous” (Martin, 2007, 6). In this evaluation stage, we take an extra step in processing such communication, while analyzing its comedic value.

This understanding is important to my study of how important comedy can be for effectively receiving information, whether with forms of news, education, etc. While general, Martin’s analysis gives insight to the mental processing of humor and how it can be effective. When we hear or see something humorous or comical, our psyche needs to take in the information and discover how it should be processed. Especially with humor, as Martin points out, we need to make sense of the information and do something with it, whether that entails laughing at the humor or developing a retort. Throughout the process, however, the brain sorts all the information and creates some form of action to take. It is within this processing action, I believe, that relevant and general information can be retained. As the mind takes in information, wrapped around the context of humor, the mind processes the information on different levels, aiding in the retention process.

Physically and psychologically, comedy has advantageous effects on our body and overall health. Humor tends to evoke pleasant emotional responses, as Martin
describes. Additionally, psychological studies have shown that humorous communications produce positive affects and moods in individuals, effecting the biochemistry of an individual’s brain (Martin, 2007, 7). This research, too, is very important to the study of comedy as an effective communication technique. Comprehending the emotional reasons for seeking out comedy is essential to help develop an understanding of motivations and psychological reasoning for why humor is an effective communications tools.

Martin outlines three specific uses of humor in communications: “Cognitive and social benefits of the positive emotion of mirth (emotion elicited by the perception of humor), uses of humor for social communication and influence, and tension relief and coping” (Martin, 2007, 15). Martin writes that when people are in heightened states of positive emotions, such as states created and enabled through humor and mirth, they tend to demonstrate greater cognitive “flexibility” or greater ability for problem solving, more efficient organization and integration of memory, more effective thinking and planning, and stronger levels of social responsibility (Martin, 2007, 3). This is an important argument. The mood changes created by humor and mirth can positively affect the cognitive processing. As a result, information retention and recall may be enhanced.

Martin’s second use—that humor is used for social communication and influence—claims that humor is used to convey information in non-vocal and non-explicit ways. “Humor,” as he writes, “may be viewed as a mode of interpersonal communication that is frequently used to convey implicit messages in an indirect manner and to influence other people in various ways” (Martin, 2007, 17). Humor, to Martin, is a
way to portray feelings and emotions about information or positions, in situations where there are serious or tense discussions. However, humor can also be manipulative and detrimental to engagement. When humor is used to attack or denigrate, it has the potential to turn off, humiliate, or ostracize an individual or group of people. While still enabling individuals to recall information more efficiently, the message communicated is not positive.

Thirdly, Martin says that humor can be used to relieve tension and cope with an adversity. According to Martin, “humor provides a way for the individual to shift perspective on a stressful situation, reappraising it from a new and less threatening point of view…[rendering the situation] less stressful and more manageable” (Martin, 2007, 19). The presence of mirth helps an individual to refocus on positive emotions and feelings, separate from negative or detrimental emotions, such as anxiety, depression, or anger. Furthermore, by turning away from those negative emotions, comedy helps cardiovascular health in individuals. Humor also plays a function in coping mechanisms for people. Observing tendencies, Martin says that humor, especially when conveyed with other individuals, helps to relieve tensions and stresses received from adversity (Martin, 2007, 19). All three of these uses of humor are important to the study of humor as a communication device. Each use helps in our understanding of how humor is sought out, internalized, processed, and released. Through these uses, we can gain better insight into how people seek and exploit humor, and how it can effectively convey information and educate individuals.
In Martin’s study he lays out a question essential to this research: “Are we likely to remember humorous information better than serious information? (Martin, 2007, 83).

To answer this question, Martin first builds an understanding into the field of psychology and linguistics, giving humor a home and helping guide the way into the understanding of its utility. Humor, as Martin points out, finds a place in cognitive psychology. While most cognitive psychologists tend not to focus or even touch on humor in their research, humor fits into the psycholinguists field of cognitive psychology. Psycholinguistics is directed at the cognitive processing of language in language comprehension and production. Because so much of the effect of humor is found in its vocal cues, Martin says that the research permits itself to the psycholinguistics field (Martin, 2007, 84).

Martin highlights a number of theories to help our understandings of how humor helps retain information. He states:

The positive emotion associated with humor may have positive effects on memory in a manner similar to the demonstrated effects of nonhumorous emotional arousal…Humor may enhance attention to stimuli due to the novelty and surprise involved in humorous incongruity…Humorous material may be rehearsed more than nonhumorous material, resulting in increased retention…Humor may affect retrieval strategies, biasing subjects to retrieve humorous material before nonhumorous material (Martin, 2007, 103).

Describing studies conducted by Middle Tennessee State psychologist, Steven Schmidt, Martin uses previously explored case studies and experiments to bolster the aforementioned effects on memory. In 2001, Schmidt and A. R. Williams conducted an
experiment using cartoons to determine the effectiveness of comedy on memory retention. The experiment utilized humorous cartoons to help determine participants’ recall of the message of the cartoons when compared against serious cartoons both being prepared with the same basic information. The result of the study suggested that humor formed a type of memory aid, benefitting elaboration of information and enhancing memory retention in long-term memory. However, this is true when humorous content was presented in the same context with nonhumorous information. When only one form of information is present, the effect is not as great. Humor recall then, according to Martin, appears to at the expense of retention and recall of nonhumorous information, when both are presented at the same time. Furthermore, selective attention to humor, over nonhumorous content, seems to be another cause for enhanced memory retention of humorous portrayals of information. Constant application of humor has little affect on retention, according to Martin, but can be effective to explore and explain important information (Martin, 2007, 105).

Communication Theories

Editors Arvind Singhal and Everett M. Rogers advance a number of theories in their work on the impact of entertainment-education. The theory of social learning, later adapted into the social cognitive theory, is essential to their work and the understanding of the effectiveness of using entertainment-education programs for informing the public. Singhal and Rogers are not the only researchers to discuss the value of this theory in communication research. According to the authors Suruchi Sood, Tiffany Menard, and Kim Witte, the social learning theory is characterized by one’s belief that they can carry
out a specific action. In addition to modeling of that change, clearer beliefs that a change will occur enhances a person’s self-efficacy perceptions, signaling stronger outcome expectancies from an activity (Singhal, 2004, 125). Key to this theory is that awareness and future expectations from actions can affect individuals’ behaviors (Ormond, 1999). In other words, one person sees another performing a behavior or expressing an idea, this enhances the person’s belief that such an action is permissible. Therefore, they are more likely to mimic such behavior and learning may occur.

Another prominent social psychology theory important to the research of entertainment-education is the theory of planned behavior. According to the theory, a person’s behavior can be identified and predicted by that individual’s intentions. Attitudes and subjective norms, predictors of intentions, are conceived from beliefs about and social influences of carrying out an action (respectively). Perceived behavioral controls, also indicators of intentions, are defined as the “degree of volitional controls s/he has over a given action” or the amount of comfort of control a person has to carry out a specific action (Singhal, 2004, 125). Under this theory, the use of humor has substantial effects on shaping and defining subjective norms and attitudes on subject or knowledge acquisition.

Sood, Menard, and Witte demonstrate how these theories can be used in practice for identifying and informing the public on social issues. While their applications were towards specific goals (social change) and mediums (mass media devices such as radios and television), the theories they advanced can be further developed for greater understanding in communications fields. Both the theories of social learning and planned
behavior, while essential to the understanding of entertainment-education on social change and learning, can also be applied to our understanding of how individuals learn and retain information through humorous filters. The theory of planned behavior, specifically, has received a great deal of attention to humor content and information.

Looking through the lenses of communications theory, focusing specifically on the theories of planned behavior and uses and gratifications, several routes exist to illustrate how comedy played a role in developing public perceptions of the candidates and issues, as well as how the influence of comedians and programs may have impacted information processing and retention. During the 2008 presidential campaign, many scholars and individuals in the media looked at comedy programs as important to the national dialogue. These programs were seen as driving forces for informing the public and relaying information in ways that many traditional news outlets, based on factors like objectivity in reporting, audiences, and program formats, could not approach.

The theory of uses and gratifications is a prominent theory that helps our understanding of the impact of comedy programs on knowledge maintenance and recall. The roots of the theory of uses and gratifications can be traced back to 1940s research, conducted by Herza Herzog, to figure out the appeal of quiz shows on the radio to the public. Herzog’s research delved into questions regarding the needs and foci of the radio audience and how those decisions affected the programming content in the media (Miller, 2005, 256). This theory has also been used by advertisers to help develop marketing practices, specifically how well information regarding products and advertising messages are remembered. The theory of uses and gratifications can identify logical reasoning for
why people seek out humor and comedy sources for entertainment and educational purposes. Additionally, it can be used to develop how the desire for humorous content and the retention of information is received.

Later research would further develop Herzog’s original principles. In 1974, Elihu Katz, Jay Blumler, and Michael Gurevitch expand the definition and criteria for the theory of uses and gratifications. The original theory was based upon the effort to answer questions about how individuals used the media and what types of pleasure those individuals received from that media. Katz, Blumler, and Gurevitch expanded on this, theorizing that individuals chose and utilize media specifically to receive some form of satisfaction from the medium. Among those fulfillments, individuals chose media for information, personal identity, integration and social interaction, and entertainment reasons (Miller, 2005, 258).

Further research conducted in the 1990s by Jungkee Kim and Alan Rubin addressed how audience gratifications factor in behaviors. Their research found that the ideas of selectivity, attention, and involvement were key to understanding how media viewing habits may contribute to media’s potential behavioral effects (Miller, 2005, 259). Selectivity refers to the idea that individuals watch particular programs because they are looking for a specific gratification, such as entertainment value or seeking information. Under the notion of attention, individuals watch programs more closely depending on if they are in search of a specific reaction or enjoyment. Finally, the role of involvement looks into the effect of the media in instances where the viewer has a personal interest or relationship with those in the media (Miller, 2005, 259). In other words, viewers develop
self-perceived personal relationships or connections with the characters or individuals they see. The theory of uses and gratifications is appropriate not only to the topic of comedy’s role in entertainment, as it enhances our understanding of why an individual may seek out comedy programs as a source of political news or information, but also to what forms of enjoyment they receive from these sources.

Several academic sources help to demonstrate how different research into the theory of uses and gratifications can provide insight into its persuasive and potential memory retention and recall techniques. One such academic resource is a paper published in the June, 2006 *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media*. In the issue, Arvind Diddi and Robert LaRose discuss the theory of uses and gratifications and its application for understandings news forming habits among college students. In their discussion, Diddi and LaRose hypothesize that audiences will gravitate toward news sources based on those sources’ ability to gratify a need for “information, entertainment, social interaction, and escapism” (Diddi, 2006). Diddi and LaRose further explain that in early media selection, if news consumers discover that news can be obtained from other sources (*The Daily Show* and *Colbert Report* for example), those consumers may fall into a pattern of repeatedly utilizing those sources out of habit forming behaviors (Diddi, 2006).

Diddi and LaRose’s application of the theory of uses and gratifications is important to understanding how media habits can develop, particularly in young viewers. The authors found that cable television and mass communication news from Internet sources are the most-habit forming consumption orientations among news junkies (Diddi,
With the proliferation of video on the Internet, particularly from comedy sources, any individual has the ability to view programs—on their own time and at their convenience—throughout the day via a number of sources.

One theory that will be helpful to our understanding of how comedy in communications is processed, as well as its effectiveness in presenting information is the elaboration likelihood model (ELM). ELM was developed in the 1980s by social psychologists Richard Petty and John Cacioppo. The goal of the ELM is to help explain how different forms of information are processed and any potential attitude changes that might occur as a result of that processing (Miller, 2005, 129). ELM posits that there are two routes to persuasion: the central and peripheral routes. Central route processing states that when a message is given, different thoughts and cognitions about the argument are made in the evaluation process. If a person likes the argument, it is retained easier. Following the peripheral route to persuasion, cognitive processing relies on cues to help facilitate message acceptance (Miller, 2005, 129). Both routes depend on motivations and abilities on cognitive processing. Motivations generally revolve around the importance of the topic to the receiver. With the topic of this thesis, motivations might entail a desire to laugh, a desire for an escape, or a desire to be informed (Miller, 2005, 129).

A study conducted by Hyuhn-Suhck Bae, a researcher from the Department of Media and Communications at Yeungnam University in South Korea, helps understand how the can be used to explain the effectives of entertainment-education. Bae published “Entertainment-Education and Recruitment of Cornea Donors: The Role of Emotion and
Issue Involvement” in the January, 2008, *Journal of Health Communication*. The study’s purpose was to understand if using entertainment-education, specifically drama, helped relay messages about the necessity of cornea organ donations as well as increase viewer involvement and emotional response to the issue. Bae found that, “The results confirmed that sympathy and empathy responses operated as a catalyst for issue involvement, which emerged as an important intermediary in the persuasion process” (Bae, 2008). Bae’s study, using ELM as a guide, supports the use of entertainment-education to developing social health messages used to promote issues and educate the public. While Bae’s study used dramatic messages, I believe the same results can be taken from humorous content.

*Humor’s Effect on Literature*

Humor is a shared experience. Paul Lewis, the author of the book *Comic Effects: Interdisciplinary Approaches to Humor in Literature*, writes, “Humor assumes and reveals social and psychological relations, cognitive processes, cultural norms and value judgments” (Lewis, 1989, ix). Lewis’ definition of humor, much like the one being used for this work, is loosely defined and constrained to a single classification. According to Lewis, humor comes from textual support (where characters or tone leads to perceived humorous content), in addition to lines, scenes, characters, or plots in literature. As Lewis describes, “the perception of humor is subjective and intuitive” (Lewis, 1989, xi).

Throughout his work, Lewis analyzes the use of humor in literature. When describing individuals’ normal tendency towards humor, Lewis says, “Our eagerness to be amused or amusing is controlled by the drives, values and views that shape our
conscious life from moment to moment” (Lewis, 1989, 156). He continues, “Humor marks the boundaries of our sense of the real, reveals our values, solidifies our social and psychological identities, supports our maturation and enables us to learn” (Lewis, 1989, 156). Here, Lewis draws upon the research and analysis of humor in literature to find its utility. Lewis acknowledges that humor can be used in many different facets, ranging from a jovial game to help embrace cultural identities to a tool used for the proliferation of education.

To Lewis and other humor scholars, the effect and essence of comedy is set in its incongruity with the social world. In order to “get” a joke and understand its meaning, according to Lewis, we must first resolve that inconsistent aspect of the information through retrieving an idea or image from our understanding of the world (Lewis, 1989, 34). Furthermore, Lewis draws on Sigmund Freud and his understanding of humor to verify this idea. According to Freud, as the conscious mind is thinking about the joke, the unconscious mind is at work, presenting ideas and notions to the consciousness (Lewis, 1989, 34). This is important, as it presents one theory for why humor can be an effective lens for information distribution. A combination of Lewis and Freud’s thoughts of the role of the joke creates a new understanding, as the recipient of the information processes the joke, the subconscious is heavily at work trying to process the information presented. As a result, the subconscious has a greater capacity to absorb the information from the humor, thereby making it a successful vehicle to present information. Lewis uses literary examples, such as John Marston’s *The Dutch Courtesan*, to demonstrate that
the use of humor in literature has been a feature to educate and communicate for some time (Lewis, 1989, 47).

Paul Lewis also takes a look at humor in the role of educating youth. Lewis traces some research regarding how well humor can be used to inform youth. He notes that one of the utilities of humor is to help engage a child. Lewis also describes research in the field that explores the use of humor as an effective way of incidental learning, more effective than intentional learning in children. “Humor can help children concentrate and, as a result, foster information acquisition” (Lewis, 1989, 73). This idea will be further explored in subsequent chapters. Discussing the work of Gary Allen Fine, Lewis notes that an indication of the effectiveness of a joke is that the recipient understands its context. When the joke is told and understood, the “content and norms behind the joking” are transferred and received. “Humor provides,” as Lewis concludes, “a safe way of testing new ideas, and therefore, facilitates the assimilation of previously unfamiliar materials” (Lewis, 1989, 75).

*Humor in Persuasive Arguments*

Through research and study, Charles R. Gruner set out to determine if using humor could effect the processing of persuasive arguments. However, through his studies, he was unable find any supporting evidence that humor enhances the effectiveness in persuasive arguments. “Adding humor which is germane to the particular message seems to heighten its entertainment values, but that is about all” (Gruner, 1978, 202). Gruner did not find adequate case studies to back up his hypothesis and research. Gruner’s inability to find supporting evidence adds to the relevance of my
current research. His study was limited to humor’s effectiveness on persuasive arguments. My research will go beyond persuasive arguments to study the presentation of information in various areas, not merely persuasive speeches.

At the time Gruner’s book was written, programs such as The Smothers Brothers and Saturday Night Live—programs featuring heavy usage of satire and political humor—had not yet been researched for effectiveness and popularity. Additionally, at that time, people had not experienced or seen the fruits of the information revolution. Technology such as cable television, the Internet, video sharing sites, and DVDs, were barely in the periphery of the American conscious, if there at all. Today we have the luxury and capabilities to receive information from multiple sources at any available moment. While Gruner’s findings may be important, they are limited to the time period in which his research was conducted. The change in information distribution and reception had not been explored at the time of his writing. With the availability of these resources, it is pertinent to look again at Gruner’s studies and further develop his research into a newer generational and informational understanding.

Current Study of Humor

As Rod Martin notes, the field of study in humor research has yet to really develop its full potential. Greater research and understanding is necessary. One purpose of this thesis research is to further develop our understanding cultural, communicative, and psychological knowledge pertaining to comedy and memory retention. While research has been conducted in the past, this research will take a current look at the role of humor and its effectiveness across numerous mediums.
“There's no trick to being a humorist when you have the whole government working for you.” ~ Will Rogers

Chapter 3: Comedy and Political News

News and cultural information have been a steady source of humor and satire for comedians for centuries. Whether by relaying information through joke, hyperbole, or mocking the newsmakers themselves, humorists have used current events as a prominent source of their comedy. Humor, as will be explored in this and subsequent chapters, can be an effective method of communicating various types of information to different recipients. In no communications area is the use comedy and humor to present information felt stronger than in its use to convey current information, specifically referencing politics and political events: news about candidates and politicians, bills and legislatures, mistresses and paramours, etc. Comedians have used humor for generations to inform the public of sometimes serious, sometimes absurd, but often significant and relevant pieces of information.

Humor in the 2008 Presidential Election Coverage

The 2008 presidential election was a hotly contested race between Democratic Senator Barack Obama and Republican Senator John McCain. Every step they took and every comment they made was scrutinized intensely by the media. Nowhere was this more apparent than in the world of late-night comedy programs. On late-night talk shows, the candidates were routinely the subject of jokes and mockery during
monologues from the host and during interviews. Programs such as The Daily Show with Jon Stewart, The Colbert Report, and Saturday Night Live were important and influential institutions of satire during the 2008 general election cycle. These programs, as they have in the past, doubled as entertainers and educators, informing the electorate on issues, candidate positions, and important election news.

The comedic and political skewering received by the McCain campaign was far more frequent than the satire pointed at Barack Obama and running mate Joe Biden. The number of jokes focused on John McCain and running mate Sarah Palin may have been a significant cause, although far from the reason, why Republicans lost their campaign for the White House. As Adam Howard, in a piece for The Nation during the election cycle explained, “If Letterman, SNL and others continue to hammer [Sarah] Palin as an extremist airhead and John McCain as a desperate madman, those images could start to solidify in the heads of voters more accustomed to listening to these entertainers night after night than to politicians” (Howard, 2008). Furthermore, during the election, comedians on late-night programs and comedy shows made fun of the Republican ticket nearly seven times more often than the Democratic ticket (Bauder, 2008). With such one-sided representation of humor, political satire emerged as an ally to the Democratic Party by educating the electorate on the follies and liabilities of the Republican candidates. As illustrated, political humor and satire have been shown to be an extremely effective way of presenting information, especially in terms of political parties who wish to appear non-confrontational.
Informational Presence on Humorous Programs

Programs like *The Daily Show* and *Saturday Night Live* are great forums for generating laughter through political satire. Several surveys and academic studies, however, suggest that these programs are useful beyond merely creating humor in our daily lives. In fact, research has demonstrated that these programs broadcast relevant news and political information to viewers. While there are numerous comedy programs on television and on the Internet that use humor to convey relevant information, none has received as much national attention and scholarly research as *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*.

In 2006, Julia R. Fox, an assistant professor of telecommunications at Indiana University released significant findings that demonstrate the integrity of *The Daily Show*’s content. The study, entitled, “No Joke: A Comparison of Substance in *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* and Broadcast Network Television Coverage of the 2004 Presidential Election Campaign” helped promote the notion that humor programs could be used for more than just laughter and a daily escape from world problems through humor. The study’s findings, published in the Summer, 2007 edition of the *Journal of Broadcast and Electric Media*, found that *The Daily Show*’s coverage of news and information, specifically politically relevant information about the 2004 election, “is just as substantive as network coverage.” Fox continued:

It is clearly a humor show, first and foremost. But there is some substance on there, and in some cases, like John Edwards announcing his candidacy, the news is made on the show. You have real newsmakers coming on, and yes, sometimes
the banter and questions get a little silly, but there is also substantive dialogue
going on…It’s a legitimate source of news. (Indiana University, 2006).

When comparing the content of The Daily Show with that of broadcast news programs, Fox and associates found some interesting information. While The Daily Show is focused more on satirizing than reporting news—resulting in Fox finding more humor than substance in her content analysis—network news programs during the 2004 election cycle did not focus all their attention on substantive news. An analysis of second-by-second coverage in broadcast news found that the programs relied substantially more on “hype”—defined as references to polls, political endorsements, and photo opportunities—than actual news content (Indiana University, 2006). Fox found that the amount of substance news on The Daily Show, when compared to broadcast news coverage, was generally at the same levels.

The presence of The Daily Show as a credible news source is apparent in the American psyche. In May, 2008, the Pew Research Center’s Project for Excellence in Journalism released a report entitled, “Journalism, Satire or Just Laughs? ‘The Daily Show with Jon Stewart,’ Examined” which described public opinions of the program and its host. As reported by Pew, Americans surveyed in 2007 for the study were asked which journalist they most admired. Jon Stewart came in at Number 4 on the list. Also coming it at Number 4 were broadcast and cable news stalwarts such as Brian Williams, Tom Brokaw, Dan Rather, and Anderson Cooper (Pew, Journalism, Satire or Laughs?, 2008).
Pew’s report details the construction of the program, which is similar to the standard format of traditional news programs. *The Daily Show*, like traditional news programs is very selective when choosing news topics to cover and tends to focus more on political news, especially during election cycles. Additionally, the structure of the program, including segments, the use of footage, and correspondents, is similar to traditional news programs (often to satirize those same news agencies). Furthermore, the footage used by *The Daily Show* is taken from news outlets. Often times, this use of traditional news footage on *The Daily Show* is intended to “blend facts and fantasy in a way that no news program hopefully ever would” ([Pew](https://www.pew.org/2008/05/15/journalism-satire-or-laughts/), *Journalism, Satire or Laughs?*, 2008). The format of *The Daily Show* is strikingly similar to that of traditional news programs, bolstering perceptions of respectability and authenticity of its news broadcast for the public.

An important finding in the Pew research study suggests that part of the effectiveness of *The Daily Show* is its requirement that viewers hold prior knowledge of the depicted news events. This is a concept that has been shared by many researchers and reporters delving into the success and popularity of the program. This prior knowledge component is necessary if viewers intend “to get the joke,” and truly understand the topics and concepts covered by *The Daily Show* ([Pew](https://www.pew.org/2008/05/15/journalism-satire-or-laughts/), *Journalism, Satire or Laughs?*, 2008). Pew also states:

**But it’s also true that, at times, “The Daily Show” aims at more than comedy. In its choice of topics, its use of news footage to deconstruct the manipulations by public figures and its tendency toward pointed satire over playing just for laughs,**
“The Daily Show” performs a function that is close to journalistic in nature—getting people to think critically about the public square (Pew, Journalism, Satire or Laughs?, 2008).

Nowhere was this concept more apparent than in a March, 2009 “spat” on The Daily Show. Jon Stewart and his Daily Show team constructed a blistering report on the cable business news network, CNBC and its personalities for not living up to their journalistic responsibilities. Stewart implied that CNBC had the ability and duty to inform and warn the country of the financial crisis looming within the American economy in 2006 and 2007, but were not capable of fulfilling their responsibility, and in some ways, exacerbated the situation. The piece, and subsequent interview with CNBC personality Jim Cramer on The Daily Show, received rave reviews from the media and public at large.

Seizing on a growing sense of outrage that had been building with the public over the financial system’s disarray, Stewart and the Daily Show were able to tap into the national ire and provide a national, mainstream voice. Following the CNBC report on the program, as well as a subsequent interview with Jim Cramer, many in the media and public praised Stewart for their ability to attack CNBC and its lack of journalistic integrity. Blogger Stewart Mader, mirroring many public comments, wrote, “This video of Jon Stewart taking CNBC to task over the faux populist rantings of one of its reporters is an example of the quality of journalism we should see from all news outlets, but rarely do” (Anderson, Organ Grinder Blog, 2009). The power of the piece and interview was that Stewart was able to get on his soapbox and present information and make the claims
that no one in the mainstream media was capable of doing. In this situation Jon Stewart was able to inform the public of a complicated issue and effectively communicate growing frustrations through a medium that was particularly effective and enlightening.

Part of the success of \textit{The Daily Show}, along with other comedy programs is found in its ability to not only present information, but to discuss topics and theories the mainstream media is too anxious to cover. To achieve this, \textit{The Daily Show} often employs the use of footage and coverage from those network news programs which often get overlooked and discounted in its importance (Farhi, 2008). This idea of using often overlooked news footage, which could be vital to making an argument, carries with it a sentiment—particularly conveyed by the program’s show runners—that the news media have not adequately done their jobs. In a 2008 article from the \textit{Washington Post}, reporter Paul Farhi briefly spoke with David Javerbaum, the Executive Producer for \textit{The Daily Show}, on this subject. Javerbaum said that \textit{The Daily Show} made connections and presented information that traditional news sources usually did not cover. Furthermore, those traditional news outlets do not usually present information in such a way, according to Javerbaum, because they are entrenched in “the status quo” and are not interested in disrupting that balance. “We think all of these [networks],” Javerbaum stated, “are really, really bad at what they do. My opinion is they suck at their jobs” (Farhi, 2008).

\textit{The Daily Show}, \textit{The Colbert Report}, and \textit{Saturday Night Live} are effective in conveying information partly in response to filling a void between what occurs and what news gets reported. This sentiment is also shared by the Executive Producer of \textit{Saturday Night Live}, Lorne Michaels. In an October, 2008 article in the \textit{New York Times}, Michaels
said, “I think we affect the media and maybe influence some people. I think we’re a safety valve” (Carter, 2008). When news outlets choose not to report information, or are not effective in their presentation of the relevant news, programs such as these fill in those voids and are able to convey content in creative, concise and informative methods.

**Learning News from Comedy Programs**

Mark Philip C. Fernando studied how late-night comedy programs alter public perceptions of politicians and political figures in 2003. As part of this research, Fernando developed an online survey and focus groups to look into several components of the late-night comedy format and content, focusing specifically on how those sections are received by viewers. Fernando’s survey and focus group each featured two questions, in particular, that are applicable to this research.

In his survey, Fernando asked respondents to rate late-night viewers’ ability to receive news information from the programs. Specifically, respondents were asked, on a scale of “Often,” “Sometimes,” “Rarely,” “Never,” or “Don’t Know,” if they learn anything from their favorite portions of the program as well as if they receive news and current events information from the late-night comedy program monologues? With focus group participants, Fernando posed similar questions, asking whether viewers learned anything from late-night programs (if so, what did they learn) and if late night programs were viewed as credible sources of information (Fernando, 2003, 116).

Fernando found in his research that information could be conveyed through late-night formats. Writing on the results of his focus groups, he stated that the benefits of these programs are that they act as a supplement to the news format; one must have some
background on the subjects for the reception of the information to take hold. However, they were beneficial to information distribution. Fernando did additionally note that late-night program comedians have the ability to provide education for daily events with humor in the absence of background context. The effect, however, was not as substantial. Furthermore, when describing the data received from survey participants, Fernando found that nearly 53% of respondents said they often or sometimes gained news and current events information from the monologue on late-night talk shows. This was particularly the case in survey participants aged 18-30 years old (Fernando, 2003, 81).

Throughout his research, Fernando found the line between news and entertainment was increasingly blurring. He wrote that comedy was becoming more informative. With this mixing of humor and information, the news was becoming more diversified, thereby making these formats more appealing to larger audiences (Fernando, 2003, 98). Fernando was not the only person to research the impact of humor on public knowledge and perceptions. The Pew Research Center has produced several different reports in the past year that help illustrate the impact of humor on public perceptions and knowledge of current political affairs.

In 2008, the Pew Research Center released two influential survey studies that relate how individuals use programs such as The Daily Show, The Colbert Report, and Saturday Night Live—specifically people under 30—as sources of news and information. Each survey highlights key ideas and presents information for how the programs are used by individuals seeking news and commentary. Additionally, the surveys provided substantial insight to the effectiveness of these mediums in information presentation.
“Internet’s Broader Role in Campaign 2008: Social Networking and Online Videos Take Off” is a survey that was developed by the Pew Research Center for People and the Press and Pew Internet & American Life Project and conducted every four years on presidential election cycles. The study, which chronicles survey responses through the past three election cycles, focuses on American regular television viewing habits. The 2008 study found that Americans’ reliability on traditional news sources has held steady or declined in most news media outlets since the 2004 election cycle. While the percentages of Americans who sought information from “Late-night talks shows” and “Comedy TV shows” remained steady from 2004 levels, growth has occurred since 2000. While those types of programs saw growth in audiences, the individuals who responded that they used “Local TV news” and “Nightly network news” over the same period witnessed substantial declines. The percentage of Americans who learned important political information from late-night talk shows held at 9% in 2000 to 2008, while the percentage who used comedy TV programs for news grew from 6% to 8% from 2000 to 2004 and remained at 8% in the 2008 survey. Americans who used local TV news for information fell from 48% in 2000 to 40% in 2008 and those watching Nightly network news dropped from 45% in 2000 to 32% in 2008 (Pew, Internet’s Broader Role, 2008).

In 2004, Pew’s political communications survey demonstrated that many individuals sought political news and information from The Daily Show and Saturday Night Live (The Colbert Report did not begin airing until 2005 and therefore was absent from the discussion). However, nowhere was this more apparent than with America’s youth. The January 2004 survey found that 8% of the public sought political news and
information from comedy TV programs. The same survey revealed that of that 8%, 21% of those who responded under the age of 30 replied that they had learned something from comedy programming. The same percentage of Americans who used comedy TV programs for information remained the same in the 2008 survey at 8%. While the percentage of America’s youth who used the programs as a source of news dropped during this time (12%), part of this decrease may have been caused by the Writer’s Guild of America strike that took place during the fielding of Pew’s poll. While the strike was occurring, these programs were on hiatus, hampering Americans’ ability to receive any updated news and information. Because of the timing of the survey, respondents were asked to think back to when the shows were still broadcasting and recall if they were able to learn any political information from the programs (Pew, *Internet’s Broader Role*, 2008). This may have had a negative affect on the respondents’ answers as, unlike traditional news outlets, the strike did not permit those comedy programs from airing new content for nearly three months.

From April 30 to June 1, 2008, the Pew Research Center conducted a survey of 3,612 adults (over 18 years old) across America to determine media trends as well as which programs had the best-informed news and current affairs audiences. Those identifying themselves as regular readers of *The Atlantic* and *New Yorker* magazines proved to be the best-informed media audiences. However, while not right at the top of the list, those who identified themselves as regular views of comedy programs, such as *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report*, were rated as better informed than many regular viewers of traditional news programs. Politically informed, according to the Pew
Research Center, was the ability to identify three political entities or politicians. Survey respondents were asked to identify the then (2008) Majority Party in the House of Representatives, the name of the Secretary of State, and the name of the British Prime Minister. Regular viewers of The Colbert Report were rated at 34% politically informed. Regular viewers of The Daily Show were rated at 30%. These programs rated higher than regular viewers of each broadcast news programs, television magazine shows, CSPAN, Bill O’Reilly, and Lou Dobbs. Additionally, regular viewers of late night talk shows, like the Tonight Show with Jay Leno and The Late Show with David Letterman were deemed more politically aware (20% identification) than regular viewers of Larry King Live, CNN, and Fox News (Pew, Who Knows News?, 2008).

This study demonstrates that regular viewers of comedy programs, where these topics are routinely discussed, do hold substantial memory retention for news and information, specifically political information. This data can be extrapolated to other relevant areas of news and information presentation. Comedy programs can be viewed as sources of relevant information in American culture and can be effective mediums for educating the public on news and current events.

Communication Theory Perspectives on Humorous Content Effectiveness and Processing

The theory of planned behavior and the (ELM) may provide insight into why these programs are so effective in informing the public. Both the theory of planned behavior and ELM contain components that help explain what brings viewers to programs such as these, why they are effective for informing the public, and how they facilitate cognitive abilities to receive information. By exploring these components we
are better enabled to understand how these programs help the information transition process.

The theory of planned behavior says that attitudes, social norms, and perceived behavioral controls help predict behavioral intention and, in turn, behavioral outcomes (Miller, 2005, 127). With the added emphasis of these programs on the previous few election cycles, especially on the 2008 presidential campaign, much was made in the public and on news programs about the influence these programs had on voter perceptions (Alston, 2008). Press coverage of the humor programs, as well as video footage on news broadcasts, only further exposed these programs to the wider public. Along with the expanded press coverage, the programs also garnered the attention of the general public with individuals discussing the latest satire with friends, families, and coworkers. The added emphasis on the programs helped increase viewership numbers. With greater attention from the public, individuals’ subjective norms and attitudes towards the programs may have changed. Individuals who were watching the programs for humor may have begun viewing it to be informed and presented with the latest campaign information and satire. In this understanding, the theory of planned behavior is applicable as social influences led people to view these programs with greater attention and importance, thus leaving them receptive to news and information.

Like the theory of planned behavior, the elaboration likelihood model can be used to help understand the reasoning behind tuning into these types of programs, as well as the retention of information that people gained as a result of watching them. Under ELM, when a person is motivated and paying attention to the information, there is a
central route to cognition and decision-making (Petty, 1986). Because of the exposure to these programs and interest from the public, people were actively seeking them. Their attention and motivation was focused on the program. They were apt to be more receptive to the informational content presented with the humor. Information was retained more easily. While the theory of planned behavior and elaboration likelihood model help us understand how presenting information through humor is effective, the theory of uses and gratifications is especially useful for promoting the research into humor’s ability to effectively present information and have it retained by the viewer.

It is highly possible that youth voters sought out comedy programs to inform themselves about political information and events. The power and pervasiveness of comedy programs and the role of humor during an election cycle is always great. When describing the 2008 general election, Lisa Wangsness of the Boston Globe wrote, “comedy has taken on an unprecedentedly important role in presidential politics” (Wangsness, 2008). These programs might have been viewed for entertainment factors and the ability to discuss the election on different forums with friends and family. A 2004 Pew Research study promotes this idea. The study found that 21% of individuals aged 18-24 years old responded as receiving their news from late-night programs and comedy shows (Diddi, 2006). When a similar survey was conducted four years later in early 2008, the percentage of youth who used comedy and late-night programs remained the same (Pew, Like a Cable Talk Show, 2008). Research conducted by Arvind Diddi and Robert LaRose shows that with the presence of multiple news sources, America’s youth are actively utilizing comedy sources to receive news information (Diddi, 2006).
The percentage of youth voting in 2008 was stronger than the youth representation in many previous years (“America’s Youth Vote,” NPR, 2008). With the representation of youth in the 2008 election and Diddi and LaRose’s understanding that comedy shows were sources of information and amusement, the theory of uses and gratifications can be applied to the American demonstrate that youth used these programs for news fulfillment, enlightenment, entertainment, and education.

Another study that can be applied to our understanding of how the theory of uses and gratifications helped inform and persuade voting behavior during the election cycle is a 2008 study done by Kaye Sweetser and Lynda Lee Kaid entitled, “Stealth soapboxes: political information efficacy, cynicism and uses of celebrity weblogs among readers.” Sweetser and Kaid laid out past research that found that individuals used political broadcasts for gratification in three areas: for reinforcement of political ideology or vote preference, to keep up with issues, and to seek excitement about the race and which candidate will win (Sweetser, 2008). Furthermore, the researchers found that blog readers seemed to identify with celebrities when they posted political information and opinions online. Individuals were interested in a celebrity’s political thoughts, even citing those opinions as influential in their decision for which candidate they would vote for (Sweetser, 2008). One additional piece of information was the celebrity identification gratification factor discovered by Sweetser and Kaid. This dimension has implications to the theory of uses and gratifications in the 2008 voting discussion as it may explain why an individual tunes into a program. Comedy programs are hosted by widely-known television personalities. Many voters may have tuned into these programs to hear their
opinions and seek their take on the election and its candidates in an effort to help inform or reinforce their own decision. Individuals who watched or followed celebrities closely were exposed to information and opinions on the election and candidates presented through jokes and mockery of the candidates.

One final conclusion reached by Sweetser and Kaid was that the presence of political content and presentation through unanticipated mediums could impact an individual’s political outlook. According to the researchers, “Exposure to political messages in unexpected and interactive media can increase the knowledge of diversity in political thought, resulting in a desire to know more before making political decisions” (Sweetser, 2008). In essence, Sweetser and Kaid explore the possibility that the use of celebrities and well-known personalities to present relevant information (especially when the presentation is humorous) peaked viewers’ interests, attentions, and desire for knowledge.

The work conducted by Sweetser and Kaid has far-reaching implications for how comedy programs and comedians played significant roles in voting persuasion in the 2008 general election. The researchers reiterated past study findings that determined people watch political broadcasts for political, surveillance, and excitement reasons, which can be applied to comedy program viewing habits during the 2008 election. In 2008, programs like The Daily Show with Jon Stewart, The Colbert Report, and Saturday Night Live saw record viewership during the heated presidential contest (Freydkin, 2008). There is reason to believe that some of the record number of viewers of comedy
programs were tuning in to understand what political events occurred, gain opinions on the events, or to get guidance for voting.

Further research into the theory of uses and gratifications can also aid in our understanding of how comedy programs impacted the 2008 election. During the International Communication Association 2007 conference, Clarissa David presented information regarding the role of motivations in the theory of uses and gratifications model. Specifically, David conducted research to discover what psychological needs are affected by a desire to follow the news. She found that a combination of a person’s tendency to follow certain types of information, along with the ability to understand the information being presented, helped to determine news-seeking motivations (David, 2007). David also found that attention and exposure effects from various sources of media could indirectly predict knowledge motives (David, 2007).

David explained, “News media play an important role in educating and informing the public about political issues that are consequential to their lives. The public’s ability to hold their elected government accountable for its actions depends in large part on how effectively the news media inform citizens on what is going on” (David, 2007).

David’s 2007 research is important to the role of the theory of uses and gratifications as applied to the 2008 elections. A growing number of late-night talk shows and comedy program viewers in the 2008 campaign sought information from these sources. The theory of uses and gratifications is further illustrated in David’s research, as audience will look to different kinds of media, other than standard television news, to achieve their motivated, information-seeking goals (David, 2007). This further
diminishes the importance of traditional news sources and may help explain motives for obtaining information from comedy programs.

_Humor’s Effects on Political Interpretation_

Charles R. Gruner takes on the issue of humor—its effects on education and politics—in his work, _Understanding Laughter: The Workings of Wit and Humor_ (1978). Gruner discusses the importance of using comedy as a rhetorical technique in candidate speeches and messages. He discusses the effectiveness of humor in political dialogues, and points out the uncertain feeling in the academic community toward the topic. He enlists quotes and materials from other academics and notable members of society, to present both sides about the argument of the effectiveness of humor in political speeches.

Gruner writes that humor acts as a form of relief in political speeches. Adding a joke to the beginning of a speech might be a useful technique to calm an audience and help it interpret the information presented. However, Gruner is hesitant to accept this as an effective way of transmitting information. Describing the study of scholar Wilma Grimes, Gruner writes, “In a serious, persuasive speech, the use of humor actually causes an ‘interruption’ of the train of thought, and this may be dysfunctional to the speakers [persuasive] purpose” (Gruner, 1978, 121). However, Gruner points out that there are some other valid uses of humor. In defending or attacking a political argument, it can be very effective. Additionally, humor can elicit emotional responses from the crowd to the speech and keep them engaged. For Gruner, the use of humor in political speeches is a fine line to walk. While it may have benefits, its use can be extremely risky and can easily backfire on the speaker. Evoking the philosophy of comedian Steve Allen, Gruner
says, “…some humor can have ‘educational’ value, although it may tend to irritate some” (Gruner, 1978, 123). This emphasizes Gruner’s argument that humor in speeches can be an effective way to inform the public, but it is indeed a precarious chance a speaker can take.

Chronicling the work of scholars on the effectiveness of humor in political speeches, Gruner follows three experiments from the late 1930s to the 1970s testing how humorous and non-humorous speeches were received. Gruner’s case studies used existing speeches that either added humorous elements or presented them in the straightforward manner in which they were originally written or presented. In each of these cases, Gruner reports that “although humor added to the speech definitely added humorousness to [the tested] persuasive speech, and even though introducing the humorous version as humorous added to its humorous rating, no difference [between the two types of speeches] seems to have occurred in terms of attitude change” (Gruner, 1978, 139). According to Gruner, adding humor into a speech neither helps nor harms anyone’s ability to persuade an audience (Gruner, 1978, 142).

When studying the effectiveness of political satire on persuasion, Gruner’s conclusions were different. In an experiment conducted using 146 students at the University of Nebraska, the subject of political satirization and its effects were tested. Students had been exposed prior to reading the columns to the author of the piece they were about to read; students were told that it was a nationally syndicated and well-read columnist. As a result of this experiment, attitude change occurred when the intent of the work was understood by those who disagreed the most with the intent of the column and
those who were categorized as “most in need of persuading” (Gruner, 1978, 176). Additionally, Gruner found further information to establish the effectiveness of satire on political communications. In a study where research participants were exposed to different types of satire aimed at a specific individual, data supported the idea that a satirical editorial—coming from a well-known source—can effect perceptions regarding the image of the person being satirized (Gruner, 1978, 186). These studies are significant as they shed light on how political satirists, such as Jon Stewart and Stephen Colbert, in addition to programs, like *Saturday Night Live*, may be influential in communicating messages and themes through humor and satire.

**Conclusion**

During the 2008 political cycle, much was made about the role and impact of comedians and satirists to perceptions of candidates and public polling data with the public. Comedians, in some cases, were either praised or vilified for helping to aid or prevent the eventual outcome of their election. Regardless of the side, these individuals played an immense and important part in the news coverage of the candidates and political events during the election.

People seek out humorous programs for a diverse number of reasons. Whether seeking news, looking for a quick laugh, or a daily escape from their lives, humorous news programs are becoming more abundant on cable television and Internet broadcasts. The use of humor with news presentation helps these individuals learn while they are being entertained.
The role of humor in political news has dramatically increased in the past decade. With programs such as *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*, *The Colbert Report*, and *Saturday Night Live* receiving substantially increased viewership, their impact on the way news is presented will only grow. Particularly with America’s youth, these programs are relied upon increasingly as primary sources of news and information. While performers on these programs downplay their importance for relaying information, their impact is profound.

These humorous programs offer relevant and substantial news coverage, often at the same levels as traditional news programming. However, the impact of humorous programs can be greater. The use of humor to deliver the news, specifically political news, helps individuals receive and retain the information with which they are presented. Additionally, these programs, because of their comedic format, are often capable of making claims and presenting information in ways that traditional news outlets often shy away from.
“I never teach my pupils. I only attempt to provide the conditions in which they can learn” ~ Albert Einstein

Chapter 4: Comedy and Its Role in the Educational Process

Comedy is an integral part of life. Across geographies, ages, and religions, comedy has a niche. Comedy has the capacity to help individuals learn, whether from the early stages of infancy, or in the later stages of life, comedy can be used to convey information from one source to another.

This chapter will discuss the means by which humor is an effective tool for education in the social world, as well as within academic settings. Through the application of literary and case studies, as well as independent classroom research, I will present information that helps illuminate how humor aids in memory retention and recall. Additionally, I will highlight how some industries have used comedy to effectively educate. Finally, I will provide evidence of humor’s effectiveness in the education process through classroom research studies.

Humor as a Teaching Device in Life’s Early Stages

Barry Sanders wrote that the process of learning through laughter begins early in life. From the moment a baby is born, the learning process through laughter begins, but not in the traditional way. Sanders stresses that infant communication is essential to adults’ ability to learn about parenting and the baby’s needs through humor and laughter. "The infant ‘informs’ the mother by ‘telling’ her what it wants, keeping her in tune with
the rhythm of sentences, with breathing, and with loose and goofy constructions kept lively and animated through giggles and laughter.” Here, Sanders establishes from the earliest moments of life, babies use humor and laughter to communicate their needs to their parents. However, this is not a modern phenomenon. Sanders traces this information and knowledge of the infant communication experience back to the poetry of Virgil, near 30 B.C (Sanders, 1995, 23).

*Humor as an Educational Tool from Early Development: The Case of Sesame Street*

*Sesame Street* is a program that has educated children throughout the past 40 years. Its ability to educate children of all backgrounds has made *Sesame Street* an integral part of early childhood development. On average, *Sesame Street* reaches an audience of 8 million viewers per week in the United States alone (Harrison, 2009). *Sesame Street* and products featuring its brand have become important elements of learning for millions—if not billions—of children, not only those in the United States. The brand has expanded all over the world, with regional versions of *Sesame Street* in countries like Northern Ireland, Bangladesh, and Japan (Sesame Workshop, 2009).

“*G*” is for Growing: Thirty Years of Research on Children and Sesame Street, edited by Shalom Fisch and Dr. Rosemarie Truglio, discusses the development of *Sesame Street* from its origins and how content on the program is developed, tested, and produced. Several important points from the book become relevant to this investigation into how humor can be an effective means to communicate information that is also applicable to educational content.
Using data from research chronicling the 40-year history of *Sesame Street*, Fisch, Truglio, et al. found that humor—specifically physical humor—helped draw kids’ attention to early segments in the programming. This was important for formative information studies of the Children’s Television Workshop (and now Sesame Workshop), the creative company behind the program, because it enabled researchers to “develop guidelines for judging the likely appeal of future segments—and identify appealing elements that could be built into these future segments” (Fisch, 2001, 42). This information is important when looking at the role of humor in effective communications processes. Based on these findings, the role of humor is significant to developing attention-grabbing material that can bring the child into the subject and enable them to learn.

Further evidence, from Fisch and Palmer, points to the effectiveness of humor in the learning process. “When humor, dramatic tension, or other attractive features were made to coincide with the heart of the educational message, this interaction could be used to enhance the effectiveness of the educational content” (Fisch, 2001, 12). Fisch and Palmer conclude that when those attractive features did not sync up with the educational messaging, children would only recall those attractive features (Fisch, 2001, 12).

The authors came to conclusions central to the stated hypothesis regarding classroom learning that is tested in this study: humor can be an effective feature for educating (Fisch, 2001, 42). This research moves beyond the study of *Sesame Street* which is restricted by the confines of the television and the children’s home. The use of humor on television programming for half an hour blocks at a child’s convenience and
the use of humor in the classroom setting with other students routinely instructed for six-and-a-half hours a day, five days a week, may hold different understandings.

Fisch is not the only academic to place such high importance on the role of humor as a successful medium for teaching children. Writing in the *Televizion* Journal (2006), Alice Cahn wrote on the utility of using comedy to help educate children. According to Cahn, comedy was an indicator of knowledge. She wrote, “We were very interested to learn the research-supported fact that humour is a sign of intelligence and based upon learning and mastery” (Cahn, 2006, 27). This is a crucial factor in how children’s programming is created. Cartoon Network routinely applies this understanding to their program development and distribution. “At Cartoon Network, we think making kids laugh and making them happy is an important part of helping them grow and learn. We use the importance of humor as our curricular foundation” (Cahn, 2006, 27). Furthermore, Cahn establishes how vital using comedy is in Cartoon Network’s programming development. Cartoon Network stresses using both behavioral humor (funny faces and slapstick), as well as verbal humor (jokes and witticisms) in development with the ultimate goal of “[facilitating] friendships, learning and self-esteem—all good things in life” (Cahn, 2006, 28).

*Humor as a Component in Classroom Teaching*

Over the years, a number of researchers have attempted to determine the value of humor in the educational setting. Some researchers have found evidence that humor is a useful tool for educating; others have found no such evidence.
An experiment conducted by Dorothy Markiewicz involving students from middle school English classes studied how well persuasive arguments were perceived in two pieces of reading material regarding the length of the school year; one humorous essay and one serious essay. Both suggested that the school year should run year-round. Following the readings of the essays, students were asked to write down what the authors believed regarding the length of the school year, as well as to list as many arguments the author used to advocate their position. Students exposed to the humorous essay retained more ideas put forth by the author than those who read the serious piece (Gruner, 1978, 193). This experiment is significant to my research and acted as a basic model for the classroom study detailed later in this chapter. As the researchers found out, the readers of the humorous essay retained more facts and exhibited greater argument control than those exposed to the serious essay. This gives credence to the belief that using humor to present information helps in the cognitive processing of information and memory recall.

Using Cartoons as Educational Devices

William Cosby, Jr. is a comedian who has made millions of people all over the world laugh for decades. Better know as Bill Cosby, he has been discussing the status of the educational system in the country for decades. In the late 1970s, Cosby authored his dissertation for the School of Education at the University of Massachusetts, entitled An Integration of the Visual Media Via Fat Albert and the Cosby Kids into the Elementary School Curriculum as a Teaching Aid and Vehicle to Achieve Increased Learning (1976). Throughout his study, Cosby looks into ways that educational programming, mainly focusing on Fat Albert and the Cosby Kids, but also including Sesame Street and the
Electric Company, can be used to not only act as an alternative source of instruction for children, but also as a means to teach children without racial bias and prejudice in the 1970s school system (Cosby, 1976, viii).

Noting a strong problem with the educational system of the 1970s that is still apparent today, Cosby writes that teachers in urban school districts assume that children are “intellectually deficient upon entering school” because of their socio-economic environments (Cosby, 1976, 6). Evoking author John Holt, Cosby quotes, “School is a place where children learn to be stupid” as a result of children in urban communities receiving teachers’ quick and false assumptions of the children’s’ cognitive capabilities (Cosby, 1976, 6). As a result of this environment, Cosby continues, children learn not to ask questions and are sometimes discouraged or lackadaisical about learning, which can be attributed to urban schools (Cosby, 1976, 7). Cosby sums up his argument with a telling and informative statement, “Youngsters fail because they are bored” (Cosby, 1976, 7).

Cosby outlines ways to combat both educational and institutional discrimination as well as help students learn in educational settings. The educational system, particularly in urban environments, needs to do a better job of developing alternative ways of teaching, Cosby implies. “Students need to develop inquiring minds, experience satisfaction with learning, and develop effectual human relations. These can be brought about through the integration of an improved curriculum utilizing the educational hardware at hand” (Cosby, 1976, 21). Cosby focuses on using more modern technologies (at least modern to the 1970s), to enable teachers and children better learning
opportunities. Incorporating visual media into urban classrooms, Cosby says, provides children dealing with certain difficulties greater avenues to learn. Programs, such as *Sesame Street, Fat Albert and the Cosby Kids,* and *The Electric Company,* have been proven to be successful efforts to help children cultivate creativity energy in the classroom, thereby enhancing their educational experience. “The use of educational films in this instance can be effective vehicles to aid teachers in the formulation of more meaningful lesson plans built on reality-based curriculum; they can help bring teacher and student together through the visual assistance of contemporary themes and approaches to learning” (Cosby, 1976, 24).

One of the programs Cosby discusses effectively educating children while entertaining them is *Sesame Street.* *Sesame Street,* according to Cosby, is a valuable resource for parents and educators. *Sesame Street* has a way of introducing topics and lessons to children that keeps them attentive and able to receive the educational message. Following the success of *Sesame Street,* *The Electric Company* was created, using the visual medium to help teach children between the ages of 7-12 (roughly those children just past the demographic of *Sesame Street*). *Fat Albert and the Cosby Kids* was another program used to help children learn and develop educational skills. The program was the first of its kind designed to aid teachers by teaching child viewers morals and social lessons through animated characters dealing with real problems like racism, drugs, and bullying (Cosby, 1976, 33). Cosby writes that the three programs in his study have bolstered three concepts: 1) television is an effective medium for teaching, 2) education can be a form of entertainment, and 3) there are forms of entertainment for children that
are non-violent (Cosby, 1976, 35). The programs, all created as aids to help children learn, were effective means for teaching children, specifically in urban settings or middle-income families. These programs taught children either traditional educational staples such as math, reading, or science, or social educational lessons of social awareness, tolerance, or problem solving.

Cosby discusses the benefits of using comedic educational programming in the classroom. Quoting Sidney Marland, commissioner of the then Office of Education, Cosby wrote, “Perhaps no other innovation…in the history of education has made its presence felt among so many people in so short a time” as *The Electric Company* has (Cosby, 1976, 49). Quickly after its premiere, *The Electric Company* found a home in one out of four Elementary school classrooms in the country, reaching up to four million children on a daily basis, including children watching the program at school and in the home (Cosby, 1976, 49). The effect of using the humorous and entertaining products in the classroom was profound. According to a teacher in a 1971-1973 survey, showing *The Electric Company* to children in school helped raise reading, spelling, language, and vocabulary skills (Cosby, 1976, 52).

Cosby’s analysis of the use of humorous programs is bolstered through classroom research conducted with *Fat Albert and the Cosby Kids*. For his study, Cosby sent a questionnaire to classrooms that used the program incorporated into the elementary school curriculum. Cosby’s data denote that the classrooms using *Fat Albert* as an educational aid “attracted the most interest and highest ratings,” indicating that presentation of the cartoon acted as a successful teaching tool (Cosby, 1976, 105).
Additionally, the cartoons promoted classroom activity, either in the form of positive discussion or participation. When children viewed the program outside of the classroom, positive reactions were received as well (Cosby, 1976, 105). Further responses from education officials promoted the idea that use of the cartoons in the educational setting “are an entertaining educational tool that can successfully aid the teacher in the presentation of lesson plans” (Cosby, 1976, 110).

Cosby’s use of humorous, entertaining educational content in the classroom setting is informative and essential for the formation of critical research. It provides support for the use of different forms of humor to educate children not only at home, but in school settings as well. Cosby’s success with such presentation of material can hold influence past the children of the 1970s generation for which the study was conducted. Such an understanding of the impact of humor in the school setting will be explored later in this chapter with research conducted in two elementary school kindergarten classrooms.

*Television as a Medium for Social Learning*

Comedy is not merely a beneficial tool in teaching individuals in the classroom setting. It has been shown to have an impact on children in significant ways. Author Dr. Helga Kotthoff believes the impact of humor is helpful to a child’s social world. In the aforementioned 2006 edition of the *Televizion* journal, Dr. Kotthoff wrote:

Humor and joking play a significant role in the children’s world. In a variety of ways, they have lots of fun playing with forms and norms…[children] test relationships, provoke and stand up for each other, turn boring conversations into
interesting ones, allow their imagination full rein and share its fruits with others (Kotthoff, 2006, 14).

Kotthoff’s position on humor is one shared by many academics. It has greater implications for the educational process. Humor can be used to help accelerate social learning and norms, better preparing children to thrive in the social world.

The benefits of humor beyond the classroom are numerous. Maya Götz, in her article, “Laughing with Educational Programmes” in the 2006 edition of the journal *Televizion* wrote, “Researchers found that humour in educational programs attracts and holds attention of young viewers, raises their attentiveness to the visual and facilitates the acquisition of information by selective exposure” (Götz, 2006, 47). Not many forms of communication hold the power to keep children’s attention in order to inform. Humor is one of the most prominent forms of interaction able to inform children while keeping them engaged.

The idea that humor is a significant form to keep kids attentive while giving them an educational message is a theme explored by Norbert Neuβ in the 2006 edition of *Televizion*. When describing how humor is used by children, Neuβ said, “Children use the vehicle of humor for tuning into themes that are new for them; through humour they establish common links with their peers. Moreover, via humour they express their creative way of interpreting the world combined with their spontaneous experimental approach” (Neuβ, 2006). This concept of using humor to discover new things and rationalize the world around them, along with Götz’s findings that humor’s value in keeping kids’ attentive long enough to receive an educational message, helps us
understand the selective attention of children. The more children find the entertainment and peer connection values in humor, the more effective humor can be. Kids will keep their attention on the program and will be able to receive the message if they have a reason or desire to tune in.

Both Götz and Ragna Wallmark, the Head of Children’s and Youth Programmes in Stockholm, Sweden, describe vital forces to the beneficial impact of humor for children. Wallmark was interviewed about the benefits of using humor in televised educational programming. She says, “In a manner of speaking, humour can lift children up and make them see difficult things from another angle” (Wallmark, 2006, 22). Humor has the benefit of bolstering self-esteem and moods. This enables children to think more clearly and with more imagination. Humor, and its ability to attract and retain child audiences, promotes social learning skills, specifically problem solving skills and memory retention.

*Using Humor to Teach Socially Responsible Messages*

Bill Cosby looks beyond the role of cartoons as a way to inform America’s youth. He also describes how humor can be used to promote messages about tolerance and respect to audiences of all ages, not only children. The 1960s produced a great change in the uses of television as a medium for education. As the war in Vietnam and civil unrest began to be covered heavily by news cameras in the late 1960s, television became an important medium to attempt to rid America of various forms of stereotyping. Programs, like *Sanford and Sons*, *The Jeffersons*, and *All in the Family*, used socially responsible messaging and humor to carry out this agenda in the 1970s (Cosby, 1976, 16). However,
using television, especially the sitcom and comedy formats to promote social messages, was nothing new to the 1960s. Media formats like television and radio have been used to convey socially relevant information since their inception.

One of the first examples on radio and television of a socially relevant program was *The Goldbergs*. Created by Gertrude Berg, the program focused around a lower-class Jewish family living in the 1920s Bronx. *The Goldbergs* was a comedy with dramatic features that followed the lives of the title family as they struggled to get through the day. The program began as a 15-minute radio program. However, its popularity carried it to television, where it remained on air until 1951. *The Goldbergs* dealt with various social issues, ranging from raising children in the American tradition while clashing with old world customs, to economic success, security, religion, and children at war. Additionally, it served as a way to educate people domestically about these social issues, as the title family dealt with these problems through humor and grace (Museum of Broadcast Communications, “The Goldbergs”). The program has been influential, not only in American culture, but for humorists and comedians to come. *The Goldbergs* was featured on the PBS Documentary, *Make ‘Em Laugh: The Funny Business of America*. The program was revered by many of today’s comedians as not only groundbreaking in American entertainment, but educational to the public (Kantor, January 14, 2009).

*Comedy in the Classroom Research*

Thus far I have provided support for how comedy can be effective devices for educating the public at large. Additionally, I have presented academic research
discussing the use of humor; specifically, how it can serve as an effective educational technique with children. Continuing the argument from Bill Cosby, I, too, feel that comedy sources can serve as an effective tool to be used in the classroom environment.

The classroom setting is very important to study. Finding new ways to aid children and their cognitive abilities is, and has been, a goal for each generation of teachers. The objective of this research is to better understand the means by which comedy can be an effective way to promote education in the classroom setting. To study comedy’s effectiveness in a school classroom, I designed a research study to compare the effects on learning of a comical lesson plan versus learning through a straightforward, more traditional form of teaching students.

The Goal

The purpose of this research was to see how comedy benefits teachers and students in the classroom setting. To carry out this task, a specially designed lesson plan was created for two kindergarten classes at Westbrook Elementary School in Bethesda, Maryland. The lesson plan was created to fit into the agenda and guidelines set out for kindergarten courses by the Montgomery County Public School (MCPS), the school system Westbrook Elementary School’s jurisdiction comes under Montgomery County, Maryland. For a full description of the lesson plan and its MCSP criteria, please see to Appendix A.

In one class, students were taught a lesson using a traditional teaching method for the presentation of information. The other class was taught using a comedy-incorporated lesson plan. Following completion of the lessons, teachers were asked to fill out a
questionnaire describing their experiences with the lesson plan for the students. Teachers were asked for their opinions about the use of humor in the classroom setting and whether it was an effective method for presenting information to their students. Additionally, both teachers were also asked to address the differences between traditional lesson plans and those featuring humorous elements. The other component to the in-class research involved monitoring the classroom exercises, noting behaviors of the children, and determining to the time it took the classes to complete each lesson. When analyzing the data, none of the children were identified individually; all the data collected were analyzed in the aggregate, protecting individual student identities.

The Classroom Setting

Two kindergarten classes were chosen from Westbrook Elementary to participate in this research. Westbrook Elementary was selected because of my familiarity with the school (it was my elementary school), as well as its proximity to Georgetown University (just over five miles from the University). Additionally, two instructors, Maria Fernandez and Elizabeth Garr, were asked to participate in this research. Ms. Garr is my cousin.

Another factor in the use of Westbrook as a research center was the makeup of its students. Most students come from middle to upper-middle-class families with at least one working parent. This was an important factor. In many instances where children come from homes where both parents work, those parents do not have abundant amounts of time to spend with their children. It has been shown that when parents are heavily involved with their children’s education, children achieve more, receive higher grades,
and have a more positive attitude towards the learning experience (Tableman, 2004). The necessity of the school environment for educational and social learning is enhanced in these circumstances. Additionally, the classes were made up of children from various backgrounds.

*Lesson Plan*

To carry out this research, a specially designed lesson plan was constructed with MCPS guidelines and criteria enforced. The lesson plan for both classes followed the story of the Gingerbread Man, who became lost in a museum. The Gingerbread Man left clues around the museum to indicate where he was located for the students to solve. Students were given a clue initially; subsequent clues required the students to find hidden pieces of paper located in various “museum centers” set up around each classroom. At each location, the Gingerbread Man left another clue to indicate his next whereabouts. Eventually, the children had all the clues that pointed them to the final location of the Gingerbread Man. Two types of clues were created for this lesson. The clues for the control class were presented in a straightforward manner. The other class used a set of clues with comical content. For example, the following clues were used to guide the students towards the museum section of the paintings and watercolors: “Security cameras caught the Gingerbread Man appearing a little green after getting a little crazy with some finger paints”; and for the serious lesson, “Security was walking through and found green paint all over the place. But they only found blue and yellow cans of paints.” For a full list of the clues for each lesson plan, please reference Appendix B.
The lesson was ambitious. It set out to teach the students the following MCSP objectives: Working within the “Extensions in Literacy and Math” (E.L.M.), students will develop better understandings of the layout of a museum, what exhibits are in it, and how to find the items, along with enhanced comprehension of reading, listening, logics, and collaborative working skills. Additionally, the students were being prepared for an upcoming trip to the Smithsonian Natural History Museum in Washington, D.C. Part of this lesson plan design was to reinforce the necessity to follow directions and stay with teachers and chaperons throughout their tour.

The Process

Completion of this research was far from easy. Following approval of the Institutional Review Board (IRB) from Georgetown University, a similar process was necessary to complete for Montgomery County Public Schools to ensure the goals of the county and safety of the students was ensured. Approval was granted to work with students at the school by John Ewald, principal of Westbrook Elementary, as well as MCPS’s Office of Shared Accountability.

On March 27, 2009, students in the classes were sent home with a consent form for their participation in the classroom research. In the letter parents were notified of the parameters of the research, reinforcing the understanding that there were no added risks to participating in the lesson plan. Furthermore, parents were told that two classes would be using modified lesson plans, one using comedy as a major component to the guidance and one being presented with information in a traditional fashion. However, to prevent parents from attempting to control which teachers featured the comedy or serious lesson
plan, parents were told that the decision regarding which class would use comedy and which would use the serious teaching method would not be determined until the day before the lesson. Students were then given a little more than two weeks to have the consent forms signed by a parent or guardian and returned to their teacher. On April 1, 2009, a strategy session with Ms. Fernandez and Ms. Garr was conducted. During this ninety-minute session, specific information about the lesson, the clues, organization of the classroom, and criteria for the lessons were developed. It was also determined that Ms. Fernandez would teach the serious lesson plan while Ms. Garr would teach the comical lesson plan.

Classroom Results

On April 15, 2009 both the serious and comical lesson plans were taught at Westbrook Elementary. Specific areas of the classroom were set up as “museum centers” that acted as settings within the constructed classroom museum for the clues to be hidden. Children were first presented with the story of the Gingerbread Man and how he became lost in the museum, as well as the first clue. In both classes, students seemed engaged in the story and anxious to begin. However, with the use of different voices and tones in speech from the teacher beginning the comedic lesson plan, all the children in that class were facing the teacher and engaged. In the serious lesson, there were a few students who were looking away, not as focused. The comedy lesson plan kept the students’ attention more easily than the serious lesson.

Throughout the classes, students were presented with seven clues in each lesson that led them to the next location. In the comedy lesson plan, students asked to answer
the clue had difficulties with two out of the seven clues. Difficulties included not going to the correct location, not remembering the name of the museum center they needed to search for the clue, or taking some extended time to solve the clue. Comparatively, in the serious lesson plan the students had difficulties with three out of seven clues. The comedy lesson plan class appeared to do a better job of grabbing and keeping the students attention throughout the class.

During the presentation of the clues given in both lesson plans, the children had to be reminded to stay seated on the floor, thereby allowing others in the class asked to participate to process the question and determine the location of the following clue. There were more observed instances of this classroom behavior in the comedy lesson than the serious lesson. While it may have been due to the nature of the lesson plan in part, I believe this may have been a result of the personalities of the teachers and their need to calm the students down. The serious lesson plan appeared to keep the students calmer, but they were less engaged at the same time.

In both of the classes, the children seemed to work well collectively to understand the clues and figure out the next location. In the comedy classroom, if the student who was tasked with figuring out the clue did not know the answer, almost all of the other students raised their hand to help or answer. In the serious lesson classroom, when a student was having difficulty understanding the clue or determining the Gingerbread Man’s next location, only a few hands were raised to help with the answer. Additionally, in a couple of instances with the comedy lesson classroom, early on in the lesson plan when one of the students found the location of the clue, they received applause from a
couple of their classmates. This illustrates that there was a greater sense of cooperation and collective working skills exhibited in the comedy lesson.

Overall, both sets of classes seemed to enjoy the lesson plan. In each case, it was a diversion from the normal classroom experience and a different form of learning. Conducting a quick post-lesson plan poll, both teachers asked their students whether they “enjoyed” or “had fun” in the activity. In the comedy class, almost all the children responded (with a thumbs up sign) that they liked the activity. In the serious class however, a little more than half of the students responded positively. Additionally, following the comedy class a few of the students mentioned to other classmates that they intended to look for the Gingerbread Man on their upcoming museum trip. These students also said they didn’t intend to be like the Gingerbread Man and get lost when they went on their museum field trip. The students in the comedy class seemed much more engaged and in favor of the tailored lesson plan than the students in the serious class.

There is a substantial difference in the time it took to complete the designed lesson plan. The lesson plan in the comedy class took 11 minutes and 30 seconds to complete. Comparatively, in the serious lesson plan class, the exercise took 21 minutes and 16 seconds to complete. The difference may have been a result of the students understanding the directions and clues more clearly in the comedy class than the serious class. Additionally, the difference may have been a result due to the greater attention and motivation of the students in the comedy class. However, there are a number of factors that may explain why the large gap occurred. The primary cause for this disparity may
have been due to the time necessary to present the clues. In the comedy lesson, the teacher read the clues, while the class solved the clues and searched for the next clue. In the serious class, the teacher called on the student to read the clue while she helped each reader with tricky words. Because an inexperienced reader was reading a majority of the clues in the serious lesson, a greater amount of time was taken finishing the clue before solving it.

Another cause for the time difference may be due to the difference in teaching styles between the teachers. While there were more instances in the comedy lesson of the teacher asking the students to settle down, in the serious lesson, the teacher waited longer to make sure the students were settled before restarting the lesson.

One final cause that may have contributed to the lengthier lesson plan in the serious classroom was that the students accidentally finding the Gingerbread Man hiding one clue too soon. One of the students, in his/her search for a clue stumbled onto the Gingerbread Man’s hidden location. It took some extra time for the teacher to get the students to understand that they needed to get through all the clues before they could look for the Gingerbread Man, as well as to regain their attention and get them to refocus on the linear progression of the lesson. For these reasons, the amount of time it took to conclude the lesson is not factored as much in the overall analysis on the comparison and effectiveness of the two designed lessons.

Both of the lesson plans met a majority of the goals developed for the lesson plan. The students appeared to grasp the layout and concept of the museum in the classroom, as well as the different types of items that could be found in the museum environment. The
reading achievement in both classes was not exhibited. This was, in large part, due to discussions previous to the lesson with both teachers and whether they felt their kids were comfortable enough reading sentences in front of their classmates. While kids in the serious lesson did read the clues, the teacher read any words in which they had not been exposed. The children in the comedy lesson plan seemed to comprehend the clues presented to them a little more clearly and did not appear to have as much difficulty as a collective group figuring out the next location of a clue. Additionally, these students in the comedy lesson classroom demonstrated a bit better collaborative working skills on the lesson than the students in the serious lesson plan classroom.

These findings were reinforced in a follow-up questionnaire filled out by Ms. Fernandez and Ms. Garr at the conclusion of the school day. Following the lessons, the teachers took up to an hour to fill out a questionnaire that gauged their opinions of the two lesson plan designs and their implementation. A copy of the questionnaire can be found in Appendix C. When asked to determine on a scale of 0-10 how well the students understood the clues and materials, the comedy lesson plan was evaluated at a 9, while the serious lesson plan was given a rating of 7.5. Ms. Fernandez, who taught the serious lesson plan, attributed this lower score to the possibility that there was a shift in museum center locations in the classroom just prior to the day it was taught. When rating the students’ abilities to understand the directional instructions in the lesson, the comedy lesson was rated at 10, while the serious lesson was rated at 8.5, for the same reasons as the previous question.
In both classes, the teachers felt that the students were very interested in the designed lesson. While the comedy class was rated as a 9 on the ten point scale, the serious lesson was rated at 9.5, mostly due to the fact that “some of the momentum and focus was lost [after finding the Gingerbread Man early], however they seemed enthusiastic and interested in getting through the hunt.” Additionally, I asked Ms. Garr to compare the enthusiasm of the students in the comedy lesson plan to a traditional lesson plan. On the ten point scale, she rated it as a 9, responding that the students “were very excited and ready to participate for the most part—anything different is exciting.”

Additionally, I asked both teachers to describe their overall feelings about using the specially designed lesson plan on the students’ educational experience. On the first topic, Ms. Garr responded that she believed the students enjoyed the lesson. “I think the way the material was presented was new and different so they were more willing to really listen.” She did also note that she was unsure whether it helped them to understand any more than a traditional lesson plan. Ms. Fernandez also believed the experience to be positive. She also said that she believed “it was a great activity to review and reflect on museum experiences completed in class. It required processing and thinking skills.”

My last question to the teachers was to relate their experience to their opinions on the role of comedy and humor in the classroom. Both teacher sentiments seemed to sum up the effectiveness of using the lesson plan well. Ms. Garr said that using comedy was “a must” and that its use helped keep the activities fun and students engaged in their studies. Ms. Fernandez too felt that comedy in the classroom “is a great way to engage children in the learning process and to make gaining knowledge interesting and
enjoyable. All of these traits will support the students learning and retaining information.”

The application of comedy in the classroom setting really helps keep the children attentive and engaged in the learning process. Both of these activities proved to be a diversion from the normal classroom lesson. However, the children in the comedy classroom appeared more engaged in the story and finding the next clue. Additionally, these students appeared to be more enthusiastic about the collaborative learning effort and supportive of their classmates. This research has enhanced the understanding of how the use of comedy in the classroom is an effective way to present educational content. This application of using comedy to teach reinforces the literature of *Sesame Street* and Cosby, while enhancing our understanding of its real application in the classroom setting.
“Outside of a dog, a book is man's best friend. Inside of a dog it's too dark to read.”
~Groucho Marx

Chapter 5: Survey Data

I. Introduction

The Pew Research Center’s 2008 study on news audiences was very revealing. The data showed that individuals who identified themselves as regular viewers of *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* and *The Colbert Report* had higher knowledge retention of current leaders and world affairs than viewers of television news magazine programs and 24-hour news channel mainstays like *The O’Reilly Factor* and *Lou Dobbs Tonight* (Pew, *Who Knows News?*, 2008). This valuable data, along with ratings information, shows that these programs are expanding in viewership, demonstrate that humor and comedy programs are growing sources of importance for news in American culture.

Jon Stewart, Stephen Colbert, and the show runners for their popular programs do not claim to be primary sources of information. In particular, they reject the notion that individuals use each comedy and satirical program solely for news and information (Waldo, 2007). However, much to their chagrin, as the Pew study points out, many individuals are using these programs as primary sources of news information and gaining it from them. During the 2008 presidential election cycle, these programs became more and more popular, garnering their biggest audiences in their programs’ histories (Comedy Central, 2008).
While the Pew study is important, it does not go into the causes and reasoning behind viewership trends and the ability of these programs to effectively convey information. Specifically, the research does not delve into the resulting cognitive effects on memory processing and retention of these programs. This chapter will help develop an expanded understanding of how comedy can be used to effectively communicate information. To achieve such understanding, an online survey was fielded, in which an imbedded experiment to test the effects of comedic versus serious presentations of information was included.

II. Survey

Observations/Data

The purpose of this survey was to determine the effects of humor on a participants’ ability to learn and retain information. Additionally, the survey was conducted to gain a better sense of individuals’ preferences for serious or humorous presentations of information. To this degree, the following hypotheses were posed:

**H1:** Respondents show stronger preferences for the humorous presentations of information.

**H2:** Respondents who viewed humorous portrayals of information will have greater retention of information presented to them than the respondents receiving the serious presentation of information.

**H3:** Respondents who have a higher perceptions of comedic material will be more likely to get the correct answer on survey test questions of materials presented to them than those who have low or medium perceptions of comedic materials.

The corresponding null hypotheses were tested:
\textbf{H}_{10}: \text{ Respondents show preferences for the serious information presentations or there was no discernable difference between respondent preferences.}

\textbf{H}_{20}: \text{ Respondents who viewed the humorous portrayals of information will have the same retention of information or less retention of information than those viewing the serious presentations of information.}

\textbf{H}_{30}: \text{ Respondents who have a medium or low perception of comedic material will be more likely to get the correct answer on survey test questions of materials presented to them than those who have high perceptions of comedic materials.}

\textit{Survey Design}

To test these hypotheses, a survey was devised to help gain a better understanding of the public’s feelings on the use of comedy as a source of information. The survey was multi-faceted, featuring different types of questions to both gauge the public’s reactions, as well as test the public’s ability to learn through humorous content. Additionally, the survey contained an embedded experiment.

The embedded survey experiment was designed to understand how the presentations of two distinct types information—comical and serious portrayals of an idea or subject—were received by the survey participants and how they affected their knowledge retention and recall. The style of the information presentation was randomly assigned to the survey participants. Following all the informative statements, survey respondents were asked five questions; one question directly referencing information they received in each category of statements. Respondents were given five choices for each test question, with only one of the answers having been directly pulled or inferred from their previous readings. The results from these test questions will be discussed further in this chapter.
The survey had four distinct sections, the information segment containing five statements in the areas of news, science, U.S. history, world history, and political themes, a test segment containing five questions relating to the five previous topic statements, a demographics section, and an opinion section. Survey participants were exposed to two forms of information, presented through serious contexts and comic portrayals of information. Following these statements, survey participants were tested to determine the effectiveness of the different types of communication on memory retention and recall. Respondents were asked factual questions about the content of the informational passages.

At the onset of the survey, participants were directed to a welcome statement where they were asked to acknowledge that they had read and understood the printed terms of participation statement that conformed to Georgetown University’s Institutional Review Board (IRB) standards. This statement said that those taking the survey understood that participation was voluntary and that the respondent was going to answer the questions to the best of their abilities.

Upon choosing a quote, the respondent was then directed to the “In the News” statement, followed by “History,” “Science,” “Political Themes,” and “World History.” A comic and a serious statement were developed for each topic area. The “In the News” topic, for example, had a statement on the controversy surrounding then Governor of Illinois Rod Blagojevich who was arrested in December 2008 on charges of corruption and trying to sell Barack Obama’s Illinois Senate seat to the highest bidder. The “History” section presented information on Robert Todd Lincoln and his appearance at
three significant events in U.S. history. The “Science” portion of the survey had two statements referencing the concept of black holes in space and how they appear to observers. “Political Themes” information was represented by two statements referring to the U.S. Government’s plan to federally aid Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac corporations with tax-payer funds. Finally, the “World History” section refers information about Canadian independence from Great Britain. To ensure both comic and serious statements had the equivalent amount of information pertaining to the topic for each statement, a validity check was conducted. The survey was distributed to eight individuals who read the statements to ensure each comical and serious statement contained the same basic information.

Following the welcome statement, respondents were asked to choose one of four different humorous quotes. The quotes were taken from Sir Winston Churchill, Mark Twain, Conan O’Brien, and Groucho Marx. There was no method or meaning to choosing these quotes. The purpose of these quotes was the random assignment of subjects to different sections of the survey. Choosing the quote from Twain or Marx guided participants to the comedic portion of the first set of questions; a comical statement about Rod Blagojevich from Stephen Colbert on December 9, 2008. Picking the quote from Churchill or O’Brien steered participants to the serious discussion of the next section; a transcript from a segment discussing Blagojevich’s arrest from the December 9, 2008 edition of The News Hour with Jim Lehrer. The quotes were randomly sorted on the screen for each survey respondent. Following each statement, respondents were asked rate their reactions to the statements on a Likert scale ranging

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from 0 (indicating the statement was not informative and did not help the reader understand the concept) to 10 (indicating the statement was very informative and helped the reader understand the topic with more clarity). For each of the items in this first section of the survey, respondents were asked to replicate this rating process.

Upon completion of the statement in the first section, participants were then directed to the next section of the survey with a statement of opposite tone. For example, those receiving the humorous statement for “In the News” would be directed to the serious statement for “History.” The respondents for the serious statements for “In the News” were directed to the humorous statement in the “History” section. This tone statement swapping process was replicated for all five topics in the initial section of the survey.

Following this initial section, participants were directed to the test portion of the survey. This section was linear, unlike the previous section. One question on each topic area was posed to the readers with five options to choose from. For instance, for “In the News,” the respondent was asked (Q14), “According to the information, what charge was Governor Rod Blagojevich arrested on?” The following question (Q15), “Which of the following statements can be attributed to Robert Todd Lincoln when invited to White House functions later in his life?” pertained to statements the survey respondents received on Robert Todd Lincoln’s life and appearance at three presidential assignations.

Question 16 on the survey (Q16) asked respondents to recall the information they had been exposed to on the appearance of objects at the event horizon in a black hole. The question pertaining to “Political Themes” (Q17) posed, “What was the main point
referred to in the earlier political statement (political cartoon or article)?” Finally, Question 18 (Q18) asked the survey respondents to recall the information they had seen on Canadian history in order to pick from a list of five choices the year Canada broke away from Britain. [For complete question wording, please see Appendix D]

After completing the five test questions, respondents were asked about their media use. The survey respondents were also asked to gauge how often they receive news from a range of sources, what their highest level of education was, and their age.

The final section of the survey contained two statements regarding participants’ preferences for humorous presentations of information. The first statement looked into the perceptions of using comedy to understand different topics more clearly. The second statement discussed how humorous portrayals of information are used to help understand concepts and content of information more clearly. Respondents rated their opinions of the statements on a scale. Individuals were asked if they agreed with two different statements, one on the use of humor to help them understand information presented to them, and a second to understand concepts and content of presented materials. Respondents then placed their choices along the following scale: Strongly Disagree, Somewhat Disagree, Neither Agree or Disagree, Somewhat Agree, and Strongly Agree. Following completion of these items, respondents were then directed to a “Thank You” page.

The survey was designed to discover how people responded to humorous and serious presentations of news and information. Additionally, it provided a way to understand if the respondent, when quizzed later, retained information from humorous
presentations of content. Finally, the survey gauged people’s reactions on the effectiveness of presenting news and facts through the different communication filters of comedic and serious presentations of information.

III. Methods

Sample and Data Collection

The survey respondents were comprised of a convenience sample of the general public. Upon releasing the survey online, an email notice was sent out to Georgetown University’s Communication, Culture and Technology (CCT) listserv, as well as posted on the social networking site Facebook.com. Additionally, the link was posted on several website message boards, including HoyaSaxa.com, Interference.com, PhinisheD.com, Eopinions.com, and Thoughts.com, which built the convenience sample. Finally, the link was posted on news, information, and public space websites, such as MSNBC’s U.S. News forum, the Motley Fool’s user forums, as well as Craigslist’s Education forum.

The survey was created on the site SurveyMonkey, a platform that facilitates the construction and distribution of online studies. Upon the survey’s content completion, notices were sent out to the CCT listserv and Facebook on January 25, 2009. Over the next 45 days until the survey was closed on SurveyMonkey on March 11, 2009. The survey link was placed on the previously discussed sites and forums in timed increments, under the desire to keep response momentum continued over the 45-day range. Links to the survey were sent out to liters initially and, a week later, the link was posted on a new site. The link to the survey was distributed to a news location, on average, once per week. Additionally, snowball sampling was employed to distribute the survey link, as
friends, family, and colleagues reposted the link on their various social networking pages or forwarded the link to other individuals. When the survey was taken down, 307 respondents had taken the survey.

Of those 307 survey participants, most tended to be younger and based domestically. In fact, about 63% of survey respondents were under 30 years old. The age distribution favored the 20-29 year old range. Table 5.1 lists the range in ages from the survey participants:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age Range</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>≤19</td>
<td>1.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(n=3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20-29</td>
<td>61.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(n=111)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30-39</td>
<td>16.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(n=29)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40-49</td>
<td>7.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(n=13)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>50-59</td>
<td>10.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(n=19)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>60-69</td>
<td>3.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(n=6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>≥70</td>
<td>.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(n=1)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The majority of survey respondents were well educated. 12.8% of those polled said they had received some college education, while 22.5% had at most an undergraduate degree. 31.0% said they have some graduate education and 24.1% had received some form of graduate degree. Table 5.2 illustrates the levels of education from survey respondents (in percentages):
Table 5.2
Survey Participants by Education Level

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Respondent Percentage</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Less than High School</td>
<td>.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High School Diploma</td>
<td>.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some College</td>
<td>12.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Undergraduate Degree</td>
<td>22.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some Graduate</td>
<td>31.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Graduate Degree</td>
<td>24.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Post-Graduate Degree</td>
<td>8.6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In addition to being well educated, survey respondents were attentive to a wide range of different media sources. A question asked the survey respondents about their use of different media sources. Answers were “Always” (coded as 1), “Sometimes” (coded as 2), “Infrequently” (coded as 3), and “Never” (coded as 4). The largest percentage of these respondents (nearly 57%) also revealed that they use Internet news outlets, such as CNN.com, MSNBC.com, Washingtonpost.com, etc., as main sources of news and information access. Table 5.3 displays the survey responses:

Table 5.3
Survey Participant News Source Leanings

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Always</th>
<th>Sometimes</th>
<th>Infrequently</th>
<th>Never</th>
<th>Mean</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Internet News Outlets</td>
<td>56.8%</td>
<td>33.9%</td>
<td>3.8%</td>
<td>5.5%</td>
<td>1.579</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blogs</td>
<td>9.4%</td>
<td>35.9%</td>
<td>32.6%</td>
<td>22.1%</td>
<td>1.674</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cable News Networks</td>
<td>17.3%</td>
<td>49.2%</td>
<td>27.0%</td>
<td>6.5%</td>
<td>2.227</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Traditional Newspapers</td>
<td>20.1%</td>
<td>42.4%</td>
<td>29.3%</td>
<td>8.2%</td>
<td>2.255</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comedy Programs</td>
<td>13.1%</td>
<td>41.5%</td>
<td>24.0%</td>
<td>21.3%</td>
<td>2.536</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Talk Radio</td>
<td>3.8%</td>
<td>16.5%</td>
<td>27.5%</td>
<td>52.2%</td>
<td>3.280</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Broadcast News</td>
<td>11.5%</td>
<td>37.7%</td>
<td>33.3%</td>
<td>17.5%</td>
<td>2.568</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
IV. Results

Data were taken from SurveyMonkey and converted into a Microsoft Excel data spreadsheet. Survey data from the spreadsheet were then cleaned, enabling the data set to be moved into a statistical analysis software program, SPSS.

Data Transformations

For the usefulness perception statements (labeled as Q3-Q12, odd numbers correspond to comic statements and even correspond to serious statements), in which information was presented to survey participants who were asked to rate their reaction to each statement and its presentation format (comical or serious) on a Likert scale, data were analyzed using t-tests to determine mean difference scores for respondent feedback. The data were then recoded into three different categories to facilitate categorical analysis. Respondents who rated the informational passage or cartoon between 0 (Not helpful) to 3 were collapsed into a “Low” category, signifying diminished preference for the statement. Respondents who rated the statements between 4-6 were labeled as “Med,” standing for medium preference to the statement. Responses between 7-10 in personal preference were labeled as “High” statement preference.

Questions 14-18, in which respondents were asked to recall information to which they had just been exposed for test questions, also required recoding. For each of these questions, five answer choices were given to questions referring to prior informative statements. Four of the statements were false; one was true. To prepare data for analysis,
responses were recoded into two categories. All responses that were incorrect were recoded and given the value “0.” All correct responses were recoded as “1.”

A binary logistic regression analysis was conducted to determine how well usefulness perception statements, when analyzed against the type of question respondents received to a given subject (comical or serious), could be used to predict getting the correct answer on the test questions. To run this regression, data had to be recoded. A new variable was created to combine both comical and serious statements for each subject category. Those who received the comic variation of the information received the code “1” and those who received the serious statement were given the code “2.” The new variable was given a one-word label, coinciding with the type of information for the given subject (“News” for “In the News,” “History,” “Science,” “Political” for “Political Themes,” and “World” for “World News”). Additionally, the previously recoded data for preference level were transferred into a new variable containing responses from both comical and serious statement recipients. Similarly, those who received the comical statements were recoded to “1” and serious statement recipients were recoded to “2” into the variable categories, labeled with their subjects and an “R” for recoded (“NewsR,” “HistoryR,” “ScienceR,” “PoliticalR,” and “WorldR”).

Findings

Using the full Likert scale, t-tests were run on all unrecoded usefulness perception statements (Q3-Q12) to determine mean scores for each statement, as well as significance levels. To determine whether the survey respondents considered the comical or the serious information statements to be more helpful, t-tests were also performed to
determine if there were significant mean differences within each of the fine topic areas—
“In the News,” “History,” “Science,” “Political Themes,” and “World History.” As Table 5.4 details, the respondents’ attitudes differed on the utility of presenting information through comical filters by topic area. The mean differences were statistically significant for all topic areas. For “In the News,” subjects found the standard account to be more useful than the comic statement. This was the same finding for statements in the “History” and “World History” categories. Thus, the hypothesis that comedic information would be preferred by respondents (H₁) is supported for “Science” and “Political Themes,” but not for “In the News,” “History,” and “World History.” The following table displays the results of these t-tests:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Comedy Mean</th>
<th>Serious Mean</th>
<th>Comedy Mean – Serious Mean</th>
<th>Sign. (t-test)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>In the News</td>
<td>5.37</td>
<td>6.59</td>
<td>-1.22</td>
<td>.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>History</td>
<td>6.59</td>
<td>7.37</td>
<td>-.78</td>
<td>.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Science</td>
<td>6.19</td>
<td>4.87</td>
<td>1.32</td>
<td>.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political Themes</td>
<td>7.43</td>
<td>5.89</td>
<td>1.54</td>
<td>.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>World History</td>
<td>6.32</td>
<td>6.98</td>
<td>-.66</td>
<td>.000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Similar tests were run on questions pertaining to the value of using comic content to communicate information that survey participants placed on an individual’s abilities to learn. The choices for both questions were “Strongly Disagree” (coded as 1 in SPSS), “Somewhat Disagree” (coded as 2), “Neither Agree nor Disagree” (coded as 3), “Somewhat Agree” (coded as 4), and “Strongly Agree” (coded as 5). Q22 asked whether humor helps the participant to understand topics more clearly. The modal score among
those responses was 4 ("Somewhat Agree"), signifying that 36.6% of the individuals found humorous presentations of information helped them to understand the topics more clearly. Q23 asked survey participants to gauge whether information through humorous mediums helped them to understand the concepts and content of the presented material. The modal score of these respondents was 4 as well. This indicates that the majority of survey responses (42.2%) answered that they "Strongly Agreed" that humorous portrayals of information helped them understand the concepts and content of that information.

Using SPSS, crosstabs were run to determine how the comical statements compared to the serious statements on the test questions. Table 5.5 displays the percentage correct in each test question by the respondents who received comical and serious statements. Also shown in Table 5.5 are the $\chi^2$ values for each test question as well as the difference between those who received the comical statements and answered the test question correctly and those who received the serious statement and answered the test question correctly. Comical statements outperformed serious statements. On each of the test questions, respondents who received the comical statement answered the questions correctly more often than those who received the serious statements. This is especially true for the “Science’ and “World History” test questions, where there was a 30+ percent point difference between those who answered correctly having seen the comical statement compared to those who had seen the serious statement. This information supports the hypothesis ($H_2$) that those who received the comical statements
in the survey would have better information retention and recall than those who viewed the serious statements. Table 5.5 depicts these data:

Table 5.5
Humorous or Serious Condition by Correct Answer

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Humorous Statement</th>
<th>Serious Statement</th>
<th>χ²</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Q14: In the News</td>
<td>93.2% (n=96)</td>
<td>90.9% (n=80)</td>
<td>2.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q15: History</td>
<td>90.7% (n=78)</td>
<td>75.8% (n=75)</td>
<td>14.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q16: Science</td>
<td>78.4% (n=76)</td>
<td>38.8% (n=33)</td>
<td>39.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q17: Political Themes</td>
<td>95.3% (n=82)</td>
<td>71.7% (n=71)</td>
<td>23.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q18: World History</td>
<td>65.7% (n=65)</td>
<td>31.8% (n=27)</td>
<td>33.9%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A separate set of crosstabs were run to determine the percentages of respondents who rated the comedic statements as highly useful (“High”) and answered the test question correctly. These respondents were then compared to those who rated the comical statements as “Low” and “Medium” who got the test questions correct as well. Table 5.6 displays the results:

Table 5.6
Perceptions By Correct Answer

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Q14 (In The News)</th>
<th>Q15 (History)</th>
<th>Q16 (Science)</th>
<th>Q17 (Political Themes)</th>
<th>Q18 (World History)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Low</td>
<td>82.6% (n=19)</td>
<td>76.9% (n=10)</td>
<td>66.7% (n=10)</td>
<td>100.0% (n=7)</td>
<td>36.4% (n=4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medium</td>
<td>97.1% (n=34)</td>
<td>81.8% (n=18)</td>
<td>64.9% (n=24)</td>
<td>94.7% (n=18)</td>
<td>71.4% (n=25)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High</td>
<td>95.6% (n=43)</td>
<td>98.0% (n=50)</td>
<td>93.3% (n=42)</td>
<td>95.0% (n=57)</td>
<td>67.9% (n=36)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>χ²</td>
<td>.070</td>
<td>.016</td>
<td>.004</td>
<td>.829</td>
<td>.090</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
In two of the categories tested, “History” and “Science,” a higher percentage of those who rated the comedic statements as “High” in terms of their ability to help the reader understand the concepts and materials presented to them chose the correct answer than those who rated their statements “Medium” or “Low.” In the categories of “In the News” and “World History,” respondents who rated the statements as “Medium” chose the correct answer in the majority of cases. Only in the category of “Political Themes” did the “Low” raters score a higher percentage of correct answers when compared with the other two preference levels.

While the percentages do not support the third hypothesis (H₃), which posed that individuals who perceived the statements as “High” would be more likely to get the correct answer over those who rated it as “Medium” or “Low,” the number of actual cases support the hypothesis. In each of the categories, those who rated the comedic statements as “High” chose the correct answer on the test questions in higher percentages.

Finally, a binary logistic regression was run on the recoded survey data to determine how well perceptions of each statement and the types of statements received could be used to construct a model for predicting whether the survey participant will answer the test question correctly. The regression analysis was also run to control for age and education level; however, these variables did not improve the predictive ability of the model. The logistic regression supported Hypothesis 3. Separate logistic regression analyses were run for each topic. The logistic regression equation for each model is as follows:

In the News: Knowledge = 2.068 - .526(News) + .519(NewsR)
History: Knowledge = 1.915 - 1.393(History) + .778(HistoryR)
Science: Knowledge = 1.756 - 1.622(Science) + .516(ScienceR)
Political Themes: Knowledge = 3.441 - 1.935(Political) + .608(PoliticalR)
World History: Knowledge = 1.499 - 1.466(World) + .256(WorldR)

The overall model statistics coefficients for each model appear in Tables 5.7 and 5.8, which details the individual variable coefficients. Table 5.7 describes the logistic regression analysis statistics for the model and the individual variable coefficients for each topic.

Table 5.7
Binary Regression Results by Subject

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>B</th>
<th>Sig.</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>Wald</th>
<th>χ²</th>
<th>Cox &amp; Snell R²</th>
<th>Nagelkerke R²</th>
<th>Predicted Percentage Correct Initial</th>
<th>Predicted Percentage Correct Final</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>In the News</td>
<td>News</td>
<td>-.526</td>
<td>.351</td>
<td>191</td>
<td>83.811</td>
<td>.281</td>
<td>.013</td>
<td>.031</td>
<td>92.1</td>
<td>92.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>NewsR</td>
<td>.519</td>
<td>.132</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>2.068</td>
<td>.041</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>History</td>
<td>History</td>
<td>-.139</td>
<td>.003</td>
<td>185</td>
<td>64.794</td>
<td>.001</td>
<td>.077</td>
<td>.127</td>
<td>82.7</td>
<td>82.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>HistoryR</td>
<td>.778</td>
<td>.007</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>1.915</td>
<td>.037</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Science</td>
<td>Science</td>
<td>-1.622</td>
<td>.000</td>
<td>182</td>
<td>7.026</td>
<td>.000</td>
<td>.180</td>
<td>.244</td>
<td>59.9</td>
<td>70.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>ScienceR</td>
<td>.516</td>
<td>.015</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>1.756</td>
<td>.000</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political Themes</td>
<td>Political</td>
<td>-1.935</td>
<td>.001</td>
<td>185</td>
<td>64.794</td>
<td>.000</td>
<td>.123</td>
<td>.204</td>
<td>82.7</td>
<td>82.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>PoliticalR</td>
<td>.608</td>
<td>.043</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>3.441</td>
<td>.008</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>World History</td>
<td>World</td>
<td>-1.466</td>
<td>.000</td>
<td>184</td>
<td>.000</td>
<td>.000</td>
<td>.115</td>
<td>.154</td>
<td>50.0</td>
<td>66.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>WorldR</td>
<td>.256</td>
<td>.301</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>1.499</td>
<td>.37</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Each condition as defined by the set of variables in the binary regression predicts the probability of choosing correct the test question. Table 5.8 provides the predicted probabilities of choosing the correct answer based on whether the respondent received the
Table 5.8
Probability of Answering Correctly by Subject, Tone, and Usefulness Perception

### In the News:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tone</th>
<th>Perception</th>
<th>Probability Percentage of Answering Correctly</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Comical</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>96%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comical</td>
<td>Med</td>
<td>93%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comical</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>89%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Serious</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>93%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Serious</td>
<td>Med</td>
<td>89%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Serious</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>82%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### History:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tone</th>
<th>Perception</th>
<th>Probability Percentage of Answering Correctly</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Comical</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>95%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comical</td>
<td>Med</td>
<td>89%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comical</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>79%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Serious</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>81%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Serious</td>
<td>Med</td>
<td>66%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Serious</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>48%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Science:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tone</th>
<th>Perception</th>
<th>Probability Percentage of Answering Correctly</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Comical</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>84%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comical</td>
<td>Med</td>
<td>76%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comical</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>66%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Serious</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>51%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Serious</td>
<td>Med</td>
<td>39%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Serious</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>27%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 5.8 (Continued)

**Political Themes:**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tone</th>
<th>Perception</th>
<th>Probability Percentage of Answering Correctly</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Comical</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>97%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comical</td>
<td>Med</td>
<td>94%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comical</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>89%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Serious</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>80%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Serious</td>
<td>Med</td>
<td>69%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Serious</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>55%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| World History: |

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tone</th>
<th>Perception</th>
<th>Probability Percentage of Answering Correctly</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Comical</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>69%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comical</td>
<td>Med</td>
<td>63%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comical</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>57%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Serious</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>34%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Serious</td>
<td>Med</td>
<td>29%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Serious</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>24%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As demonstrated by Table 5.8, those who received comical statements and had higher perceptions were more likely to answer the test questions correctly. In each subject area, those who had the comical statements and high user perceptions were predicted to answer the corresponding test question correctly in a higher percentage than those who received serious statements and had high user perceptions. In fact, aside from the “In the News” subject (which showed a 14% difference), the percentage difference between those with high perceptions of comical statements and those with low perceptions of serious statements ranged from 42% for “Political Themes” to 14%, for “In the News.”
V. Analysis/Discussion

Survey participants showed stronger preferences towards the serious portrayals of information overall. In two of the categories, “Science” and “Political Themes,” readers stated that the humorous content was beneficial to their understanding of the presented material. In three of the five categories, “History,” “World History,” and “In the News,” the mean score on a scale of 0-10 showed preference to the serious statements (mean score) over the comical statements (mean score) when survey participants were asked how well each statement helped them to understand the information presented.

Overall, the serious portrayals of information found stronger support for relaying information with survey participants. This information is important and supports the first null hypothesis ($H_{10}$): Respondents showed preference towards the serious information presentations or there was no discernable difference between respondent preferences. In fact, this was the result. In three out of five instances, the serious statements were seen as stronger in relaying information to the reader.

There are a number of possibilities as to why this result may have occurred. One potential reason for such a result may have been the context in which the statements were placed prior to the survey while fielding the survey, the link to the survey was placed in the text of a brief statement I wrote explaining the basic parameters of the survey. I tried to release as few details as possible so as not to create bias within the survey participants. In the statement, I wrote the purpose was for a graduate school thesis and should take around ten minutes to complete. No information was divulged regarding the topic. Furthermore, upon following the link to the survey, respondents were still given no
information as to the nature of the study. The title of the survey was left ambiguous: “Communication Mediums.” After the subjects picked the quotes, instructions still did not reveal any information about the purpose of the survey. Because information was presented as being for a “graduate thesis,” survey respondents may have been turned away from giving higher value ratings for the humorous statement due to a perceived formality of comedic statements in academic research. Survey respondents may have given higher scores to the serious statements because of the academic nature of the survey and perceived requirement to appear educated in scholarly research.

Inherent political bias may have been a cause of the lower-scoring opinions on the humorous information. In each category that tested better with the serious statement, the source of information came from liberal writers. The “In The News” source came from Stephen Colbert, host of The Colbert Report and generally a Republican-mocking political pundit. The “History” section comedic statement came from Assassination Vacation, a book written by Sarah Vowell, who is a well-known author and Democrat (Hornby, 2005). The comical statement from the “World News” section came from Samantha Bee, a correspondent from The Daily Show with Jon Stewart. If this resulted in a bias for any survey participants, I believe the impact on those results would have been, at best, minimal.

While none of these quotes mocked any particular political party, the sources of the statement may have impacted the participant’s response. I highlight may, however. The majority of survey responses came from individuals under the age of 30. In the 2008 election, the youth vote in America increased and trended towards Democrats. Youth
preference heavily favored Democrat Barack Obama over Republican John McCain by a 38-point margin, 68-30 (Dahl, 2008). If political bias showed up in the results, its impact on the overall preference likely is nominal.

The mean scores for the various statement topics indicate that the results were mixed. A preference toward serious statements for understanding content in different forms of information distribution was shown in a slight majority of the cases (three statements to two). While the serious statements rated better when compared with the comical statements, the opposite was true on the test questions. With each question, those who viewed the comical statements, when tested, did substantially better than those viewing the serious statements.

On Q14, the tested “In the News” question, those who viewed the humorous content chose the correct answer in 93.2% of the cases, with the data approaching statistical significance (p=.07). The serious statement on the same material produced correct answers from 90.9% of the respondents, with a large variance (p=.935). The difference between the two sets of statements is 2.3%. While there are not large differences between the two types of communication methods, the figure is important. Both differences in percentage correct between the comical and serious statements do not appear to be statistically significant, although the comical statement approaches significance. This may be caused by the vast majority of survey respondents choosing the correct answer from both versions in the survey. Also, because the respondents were heavy news users, they may have been familiar with the Gov. Blagojevich information from a source other than the survey passages.
Like Q14, Q15 showed a difference in the percentage of those individuals who answered the tested question correctly. Q15 asked participants to remember information pertaining to the “History” statements given to them earlier in the survey. 90.7% of those exposed to the comical statements answered the question correctly, compared to 75.8% who received the serious statement. The difference between the two percentages is 14.9%. The findings for the comical respondents (p=.016) are statistically significant. However, the respondent answers for serious statements pertaining to the “History” section does not approach statistical significance (p=.285).

Q16 showed the biggest disparity between the comical and serious statements. This question asked survey participants to remember information on “Science” that had been previously presented to them. Comical statement viewers got the correct answer 78.4% of the time, whereas serious statement viewers got the answer correct a scant 38.8% of the time. There was a 39.6% percent gap between those who picked the right answer among the comical viewers and those who selected the answer correctly in the serious statement group. Similar to Q15, the comical statement was statistically significant (p=.004), but the serious statement responses were not statistically significant (p=.221).

The following question, Q17, was to test survey participants on information they had seen on “Political Themes.” On this question, those who had seen comical information selected the answer correctly 95.3% of the time, compared with 71.7% of the time for the serious statement respondents. This meant that 23.6% more of the comical statement viewers chose the correct answer. However, comical statement responses were
not statistically significant (p=.829), whereas serious statement responses were statistically significant (p=.007).

The last test question was used to determine if participants remembered the statements they had seen on “World History.” Of the responses, those who had seen the comical statement had answered correctly 65.7% of the time. Those who received the serious statement only answered correctly 31.8% of the time, creating a difference between the two of 33.9%. Neither of the statement responses showed statistical significant. Comical statements approached statistical significance (p=.09). Serious statement variance was a little larger (p=.185), approaching statistical significance.

While not all the responses showed statistical significance, the contrast between the correct answers is revealing. In each topic, the viewers of comical statements outperformed the viewers of serious statements, in some cases by a very large margin. Even the first test question on current events, while managing a difference of less than 3%, is significant.

These data validate the second hypothesis (H2) of this survey: Respondents who viewed humorous portrayals of information will have greater retention of information presented to them than the respondents receiving the serious presentation of information. As described, in each topic category (“In the News,” “History,” “Science,” “Political Themes,” and “World History”) those who received comical statements earlier in the survey outperformed those who received statements with serious content on the subjects.

This information is vital. Even though initial leanings showed greater preference for serious statements, the comical statements showed the greatest memory retention and
recall. Survey participants who received the comical statements seemed to be better at being able to recall the information they had been presented with and use it at a later time. Beyond showing its importance to this survey and its findings, this information has larger implications. This research is a pilot study; it is by no means a definitive answer to questions regarding how humor helps individuals remember information presented to them. However, it does provide evidence for answering the question of if humor helps with memory retention and cognitions.

Additionally, the data collected from the survey were used to test the third hypothesis ($H_3$) that theorized, “Respondents who have a higher perception of comedic material will be more likely to get the correct answer on survey test questions of materials presented to them than those who have low or medium perceptions of comedic materials.” While the percentage of individuals who rated the comical statements as “High,” “Medium,” or “Low,” showed a variety of perceptions of the information, the frequency of cases supports the hypothesis. The percentage correct differed by test topic, however, for each test question the number of individuals who got the answer correct was greater for the “High” raters than the other groups.

In each category, there was significant difference between those who rated the comical statements as “High” and those who rated the statement as “Medium” as it pertained to selecting the correct answer on the corresponding test question. The “In the News” test question showed a slightly smaller percentage of respondents rating the perception of comedy “High” compared to those rating perceptions “Medium” (95.6% to 97.1%). The “History” test question, however, showed a greater difference for those who
picked the correct answer and rated the statement as “High” (98.0% to 81.8%). The differential between “High” and “Medium” for the “Science” test was much stronger (93.3% to 64.9%), while on “Political Themes” there was a modest gap (95.0% to 94.7%). On the “World History” test, the difference showed a smaller percentage of respondents for “High” than for “Medium” (67.9% to 71.4%). Significance levels differ by topic. Data from “History” ($\chi^2 = .016$) and “Science” ($\chi^2 = .004$) questions showed statistical significance. “In the News” ($\chi^2 = .070$) and “World History” ($\chi^2 = .090$), while approaching statistical significance, do not actually achieve it. The “Political Themes” responses ($\chi^2 = .829$) do not approach statistical significance. This high significance level may be due to a ceiling effect, in which there appeared high frequencies of correct answers between all categories of comedic information preference with those who answered the test question correctly.

These data indicate that even though perceptions about the importance and impact of using comedy to promote information were mixed, those who valued comedy and its ability to distribute messages demonstrated a greater capacity for knowledge retention and recall. Those who rated humor as “High” generally did better on the test than those who rated it as “Medium” or “Low” on perceptions of influence.

The data from the binary logistic regression analyses also support the third hypothesis ($H_3$). With the exception of the regression conducted with the “In the News” data, all the data are statistically significant. In each case, the goodness of fit tests indicated the model’s ability to predict whether a respondent would get the test question
correct on a subject based on the tone of the statement they received (comical or serious) and their usefulness perception rating (“High,” “Med,” or “Low”).

On the “In the News” section, the model was able to correctly predict whether the survey respondents would get the answer correct from their responses 92.2% of the time. On the “History” subject, the model was able to correctly predict the result in 82.7% of the cases. For the “Science” subject, the model predicted correctly the outcome of survey responses 70.3% of the time. Finally, in the category of “World History,” the model correctly classified the survey responses in 66.8% of the cases. This information demonstrates how using the overall projections of usefulness perception ratings and tone of statement received can predict answering the test question correctly.

Table 5.8 represent an in-depth description of the predictability measure of the goodness of fit line, as it pertains to the tone (comical vs. serious) of the statement respondents received and the usefulness perception ratings (“High,” “Med,” or “Low”). For each subject, the model demonstrated that those who received the comical statement and rated it highly were more likely to answer the test question corresponding with the subject correctly, than those who received the serious statement and rated it highly. In a number of cases (“Science,” “Political Themes,” and World History”), the model for each subject predicted that even those whose received comical statements and rated their usefulness perception as “Low” would get the test question correct a higher percentage of the time compared to those who received the serious statements and rated their useful perception as “High.”
Evidence demonstrates that those individuals who received information through comical filters, as well as held high perceptions of the utility that presentation information were more likely to show stronger information retention and recall than those who receive serious portrayals of information and rate those depictions as high. The statistics demonstrate support the third hypothesis (H₃).

Observations on Survey Limitations

It appears that the survey respondents believed that, for a majority of topics utilized, the serious statements are more useful to understand the concepts and information presented to them. This contrasts the initial tested hypothesis (H₁) and seems to validate the first null hypothesis (H₀). While being significant, the data is limited by only a few examples. Only five different topics were used in this initial study. The study could benefit from applying more topics and subject areas to the tested statements. Categories from other sectors, such as business, religion, economics, language, etc., were not included in this study. Further research into different topics would enhance the impact and outreach of this study.

The survey was limited, additionally, by time and range. While the survey was fielded for 45 days, the addition of weeks and/or months would have garnered more survey responses, thereby giving the results greater chance for significance. Furthermore, the survey was limited in its reach. Due to the online nature of the survey, as well as the locations chosen to distribute the link on the web, the survey favored young, tech-savvy individuals. The survey also relied on snowball sampling to help promote the survey link. While beneficial, the snowball sample did not lead to a greater variety in
respondents: much of the time it was passed along to other young and web-savvy individuals. Greater diversity in ages and technological capabilities would help illustrate the greater effects of humor on information distribution on the general public.

**VI. Conclusion**

The survey detailed in this chapter was designed to further our understanding of the impact of different representations of information on the general public. It was designed to illustrate the different interpretations the public can have on presentations of information and news through humorous and serious filters. The multi-layered design of the survey was specifically used to delineate differences in preferences and opinions on humorous portrayals of information. Additionally, the approach illuminated whether the humorous statements helped individuals retain the content from those statements with greater frequency than those who received serious statements of information.

Data from the survey suggests that humor does, in fact, help facilitate knowledge retention and recall. The initial survey hypothesis ($H_1$) posed was not supported in the research, while the initial null hypothesis ($H_{10}$) was supported. Overall, individual survey respondents showed greater preference towards the serious statements of information on a majority of the subjects than the comical or humorous depictions of the same information.

These second ($H_2$) and third ($H_3$) hypotheses, however, were supported by the survey data. Those individuals who were exposed to the comical statements answered test questions correctly in greater frequency than those exposed to serious statements. Additionally, those individuals who responded to comical statements with “High” levels
of perceptions on the utility of information answered the test questions correctly in
greater numbers than those whose perceptions were rated at “Medium” or “Low” levels.
Additionally, binary logistic regressions demonstrated that when an individual received a
comical portrayal of information and rated the usefulness perception of that information
as “High” on all the subjects tested, survey respondents were more likely to answer the
test question correctly than those who received serious depictions of information and
rated the information highly.

This survey is not a definitive test of all knowledge on comedy. It is far from it.
However, it is a pilot study into the effectiveness of presenting information through
comedic lenses. The data suggest that comedy can be an important and influential filter
for information retention and recall. Comedy, as the survey suggests, is a good way to
present information to most individuals, even if they do not see the value of it as a type of
useful communication.
“I think it's the duty of the comedian to find out where the line is drawn and cross it deliberately.” ~George Carlin

Chapter 6: Other Peoples’ Thoughts

As I have established, humor is a shared experience. Whether it is a shared joke between family, friends, co-workers, or a random person on the street, humor acts as a unifying force. For it to be shared, both individuals need to understand and process why something is, in fact, funny. Humor is often conveyed in one of two ways. Humorous situations can be the result of two-way communications, in which humor can be exchanged between two individuals. Humor can also be conveyed in one-way dialogues. One-way dialogues include the use of media, such as the Internet, radio, television, and even literature, to tell jokes and make people laugh. One-way communications can also include speeches, educational presentations, and religious communications, such as like sermons. In each of these forums, one person has the ability to use humor to emphasize, establish, relay, or inform their audience.

For our understanding of how effective comedy can be as a device for communicating information, it is important to get a sense of how it is, in fact, communicated. The role of humor and comedy in the political realm was discussed in Chapter 3. Likewise, the effectiveness of comedy in the classroom setting was explored in Chapter 4. The approach in this chapter is different. Throughout this next chapter, I will describe how humor is used to effectively convey information from a number of different sources. Through interviews with individuals in different and distinct mediums,
I will explore the use of humor and comedy to inform the public of news, history, science, education, and religion.

Methodology

The key goal in this research was to get valuable insights into the use of humor in information distributing sectors. To obtain this information, I compiled a list of jobs and career sectors where I believed the application of humor had a profound impact on the information being communicated. Following this, a list was developed of potential positions and interviews that would help establish the use of humor in the different areas, as well as provide invaluable insider knowledge that would further cultivate the argument.

Process

Through an email and letter writing campaign, I was able to obtain interviews with individuals who are integral parts of their various communication sectors. These included the news information (specifically sports news) and business, literary, infotainment, education, and religious sectors. Over a two-month span, interviews were either conducted in person or via email with these individuals. Conversations in person were recorded. All interview participants were notified of the use of the conversation transcripts and each agreed to be quoted directly. In-person interviews lasted around thirty minutes.

Each of these areas is vastly different and important to our collective source of news, information, and education. Likewise, each individual throughout their careers has
taken a different approach to their presentation of information and informational materials. During each interview, participants were asked questions (at least six questions per participant) ranging across various cultural and educational subjects. Interview participants were each asked four similar questions regarding humor and the application of humor in the American culture. Because of the diverse nature of interview participants, as well as sectors of society they come from and work in, subsequent interview questions were tailored to be industry- and experience-specific. A list of questions for each participant can be found in Appendix E.

**Interview Subjects**

Each interview participant holds a distinguished and influential position in our society. Additionally, each uses humor in a specific fashion to enhance, emphasize, or help explain information.

Erik Rydholm is one of the three founding members of the Motley Fool—a business and economy site that uses humor and entertainment to help illuminate financial theories and concepts. Following his departure from the Motley Fool, Rydholm moved to the sports network, ESPN. At ESPN, Rydholm created the popular *Pardon the Interruption* program, featuring sports columnists Michael Wilbon and Tony Kornheiser, who spend a half an hour each day arguing and debating sporting headlines and educating viewers with a tremendous amount of comedy. Currently, Rydholm acts as Executive Producer of *Pardon the Interruption* and *Around the Horn*, a program using four sports reporters from around the country to dissect the day’s sports headlines.
Rosemarie Truglio, Ph.D. is another professional who deals with comedy daily in her effort to help educate the children of the world. Dr. Truglio is the Vice President of Education and Research at the Sesame Workshop, the organization responsible for educational programming such as *Sesame Street* and *The Electric Company*. The programs developed by Sesame Workshop are not only for domestic audiences; variations of their programs are viewed all over the world. Dr. Truglio’s experience and insights help illuminate the role of humor and entertainment on children’s programming as well as how each can be used to effectively convey educational information to young, generally pre-elementary school-aged children.

Sarah Vowell is a well-known and widely read author, columnist, and contributor to National Public Radio’s *This American Life*. For more than a decade, Vowell has written essays and columns on the American experience, history, politics, and society. Using a unique brand of wit and humor, Sarah Vowell fluidly introduces readers to concepts and information relating to the American experience, which were previously unexplored. Her books, columns, and contributions have been great sources of humor and education to millions of Americans.

Father Paul McCarren is the Director of Medical Campus Ministry at Georgetown University. Father McCarren uses humor daily in his teachings and communications. Whether using humor to help teach medical students to deal with their patients or helping a congregation of listeners learn about and understand the teachings of the Bible, Father McCarren’s unique character and brand of humor has become an effective device for communicating religious messages.
Peter Rees was an Executive Producer and Creator of the Discovery program, *Mythbusters*. *Mythbusters* is a television show focused around the exploits of Adam Savage and Jaime Hyneman, and their team of experts as they use science and logic to explain different urban myths in society. During his tenure with *Mythbusters*, Rees acted as a writer, cameraman, and scientific adviser (river95, 2006). Rees’s creation has developed a devoted fan base as well as received acclaim from viewers and critics alike. The program has become such a hit with the American public that cable executives are afraid to compete with it using similar formats. Peter Rees, in addition to each of the aforementioned professionals interviewed, contributes to our understanding of how comedy is used in every day communications and how it is effectively used to convey information from one source to larger groups.

*Humor as a Model for Business*

Humor holds a valuable role in relaying relevant communications. Going back to Medieval courts, the role of the comedian was very influential and effective for relaying information no one else in the court could provide. “Now historically, an incredibly valuable role of humor, for instance,” starts Erik Rydholm “was the role of the fool in the king’s court, because the fool was able to make jokes at the king’s expense. In fact, he was the only one who was able to make jokes at the king’s expense without getting his head lopped off.” Additionally, on the subject, he said, “If you actually are an appreciator of Shakespeare, or in fact of any history, you would realize that the fool is the one who knew all, and could say all, and could tell the truth.” For Rydholm and the other
creators of the Motley Fool, this was influential in their creation and marketing of the site. Rydholm said:

The reason that the Motley Fool is the Motley Fool is directly taken from that idea of the fool being able to tell the truth to the king in the motley fool. And in that example, our readers are our royalty. And so we wanted to be able to be the fool—the only person in the king’s court or the only character in a Shakespeare play—who knew all, who was able to tell the truth. It became attractive, especially in a world, in the Motley Fool’s case—in a financial world in which all the firms were always trying to paint themselves as wise. ‘We are wise. We are above you. You hand your money to us. We know better than you what to do with your money.’ And so we decided to put ourselves out there as the fool—the ones who were the antithesis of that. The fool obviously contrasted with the wise.

The use and role of humor was essential in the development of the Motley Fool. Prior to the Fool’s creation, business reporting and outlets were very serious. Rydholm, having been taught finances from then college friend (and co-founder of the Motley Fool) David Gardner, believed there were ways to explain business and investing to individuals without the dependence on those dry and intimidating sources. Rydholm himself had been taught investing and financial information from Gardner through a couple half hour sessions utilizing inventive methods. “He taught me how to invest using humor, using analogies to things like baseball, that made this information stick for the first time in my life.” Humor was key to Rydholm’s ability to learn from the fundamentals of the
economy and investing. As he would find out, humor would also be a helpful instrument for teaching individuals all over the world about economies and investing. He continued:

The essence of this was that if humor helped me understand it, imagine how many people out there, like me there must be. David felt the same way. Tom [Gardner] felt the same way. And so we started the Motley Fool together figuring that there would be a larger market if we were to take a slightly more irreverent approach with information that was traditionally incredibly serious and intimidating. And by undercutting ourselves and putting in some humor that folks would find it much more approachable—these are two key words—approachable and accessible.

The concept of information that was approachable and accessible was the foundation of the Motley Fool. These were the key attributes to the success of the Motley Fool.

Rydholm and the Gardners felt that they could cultivate a business based on presenting information in such a manner that appealed to individuals intimidated or overlooked by the main sources of business and investment news at the time. However, Rydholm expresses that humor was not the intention of the Motley Fool. “Humor was never the point of what we were doing. It was what made the information easier to digest. It’s what made us seem human, as people who were writing it.”

The Motley Fool is one of a number of businesses, both in traditional media like television and radio, as well as in new media like the Internet, to use humor in order to present information. Using comedy is not just an effective tool for business and economic advice. Companies across a broad range of industries have been using humor
in some fashion to help educate individuals. One company where this concept has been extremely well utilized is the Sesame Workshop, the creative group behind successful children’s programming including *Ghost Writer*, *The Electric Company*, and *Sesame Street*.

Entertainment is a main component of *Sesame Street*. While humor is not the sole component in the entertainment value of *Sesame Street*, it is a valuable and influential one. Dr. Rosemarie Truglio attributes the success, popularity, and longevity of the program its balance of entertainment and educational messages. Part of the success in reaching children has been the ability of *Sesame Street* to draw and keep kids attention long enough to produce an educational message that resonates. On the subject, Dr. Truglio said, “Children really love a good narrative. Children really love a narrative that holds their attention, there are stakes involved. They want to be there to find out how the story is going to get resolved.”

The starting point for humor on *Sesame Street* comes from its writers. While researchers and academics develop the curriculum, the writing comes from individuals with backgrounds specifically in comedy. Discussing the writers, Dr. Truglio said:

Our writers are trained as comedy writers. They love to write comedy. These writers also value the importance of education and making sure that they are teaching some hardcore academic, social, emotional lessons, as well as lessons about the physical body, keeping your body healthy. But they put humor first, but not at the expense of getting the lesson wrong. It gets back to that fine balance.
The component of comedy is essential to the effectiveness and strength of Sesame Street, not only as a vehicle for education, but to help build and maintain its reputation.

When Peter Rees created Mythbusters, the humor component was not part of the development process. For Rees and his associates, much like Dr. Truglio and Erik Rydholm, comedy took a back seat to informing the public. For Rees, the goal was to present science in a manner that was creative and informative. On the topic, Rees said:

Back when we started I tried to make sure that every story was supported by a scientific paper from a recognized science journal. The whole point of the show was that we never wanted to mention the word science…we just wanted to present the scientific process as a way to solve just about anything. I was also motivated by the desire to make real science and real mysteries as perplexing and fascinating as all the paranormal and conspiracy garbage that is a dominant feature of American cable television.

Rees’s target was the development of the message, not the medium. However, as the show progressed, and the natural humor of the program’s hosts became apparent and more prevalent, humor—both in its personalities and their actions—became effective methods to convey the scientific and educational message. In fact, Rees says that Mythbusters became so effective and popular, cable television executives are afraid to try and develop similar shows to compete with the program.

*Humor as a Way to Present Information*

Discussing the success of Pardon the Interruption, Erik Rydholm credits its popularity to the personalities hosting the program. For any service to customers, in this
instance, Rydholm says that it must be different, special, and better than any other services available. This is definitely the case for *Pardon the Interruption*, according to Rydholm. The personalities and intrinsic humor are what makes the program unique.

“Tony [Kornheiser] and Mike [Wilbon] not only have the banter back and forth, but they do it in a funny way. The thing that’s most remarkable about them, to me, is they were the first two people I had ever met, who could argue all day long and never take it personally…That sort of love and that passion comes through as does their natural humor.” As I explored, it seems that such an approach and personalities presenting the information makes the material accessible to the audience. The audience is able to laugh alongside both men while being able to understand the arguments and banter and to what they are relating. A large portion of the effectiveness of comedy used to relay information develops from the characteristics and personalities of the individuals who present the information.

The personalities of Michael Wilbon and Tony Kornheiser are not only valuable for presenting news and information about sports, but their position and influence in society. With both individuals, no topic is off limits. Much of the humor, according to Rydholm, develops from the partnership and differences between the two. Rydholm says:

[Michael Wilbon and Tony Kornheiser] cover a range of demographics, so they can have a legitimate conversation about just about anything. And a great thing about the show—what I love most about the show—is when we take a small issue in sports, which is a microcosm of a larger issue in society. And these guys,
another wonderful thing about them, is they not only understand sports, they understand sports’ place in the world. They understand the world outside of sports. They have a perspective, not just on each story within this sort of the toy department, they understand the toy department’s place within [a proverbial] general store…They’re able to, both through their life experiences who they are and their perspectives…really no issue is off topic for us or is off limits to us. Because we can speak to issues like race in sports, we can speak to issues like ageism, we can speak about being bald or having hair.

Rydholm’s discussion of the source of humor demonstrates the importance of the individuals creating it, not in solely the material presented. The personalities of both hosts of Pardon the Interruption and the authenticity they bring with them help convey sports information beyond the scope of the athletic arena.

Part of the success of Pardon the Interruption can be drawn from Rydholm’s own past and how he remembered the comedy on local sports programming from his childhood. Growing up in Chicago, Rydholm grew up watching a sports program featuring city reporters sitting around a smoke-filled room discussing the day’s sports events. This program, its set up, and content has remained with Erik Rydholm throughout the years. Rydholm remembers the conversations and personalities of the participants, watching them go from story to story, discussions wandering between banter and laughter, all the while having fun throughout the process. Not only did the memory of the program stick with Rydholm throughout the years, but it became influential in the development of Pardon the Interruption. The humor and camaraderie conveyed by the
program’s participants provided comedic elements retained by Rydholm years after watching the program.

While not really considering herself a historian or humorist but more of a writer, Sarah Vowell, much like Michael Wilbon and Tony Kornheiser, effectively uses her own unique brand of humor and wit to inform her readers of historical facts and events. However, for her, humor is not just trying to make a fact funny. On the topic, she said:

Humor is a relatively socially acceptable way to tell the truth. Often, it is a kind of artful constraint. Here’s an example. When the Supreme Court decided the outcome of the 2000 presidential election in a 5-4 decision, I was appalled—just outraged and angry and seething. Which was a very common emotional response at the time. Later, when I was writing about the inauguration of my new sham president, it would not have been particularly interesting to state point-blank, ‘I sure am upset at this turn of events!’ The most pointed, but also the most concise way I hinted at my anger was through a joke.

Furthermore, she says that her intention is not to tell a joke. While often times the information and her stories come off with humorous twists, that is not her goal. She said,

“In telling any story I try and be true to that story and tell it in the least generic, most coherent way possible. For me, trying not to be generic sometimes leads to a wisecrack. But I care more about just being interesting—though that is a boring way to put it—than being funny.”

I asked Sarah Vowell about the use of comedy to educate people. Specifically referencing television programs, such as *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* and *The
Colbert Report, I asked her opinion on the use of humor to communicate information.

This was her response:

One reason those shows appeal to people—of any age—isn't just that they're funny, it's that they're truthful. Remember when the Daily Show described a radio show under the Taliban as "No Things Considered"? That's funny, but it's also shorthand for a whole point of view about life under a totalitarian regime. Or look at the presidential nominating conventions. The most recent one was pretty interesting but before that, the last few have been utterly dull foregone conclusions that offered nothing more than party rhetoric, followed by balloons. But the major networks' news departments have to make an argument for their networks spending all that money to send correspondents there, as well as an argument for even airing the conventions in prime time--so they talk about how important the conventions are. But Stewart and Colbert only have to show up and tell the stupid, hilarious truth—that nothing is happening and no one is saying anything. Again, the audience thinks it's responding to the humor but really, over and over again, it is responding to artfully worded facts.

Like the creation of Pardon the Interruption, humor was never supposed to be a major component of Mythbusters when Peter Rees was developing the program. Humor developed naturally with the personalities, as they engaged with the science and information. When asked whether there was a motivation in the creation of the show to infuse humor into the commentary, Rees said:
This actually wasn’t a motivating face when I started the show. We were just having such a great time and when you are fascinated and engaged with your own topic viewers can tell the difference. I was more interested in irreverence \(\text{sic}\) and the need to get a performance out of [hosts] Jamie [Hyneman] and Adam [Savage] who had never done any television work previously…The secret was to construct a series of linking situations in which they had no alternative to respond: asking for pee and poo samples, making them decide who was going to be sucked into, making them decide who was going to be sucked into an airline toilet seat etc. If you notice it is all very physical comedy. That changed a little as Adam came into his own in confidence with the camera, but I like to think I created the right environment in which this could happen.

Similar to Erik Rydholm’s discussion of *Pardon the Interruption*, Rees credits the personalities and their intrinsic humor they convey to engage and inform their viewers. This method too is effective in conveying information. Rees mentioned that when running the program, they would get feedback from audience and researchers regarding their scientific findings.

*Balancing Humor and Information*

Erik Rydholm stressed that the purpose of *Pardon the Interruption* is not to be a comedy program. He said, “The comedy is something to make either the medicine go down easier or to make the show easier to watch.” He went on to say, “[Comedy] is usually to punctuate points. To lift people up. To take people down a level. What have you. It’s sort of always a leveler.” In this sense, Rydholm does not place the importance
of humor as a focal point for information, but as a necessary addition to the presentation. Humor enables people to watch and enjoy themselves, while in the process, digesting relevant information.

During the interview, Erik Rydholm stated, “Providing a half hour of escape and fun for folks, I don’t think is to be dismissed or underrated. I’m not going to sit up there and say I’m providing any great value to society. However, for the people who watch our show and enjoy it if I can lighten their day, I think on a personal level for them, I think they think that that’s great value.” This directly relates to the theory of uses and gratifications. *Pardon the Interruption* has a large and supportive audience. Individuals tune into the program for its entertainment value, as well as for a momentary escape. Applying the theory of uses and gratifications, this time provided by these programs helped people de-stress and lighten their days, provided viewers with a heightened mood and spirit. In the process, the person is more receptive to information. In turn, viewers are driven to the humorous experience, developing into a loyal audience. In this case, the service provided by Rydholm effectively enables viewers to obtain and understand sporting news efficiently.

The balance between the entertainment value and the educational subjects has always been a delicate process on *Sesame Street*, as well. Often, the balance comes under heated conflict from both proponents. The writers who develop the comedy and the educators who develop the curriculum for the program often clash on ideas and how concepts are presented. On the subject, Dr. Truglio said:
The goal here on *Sesame Street* is you’re using humor as a vehicle to teach a lesson. The end goal is that you want to make sure there’s an educational impact. So humor is your vehicle…You’re taking humor and using it as vehicle to reach children and make a difference in their lives and to educate children. The course for which you are delivering that message can be a humorous one.

However, there are conflicts that arise in how that vehicle is driven. Some form of a compromise between the educational message and the entertaining message is always needed. “At the end of the day, even though there is this back and forth, back and forth, you need to make sure that the message is clear. While we can duke it out sometimes, it’s a research question. We have to bring it to the kids to make sure that we got it right.”

One of the most, if not the most successful children’s programming ever, *Sesame Street*, sees the value of humor as an important facet to develop its curriculum as well as drawing children’s attention. Humor has a profound impact on how material is developed and taught on the program. Not only does it act as an agent for producing the educational content, but it focuses children’s attention and keeps them tuned in to receive the message. On this point, Dr. Truglio said:

If [the content is] not appealing, children are not going to watch it. If you don’t get them to watch it, you could have the best educational content, but it’s going to go on deaf ears. They aren’t there to benefit from the content…We know our show is educational, but if we don’t design it in a way that is appealing to young children and they don’t watch it, all the work that we’re doing here is useless unfortunately.
Humor additionally serves another purpose on the program: its content is multi-layered, appealing to both children and adults. This is an important part to the effectiveness of the program and relaying educational information. On the subject, Dr. Truglio said:

Our humor is a sophisticated humor too. The reason for that is, in our show in particular, it is written on two levels. We want to make sure that the show is hilarious to children, but we also trying to bring in the adult. Some of the adult humor goes over the head of children but is designed to keep the adult in the room. We know that when adults co-view with their child, they learn more from the show. The educational impact is greater than if they view alone.

This provides another example of how the theory of uses and gratifications can be applied to educational learning. The humor element helps draw children to the program and maintains their attention while driving home an educational message. Parents use the program to help develop their children’s education, while being able to keep themselves entertained at the same time as their kids. Additionally, as parents are drawn into the program to watch with their children, the educational impact on the children is enhanced.

*Humor and Attention*

Key to developing those stories and narratives is the element of comedy. When asked how humor fits into that narrative element, Dr. Rosemarie Truglio responded by saying that humor is an integral part of that process. “Children love the element of silliness. That they know more than the character.” Giving the example of a scatter-brained character on the program named Mr. Noodle, Dr. Truglio said, “Children find it hilarious to see an adult know less than they know. You get silliness as a result of an
adult acting not like your typical adult.” Additionally, the old-fashioned brands of humor still have a profound impact on children. “Children love slapstick…that old slipping on a banana peel still works.” As mentioned by Erik Rydholm, humor in this sense acts as a way to help “the medicine go down easier.” In this case, it provides material to keep children entertained and occupied so they can receive the educational content. Furthermore, Dr. Truglio elaborates on how the dialogue of the characters influences the humor. The character of Grover—a fun loving if not sometimes absent-minded muppet—Dr. Truglio says, “…is a key example. He comes out with responses that even a child knows are a little out there and so they find him hilarious.”

_Humor Is Not Always A Productive Way to Communicate Information_

Humor has not always been the right route to provide educational information on Sesame Street. In fact, there have been instances where humor has actually been too effective providing the wrong message to children. Following the tragic events of September 11, 2001, Sesame Street developed four programs to help children deal with the events and its repercussions. One episode in particular dealt with bullying. However, before it had a chance to be aired, the episode was withdrawn from the broadcast schedule. Dr. Truglio tells the story of how humor actually got in the way of developing and reinforcing the overall message:

Telemosenter’s cousin, Izzy, comes over for a play date. Telly can’t wait to show his cousin his triangle collection. Cousin, being a bully, takes the whole triangle collection from Telly. Telly was rather surprised by this. ‘I thought we’d play with this together. This is my triangle collection.’ [Izzy] says, ‘No this is my
triangle collection now.’ So he tries different strategies to get the triangle collection back from Izzy. And nothing is really working, so he’s getting very frustrated.

Gordon happens to walk by at this point, he’s in a state. He says, ‘Telly, we’ve got to figure this out.’ [Telly says], ‘No, I’m going to hit him.’ So he wants to hit Izzy to get his triangle collection back. And so Gordon says, ‘Alright wait a minute, think about this.’ The goal here was trying to get forethought in. So if you got the impulse to hit, just pause and think about what the consequences are to that behavior.

This is where humor comes in. Telly, you know him, he’s very anxious and excitable. So when asked the question, what will happen when you hit him? [Telly says], ‘You’re right. I’m gonna hit him and he’s probably going to hit me back. I’ll have to hit him back.’ And now we have a thought bubble. ‘And we’re both going to end up in the hospital.’ And their broken arms. One’s in traction. It’s humorous, it’s hilarious.

As a result of highlighting the consequences in a humorous way, when we did a pre, post test of the strategies that children learned from these episodes, because we do our research in a daycare center, pre, before showing them anything, putting them in a hypothetical situation and asking them, ‘if someone took your toy what would you do?’ Virtually no child talked about hitting the bully. Post, everyone started talked about [hitting the bully]—significant increase—which then lasted when we went back a week later, still was significantly higher than the
pre. So, here’s an example where you’re highlighting the not so positive, while using humor.

No one anticipated that highlighting forethought in a comical way would have such a damaging outcome. While this illustrates one of the negative impacts of humor, it also highlights how effective it can be. The children pre-viewing had no intention to fight back, but post-viewing of the episode, that was their inclination. The humor was effective in grabbing the children’s attention and keeping it. The children received, processed, and retained that entertaining content. However, the message became lost as a result of the humor. The comedy was extremely effective in its purpose of attracting children and helping them to retain information, however in this instance, the humor was detrimental to the overall message *Sesame Street* was trying to produce. As Dr. Truglio said, regarding the danger of using humor, “You want to use it strategically, so that it’s highlighting that take-home message, and not distracting from that take-home message.”

This story also emphasizes the social learning theory in communications. Social learning theory is focused around the notion that people learn by viewing others. In the story of Telly Monster, children saw Telly Monster’s reactions to having his triangle collection taken from him. What proceeded was Telly’s thought to use physical force in order to get his property back. Because of the humorous portrayal of the actions and consequences, children were negatively affected by the presentation. Under the social learning theory, because the consequences were presented in a humorous context and there were no repercussions from adults, children learned that it was ok to fight back, even though they might get hurt. Social learning theory helps explain that because of the
humorous portrayal of the consequences, children were more apt to pay attention and learn the information about fighting back because of the perceived lack of consequences from an adult for fighting back. While the message they learned was the wrong message, the social learning theory helps us understand why the children responded in the manner they did after viewing that particular episode of *Sesame Street*.

**Humor in the Classroom**

Humor can find a greater role in the classroom experience. “Humor is revealing…it simplifies,” as Dr. Truglio said. When asked of the role of comedy and humor in the educational setting, and whether that role should be expanded, Dr. Truglio said, “It’s a philosophy. Some people feel that you want that balance in order to reach and maintain children and that if schools were a little bit more fun, humorous places, maybe you’d have children learning more and sticking around longer. Laughter is a good thing.” Not every opinion on the subject is the same, however.

Prior to becoming a successful author, Sarah Vowell taught classes at Chicago’s School of Art Institute. Her opinions on humor in the classroom environment are slightly contradictory of the opinion shared by some educators and myself. When prompted whether humor could find a greater role in the classroom experience, Vowell’s response was:

When I was a teacher in art history graduate school, I was a more wise-cracking teacher. But I doubt I was the best teacher of freshman art history. I might have been the most entertaining but I'm not sure my students learned more than some of my more dedicated colleagues at the time.
While most academic writing thus far has shown some support for the use of humor in the classroom, Vowell’s experience importantly shows the opposite side of the argument, demonstrating that not all opinions on the subject are uniform. In this instance, Vowell believes that humor in the classroom acted as a distraction to the information. The educational messages were being lost in between the jokes. There are those who believe that humor has a place in culture, but not necessarily in the educational setting.

**Humor in Religion**

Religion is an immense part of the current American culture. Since the founding of the country, religion has played a prominent role in American politics, sports, business, and identity. Currently, 85% of Americans identify themselves as being part of at least one religion (Boorstein, 2009). There are some, like Father Paul McCarren, who use humor to help develop religious teachings and promote religion to followers. As Father McCarren says of humor’s role in religion, “The permission [humor] gives us, the encouragement it gives us to laugh at ourselves,” thus allowing us to see things from another point-of-view. This statement is applicable to humor’s impact on many areas of society. Humor, according to Father McCarren, can also be used to help understand and teach lessons from the Bible. He said, “If there’s any kind of theory or deliberation behind [the use of humor in religious studies], it’s a lot easier to get that insight if it comes through humor. There’s something funny that we associate with, that we laugh at, and we go, ‘That’s like me.’” Furthermore, Father McCarren says that humor acts as a mechanism to help drop mental and emotional barriers and allow people to have an “ah ha!” moment. “I think it is a good learning or teaching technique,” he states.
Humor can also be used to promote religious teachings. When asked about this, Father McCarren replied, “[Humor] puts things in perspective…Whatever view you have, it’s not complete. Laughter, it seems to me, is usually provoked when you see things differently…it’s salutary.” To emphasize this point, Father McCarren discusses how humor is used in the Bible, to help both Jesus and his followers understand different concepts. In the Gospels, as Father McCarren explains, there are plenty of scenes and depictions using humor to tell or promote a message. Furthermore, the Disciples tended to be more humorous and foolish to help teach and tell stories from the Bible. Father McCarren recites the passage of Jesus’ visit to Tyre, a site on the Mediterranean coast where he was going to meet some Jews that he’d met from the area before, a story he personally finds funny. As he tells, when word gets around of Jesus’ visit, a non-Jewish woman comes around and asks Jesus to look at her sick daughter. To this request, Father McCarren translates Jesus’ response, “You can’t feed the dogs, the puppies, before you feed the children.” In other words, Jesus was saying that his primary concern was to help the Children of Israel. The woman responded, “that even the puppies take the scraps from the children that are dropped on the floor.” Jesus, reflecting about the comment, decides to help the woman and her daughter.

In this instance, humor is used, as Fr. McCarren continues, to “puncture assumptions of what has happened.” Jesus is reminded of all humanity’s needs through an unlikely source and context. As Father McCarren said, “[Humor] takes the veil away from certain assumptions. Humor is then used to illustrate a point made in the Gospels.”
He maintains that humor, “is a good teaching device in general.” To him, humor permits people to think differently about information and in a different context.

_Humor in Practice_

Father McCarren, from accounts of churchgoers, uses humor routinely in his sermons and his teachings at Georgetown University. This is not a conscious decision for him though; he says its use is instinctively and by default. However, he notes that his portrayals of Jesus’ teachings, as well as his own, with humor come with mixed results. Churchgoers have approached him in the past with two distinct points of view and feedback. One particular form of feedback is positive. After one particular service he conducted on Good Friday, he said he received strong feedback against his conduct during the service. “Some people said right away, ‘That was different, but I liked it.’ I found from other people, much later [who said], ‘I was so shocked and offended.’” Most people tend to come around, however, to see his point of view and understand his reason for presenting information in the manner he does.

The other form of feedback demonstrates that Father McCarren’s approach to his work effectively communicates to his congregation and is relayed through an experience shared on his work with a church in Raleigh, North Carolina. Following one of his services, Father McCarren recounted the story of an Italian woman who approached him. He said that woman ran up to him and exclaimed, “I have never laughed in church before!” Father McCarren was taken back by the comments, and apologized, not knowing if the woman was angry or happy. It turned out to be the latter, as the woman was so moved by the service and the sermon that she felt compelled to approach Father
McCarren afterwards. This emphasizes the impact of humor on religious teachings.

Humor can effectively be used to develop a relationship with congregants who, previous to humor’s use, might be uninterested or unfamiliar. Humor acts as a form of opened arms sometimes, allowing people to feel welcomed or invited into a new concept or information.

**Humor and its Effectiveness**

Sarah Vowell does not attribute her success at relaying information to the humorous tone and comments that may develop out of her writing. To her, the effectiveness at communicating information comes from her background and her purpose in writing. She does not claim to be an historian, nor does she fashion herself to be a humorist (although many of her fans would contradict this claim). Describing her effectiveness relaying information and success as an author, she said:

I suppose that ever since I started writing about American history and politics a little over a decade ago--before that I was strictly an arts journalist--readers or radio listeners comment that I ‘make history entertaining.’ I’m guessing that’s partly because my writing has jokes in it but I think there are other factors that are invisible to a reader but more important than the occasional light-hearted gag in keeping a reader engaged. Namely, I’m a pretty ruthless editor of my writing, unlike other historical writers. That is partly because I think of myself as a writer, not a historian. If a fact is boring and I can't think of a way to juice it up, I cut it… This editing, I believe, is much more helpful than humor in keeping an audience intrigued. Jokes are just more in evidence.
Sarah Vowell discusses how humor can be an effective way to convey information. This, to her, is especially true when information is presented that can seem sensitive to people who may not be prepared when information is shocking:

I think I was in my twenties before I learned Thomas Jefferson took one of his slaves as a mistress. The Thomas Jefferson I learned about--patron saint of life, liberty and happiness--was such a snooze. Tell students that the man who came up with one of the most beautiful ideals in the history of the world was also raping his slave and then you've got one barn-burner of a discussion. All of which to say, a goodly portion of my humor is just me telling a bald-faced fact.

**Conclusion**

Each interview and discussion was very informative and shared great experiences and knowledge on the topic of using humor to effectively communicate information. The answers provided by the interviewed subjects were interesting and helped demonstrate that humor can be an effective tool to communicate information. Humor can be an effective communication mechanism across many industries. In education, news and information presentation, business practices, and religious sectors, humor can be a very effective means to promote information or new ideas. An important piece of information to take from this discussion is that not all opinions on humor and its use in society are uniform. While it can be useful to present information from one source to another, the extent of its use and means in which it is used are essential to its effectiveness.
The process of finding the effective balance between effectively presenting humor and information is a delicate one. When I asked Peter Rees of his use of humor in any television projects he has coming up, he responded:

Hmmm I would love to capture the same mood in a show again, but I am constantly being told that the only way this will happen is when Jupiter aligns with Saturn in the constellation of Sagittarius. Personally I think television making is a science…most execs don’t agree.

Peter Rees and all the interviewed subjects have been effective in balancing humor and information presentation in their work. Each has made a significant contribution to public education. Their thoughts and experiences greatly enhance the discussion into how humor and comedy are effective methods for presenting information.
Chapter 7: The Conclusion

Comedy can be used in medicine to promote healthy living by alleviating stresses, cushioning bad news, and engaging the healing process. Comedy too can be used in spirituality; a number of the world’s religions promote the idea that the world that we know began with laughter. Comedy is used as creative outlets as individuals use their skills and talents to entertain millions. Comedy can also be an effective form of expression and communication; it can be used to educate individuals on a wide array of subjects, appealing to people across all ages, races, and religions.

It is this last notion, that humor is an effective communication tool, which has been the focus of this research. Throughout the course of this study, I have presented academic research, case studies, new research, and interviews that help demonstrate the ways in which humor is viewed in our culture as well as the means through which comedy is consumed by the public. Initial exploration into this area provided no substantial or definitive research pertaining to why humor was an effective form of communications. In fact, there lacked sufficient academic research on this topic to define comedy, its components, or its nature. However, this study does provide valuable insights while adding to our overall understanding of this universal emotional response and its utility in information distribution. Comedy is an effective medium for conveying information from one source to another. By analyzing data and scholarly works, interviewing those in entertainment and professional industries who regularly use humor
as a focus of their work, conducting educational research in the classroom setting, and providing original research exploring the public’s perceptions on the utility of humor, I have presented research findings demonstrating how the public uses humor to relay information.

This research focused around three specific areas to help increase our understanding of the nature and value of humor and comedy in information distribution and reception: news and reporting, education, survey research and public opinion. Each research area acts a microcosm for humor’s consumption to members of the larger public. The focus on these areas is vital to how news and information is distributed to the public on a daily basis. Furthermore, I used original survey research, including classroom study and interviews to help enhance our understanding as to why comedy is such an effective device to transmit relevant information.

During this exploration of how comedy is used in news reporting, specifically political reporting, I researched public opinion about humorous depictions of news events and politicians. In recent new cycles, especially in the 2008 presidential election cycle, many individuals relied on comedy programs as primary sources to provide them with information about the candidates and campaigns. People tuned in to these programs at increased rates during the presidential election, garnering comedy programs (specifically The Daily Show with Jon Stewart and The Colbert Report) the highest ratings they have experienced in their lifespan. The presentation of information to, especially on The Daily Show with Jon Stewart, was demonstrated to be relevant and an appropriate vehicle to present news and information. Programs like The Daily Show and The Colbert Report
were shown to be credible sources of news, as they presented substantive information on levels similar to traditional news broadcasts. Additionally, these programs also were shown to effectively teach viewers information. Regular viewers of these humorous programs were shown to be more politically aware than regular viewers of other news-based programs, especially regular viewers of traditional broadcast news programs (Pew, *Who Knows News?*, 2008).

Several components of the education sector were analyzed, including those that involve children, in both home and school settings, and the promotion of social and responsible messages. Through academic research, humor was shown to be an effective way of drawing children’s attention. This is a vital component to the effectiveness of humor, as without being able to keep children’s attention, well-known education programs such as *Sesame Street*, the *Electric Company*, and *Fat Albert and the Cosby Kids* would not be as effective to engaging children in the learning process. The entertainment component of these and other programs were demonstrated to retain children’s attention long enough to develop the educational message and help them learn the relevant and socially relevant messages.

Additionally, as part of this exploration, in-class research was conducted with two classes of kindergarten students. The results from this study indicated that not only did humorous presentations of information help kids learn and get through their lessons more quickly, but it facilitated their capacities to engage in the learning process. On each of the requirements set out by the county in which the groups were tested, those children
who had humorous presentations of the lesson surpassed expectations compared with those who had the serious presentations class.

A portion of my research was devoted to a survey produced to gain a better understanding of how and why humor is an effective tool to dispense information. Over the span of 45 days, 307 participants addressed this issue with their responses to this online survey. Key findings showed that when presented with two forms of information, comical and serious, those who viewed comical information showed a better retention and recall of the information than those who were exposed to the serious presentations of information. Taking an in-depth look at the survey results, the data also supported the hypothesis that those individuals who had higher user perceptions of the value of humorous content would retain and recall information in an easier fashion. In each subject area tested, when users rated the presentation of comical information as high, they were projected to retain information and recall it later on with more frequency than those who rated serious presentations of information highly. In many cases, even if the user’s perceptions of the comical information was not high (i.e., medium or low), the ability to predict whether they would pick the correct answer based merely on that fact that they received information from comical content gave them a better chance of memory retention and recall. In this case, the data support the idea that comical information is a more effective presentation of information than serious and traditional presentations of information.

Finally, as a method to better develop the concept that using humor is an effective method to convey information, interviews were conducted with individuals who use
humor in their current and previous jobs. Ranging in industries from educational television programming (*Sesame Street* and *Mythbusters*), news and current events (*Pardon the Interruption* and *The American Life*), and religion, the insights and experiences each interviewee presented helped establish applications for humor and its effectiveness past the academic arenas.

**Communication Theories**

Four communications theories were used to frame this study and to determine how humor is an effective way to communicate information. While none of the theories—uses and gratifications, planned behavior, social learning, and elaboration likelihood model—can be used to explain humor as a whole, many components and ideas presented by each can be used to explain why humor is effective. These communications theories, in conjunction with scholarly and independent research, help bolster our understanding of the nature and utility of humor.

Drawing from the theory of uses and gratifications, individuals seek humor as an escape from their daily lives as well as for entertainment values, and in some cases, for learning about news and current events. This can help explain why individuals seek out programs like *The Daily Show*, *The Colbert Report*, and *Saturday Night Live*. Each of these programs is oriented as a comedy first program. However, while focused around comedy, these programs also provide culturally relevant information. Whether in the form of domestic or political news or promoting public opinion, each of these programs have substantial information that, in some cases, can be equally reliable in reporting as major news networks. Because individuals seek out these programs for their own
satisfaction, they will be more attuned to the program and its content. This renders them more capable of receiving and learning about new information because they approached the programs willingly with a desire to either laugh or learn.

Social learning theory is also useful for developing our understanding for how humor can help an individual learn. This is especially true with children. Children can learn interpersonal and social skills, as well as be exposed to “right and wrong” behaviors many times through humor. Because of the entertainment component to comedy, particularly due to its ability to maintain a child’s attention, children have a greater capacity to view comedic actions and determine if the consequences are fortuitous to them, thereby learning in the process.

The theory of social learning is not particular to children. Additionally, as the theory of social learning explores, part of the manner in which individuals learn is through paying close attention to information. If individuals seek out humorous programming with the expectation of laughing or even learning, as Pew Research Center’s survey research has demonstrated, they pay closer attention with the expectation of being amused or educated. With greater attention to the content of the programming, they are exposed to more information and are capable of retaining it.

The theory of planned behavior was also important to the development of humor as an effective communications tool. During the 2008 election cycle, humorous and comic programming covering the campaigns and events, such as Saturday Night Live, The Daily Show with Jon Stewart, and The Colbert Report, grew in ratings and presence in the political sphere. Much of this has to do with videos and stories present in
newspapers, television reports, and in interpersonal dialogues reporting how the information was being presented on these programs and the audience reactions. The more publicity they received, the greater the draw for these programs. Social norms helped influence the general public attitudes towards these programs. In this case, we see the presence of the theory of planned behavior. With greater media attention being paid to humorous programs, the general public was exposed to greater cultural hype and tuned into these programs with the expectation of being entertained while presented with information.

The Elaboration-Likelihood Model (ELM) is another theory that was presented and appears to have a substantial influence on how humorous portrayals of information can help an individual retain and recall information easier. Specifically, as the Model describes, if a person likes the arguments made by the actors, they are more apt to retain the information. When a person is motivated to seek out humorous and comical content, there are more likely to pay closer attention to that information. As a result, there is a central processing of that information. Information received through the humorous content is easier to retrieve.

*Why Comedy Helps People Retain and Recall Information*

I have established how humor has been effective as well as produced theories as to why it is effective. But what is it, in particular, about the joke itself that makes humor and comedy such an effective method to present information and have it processed by the recipient? Through the research, it appears that there are three main components that
facilitate this ability to comprehend and remember information so effectively: the
cognitive processing of the joke, the attention component, and the surprise factor.

The power of the joke seems to be in the cognitive processing of the information. When someone tells a joke, it is funny because we understand it. Whether a knock-knock joke or an intricate piece of satire, the utility of the joke rests on the understanding that both the speaker and the recipient(s) comprehend the concepts around it. Otherwise it’s not funny and the shared experience and knowledge between the two parties is lost.

When humorous information is presented, it takes an extra cognitive processing step to understand the information. With comedy that presents information, not only are people exposed to the joke and relevant information, but the information takes an extra comprehension step in processing. The extra processing helps retain the information as well as make it easier for recall at a later point in time.

A major component to entertainment, especially comedy, is its ability to motivate people and keep them attentive long enough to retain information. In many cases, individuals, for a wide range of reasons, specifically seek comedic content out. Because they are actively paying more attention to the content, as a result of the added attention to finding it, the extra focus leaves them more receptive and accepting of the bonus component of relevant information and news.

Finally, the “surprise factor” enables the understanding as to why the joke is such an effective way to convey information. Much like the parent who tricks their children into taking medicine by presenting it to them hidden in peanut butter or honey, part of the effectiveness of humor is that the recipient does not see it coming. When people use
humor for a laugh or to escape their daily lives and problems, they are not intending to actively receive information. However, when information is included in the dialogue, the added focus on the humor helps them receive the information more clearly, more efficiently, and more effectively.

**Implications of this Research**

The research conducted for this study is by no means a definitive analysis of humor and its effect on individuals. When researching this topic, finding information on humor’s effect on learning was few and far between. There is a great gap in our collective knowledge on how humor works and what it can be effectively used for. The information processed in this study, as well as its groundwork and foundations, help establish a greater framework for humor and our social understanding of its nature and value.

A great wealth of information on the nature of comedy and humor is yet to be found. Humor has been an active part of human existence for, well human existence. We are only just beginning to tap into fundamental understandings for how the individual processes and utilizes humor. My intention is to help bring different theories, concepts, and understandings into the value of humor to the forefront of academic research. By gaining better insight into the natures of humor and comedy, we continue to move towards a better understanding of how the types of communications can be used to help educate the public more effectively.
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Works Consulted


Appendix A: Lesson Plan

Lesson Plan
April 15, 2009

“Lost in the Museum”

Essential Questions:
• How to learn what items are in the museum?
• How to learn where items are in a museum?
• How does a shared learning experience help me understand a topic better?

Mastery Objective
• Working within the “Extensions in Literacy and Math” (E.L.M.) students will be able to gain better understandings of the layout of a museum, what exhibits are in it, and how to find the items.
• Students will gain better comprehension of reading, listening, logics, and collaborative working skills

Indicators:
• 2.1: The child will listen with increasing attention for different purposes, such as to learn what happened in a story, to receive instructions, and to converse with an adult or peer.
• 2.12: The child will link new learning experiences and vocabulary to what is already known about a topic
• 2.23: The child will recognize some words by sight
• 2.25: The child will connect the sounds in a word with their letter forms
• 2.27: The child will recognize and begin to use print in functional ways
• 2.31: The child will connect information and events in books, songs, and poems to real life experiences

Materials
• Museum items
• Paper gingerbread man

Introduction to Mini Lesson

Gather students to the carpet. Begin the story of the Gingerbread Man lost in the museum. Explain how it is up to the students to help find the Gingerbread Man and get him back to his class.

Guided Lesson
As the story goes…

The Gingerbread Man, lost in the museum, has left clues around the museum to indicate where he is located. Students will begin with a first humorous clue that will lead them to different areas of the museum. This will happen over and over. At each location, the Gingerbread Man will leave another humorous clue to indicate his next whereabouts. Eventually, the children will have all the clues that will point them to the final location of the Gingerbread Man.

Checking For Understanding

To help students reflect, return to the essential questions:
- How can I understand logic and reasoning
- How well do I understand position words?
- How does a shared writing experience help me understand a topic?

Researcher’s Assessment (*Not part of the curriculum)

I will review the time and difficulty the class has understanding the clues and figuring out where the next item/clue is located. I will also be noting how well the children follow directions and understand positioning words and working in a collaborative environment. Finally, I will determine the benefit of such a teaching method to the students’ reading comprehension and listening skills.
Appendix B: Clues and Riddles

9:00-10:00 Comic Clues
10:00-11:00 Serious Clues

Locations/“Exhibits”
Library Center
Museum Artifacts
Block Center (Building)
Sculptors (Clay)
Pointillism
Science/Finger Paint
Computer Center

Back-story:

The Gingerbread man, Saskatchewan Gingerbreadenheimer (for the humor class) or Sam Gingerbreadman (for the serious class) was on a school trip with his class to the Natural History Museum. Somewhere along the line, Mango/Sam became separated from the class. Security guards at the museum have been searching for him, but can’t seem find him and need your help. Can you help? It looks as though Mango/Sam has been wandering around the museum for a while. The security guards at the museum have security camera footage and clues left to find him but can’t figure out where he’s going next…

First clue they have:

Clue 1:
Humor: “Someone spotted the Saskatchewan Gingerbreadenheimer looking at art that is made from the tool you use to get wax out of your ear.”
Serious: “Someone spotted Sam Gingerbreadman ‘where art is made from dots.'”

Location 1:
Pointillism Exhibit

Clue 2:
Humor: Security was called after the gingerbread man was seen knocking down the model of the museum. People complained because Saskatchewan had them dodging the blocks being thrown.
Serious: When people saw Sam knocking down a model of the museum, Security was called to find him.
Location 2:
Block Center

Clue 3:
Humor: Saskatchewan Gingerbreadenheimer was seen covering his ears while Reginald Van Hooby-dooby was trying to convince him that dinosaurs were extinct
Serious: Sam Gingerbreadman was spotted reading a book about the adventures of Edwina the Dinosaur.

Location 3:
Library Center

Clue 4:
Humor: Security cameras caught Saskatchewan Gingerbreadenheimer appearing a little green after getting a little crazy with some finger paints.
Serious: Security was walking through and found green paint all over the place. But they only found blue and yellow cans of paints.

Location: Mixing Colors/Finger Paint Area

Clue 5:
Humor: Security was hot on his crumb trail when they were astonished to find a broken gingerbread arm dangling at the side of a sculpture.
Serious: Camera picked up the Sam Gingerbreadman as he had passed through some sculptures exhibits.

Location 5:
Clay Sculptors

Clue 6:
Humor: Security slipped and fell in the puddle of water as they were investigating the painting exhibit.
Serious: Security found wet footprints after visiting the painting exhibit.

Location 6:
Water Colors

Clues 7:
Humor: Security cameras found Saskatchewan Gingerbreadenheimer attempting to pull a big fossil bone--bigger than himself. He was heard saying, “I just wanted to play fetch with Fido”
Serious: Security cameras found Sam Gingerbreadman looking at some fossil bones. Sam was overhead saying that he was thinking about using one of the bones to fetch with his dog, Fido

Location 7:
Museum Artifacts

Congratulations! You helped security find Saskatchewan/Sam.

“It looks like Sam has sent you a letter”
“Dear Students, thank you for helping security find me. Unfortunately I wasn’t listening properly to my teachers when we were getting the museum tour and got lost. I’m glad you were able to find my clues and solve them. I don’t know how to thank you, but hopefully some candy will be a good enough thank you - Saskatchewan/Sam”
Appendix C: Teacher Questionnaire

Lesson Plan
April 15, 2009

“Lost in the Museum”

Time taken to complete lesson _____________________

1. On a scale of 0-10, how well would you rate the students’ abilities to understand the clues and material presented to them?

____________________________

Can you please elaborate on your reasoning?

2. On a scale of 0-10, how well would you rate the students’ abilities to understand the directional instructions in the lesson?

____________________________

Can you please elaborate on your reasoning?
3. On a scale of 0-10, how well would you rate the students’ interest in the designed lesson plan?

____________________________

Can you please elaborate on your reasoning?

For Humorous Lesson Plan Only:
4. On a scale of 0-10 (with 5 acting as a standard mark) how enthusiastic were the students’ compared to a traditional lesson plan?

____________________________

Can you please elaborate on your reasoning?
5. What are your feelings about the class’ educational experience in the developed lesson plan (specifically, did they seem to enjoy it more or less, understand the material presented to the more or less)?

6. Based on this and your previous experience, what do you feel the role of humor and comedy in the classroom is?
Appendix D: Code Book

1. Welcome

I agree to answer the following questions to the best of my abilities. I also acknowledge that my participation in this study is voluntary and at any point I can decide to leave the survey.

Yes
No

2. Quotes

Please choose one of the following quotes:
☐ "Get your facts first, then you can distort them as you please." ~ Mark Twain = 1
☐ "History will be kind to me for I intend to write it" ~ Sir Winston Churchill = 2
☐ "Those are my principles, and if you don't like them... well, I have others." ~ Groucho Marx = 3
☐ "When all else fails there's always delusion" ~ Conan O'Brien = 4
Please rate the information on a scale from 0 (Not informative/Did not help me understand the topic) to 10 (Very Informative/Helped me understand the topic more clearly)

From "The Colbert Report" on December 9, 2008:

Stephen Colbert: Shocking news out of Illinois today. Governor Rod Blagojevich was arrested on corruption charges, including the allegation that he was selling Barack Obama’s vacant Senate seat. Now I personally am surprised Obama even needed a seat. I thought he just levitated. Of course the evidence the Governor was selling the seat is highly suspect. All he was caught on tape saying was quote, ‘I’ve got this thing and it’s f**king golden, and uh, uh, I’m not giving it up for f**king nothing.’ …He could have been talking about anything. He could have been pawning his wedding ring, or selling golden retriever puppies out of his trunk, or you know what? He was probably just holding Rue McClanahan for ransom…But, if it is true. This is a disgrace. I think US attorney Pat Fitzgerald said it best: ‘Governor Blagojevich has taken us a truly new low.’ A new low in dumb! Governor Blagojevich you knew you were under investigation and you used your own phone! I can only imagine your Facebook status (‘Rod is Accepting bribes’).
Q4_News_S

4. In the News

Please rate the information on a scale from 0 (Not informative/Did not help me understand the topic) to 10 (Very Informative/Helped me understand the topic more clearly)

From the NewsHour with Jim Lehrer on December 9, 2008:

JIM LEHRER: The governor of Illinois, Rod Blagojevich, was arrested today on federal corruption charges. He allegedly plotted to sell or trade his appointment of a U.S. senator to replace President-elect Obama. U.S. attorney Patrick Fitzgerald said investigators were "stunned" by what they heard on wiretaps.

PATRICK FITZGERALD, U.S. Attorney: The most cynical behavior in all this, the most appalling is the fact that Governor Blagojevich tried to sell the appointment to the Senate seat vacated by President-elect Obama. The conduct would make Lincoln roll over in his grave. The governor's own words describing the Senate seat, quote, "It's a bleeping valuable thing. You just don't give it away for nothing," close quote. Another quote, "I've got this thing, and it's bleeping golden. And I'm just not giving it up for bleeping nothing. I'm not going to do it, and I can always use it. I can parachute me there," quote.

JIM LEHRER: Fitzgerald said he was making no allegations the president-elect knew about any of this. As for the vacant Senate seat, Fitzgerald said the governor still has the right to appoint someone. But in Washington, Illinois Senator Dick Durbin said anyone Blagojevich chose now would be tainted. He called for a special election instead.

SEN. DICK DURBIN, D.-Ill.: The governor's situation could drag on for a long period of time. He may face some removal effort by the Illinois General Assembly, which could take months. And ultimately we would be without a replacement for Senator Obama during a critical period in American history when important issues are going to be decided.

JIM LEHRER: Later, leaders of the Illinois legislature said they'd call a session to set up a special election. In the meantime, the governor was freed on $4,500 bond. He had no immediate comment on the charges.

0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

0-3 = “Low”
4-6 = Medium (“Med”)
7-10 = “High”
Please rate the information on a scale from 0 (Not informative/Did not help me understand the topic) to 10 (Very Informative/Helped me understand the topic more clearly)

From Sarah Vowell's 2005 book, "Assassination Vacation":

The bright side to researching the first three presidential assassinations is that my interest is optional, a choice. One man who makes a cameo appearance in all three stories was not so lucky. Abraham Lincoln’s oldest son, Robert Todd Lincoln, was in close proximity to all the murders like some kind of jinxed Zelig of doom. The young man who wept at his father’s deathbed in 1865 was only a few feet away when James A. Garfield was shot in a train station in 1881. In 1901, Robert arrived in Buffalo mere moments after William McKinley fell. Robert Todd Lincoln’s status as a presidential death magnet weighed on him. Later in life, when he was asked to attend some White House function, he grumbled, “If only they knew, they wouldn’t have wanted me there.”

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0-3 = “Low”
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7-10 = “High”
Robert Todd Lincoln was the first child of Abraham Lincoln and Mary Todd Lincoln and born in 1843. During the American Civil War he joined the Union Army and was appointed to the rank of captain. His father did not want him sent to the front-line and so it was arranged that he should became assistant adjutant general of volunteers on the staff of General Ulysses S. Grant.

Robert Todd Lincoln was invited to accompany his parents to the Ford's Theatre the night his father was shot by John Wilkes Booth on April 14, 1865. Citing fatigue from riding in a covered wagon for an extended period of time, he declined and remained behind at the White House, where he immediately went to bed. He was informed of the President's being shot just before midnight and was at his father’s bedside when he died. After the assassination of his father he returned to the family home. In 1867 he was admitted to the Illinois Bar and became a successful lawyer.

In 1875, fearing about his mother’s mental state Robert Todd Lincoln, arranged for a sanity hearing for Mary Todd Lincoln. The court judged her insane and she was committed to a sanatorium in Batavia, Illinois. On 15th June, 1876, a second trial judged her sane and she went to live with her sister in Springfield. Her health continued to deteriorate and she refused to leave her bedroom.

In 1881 President James Garfield appointed Lincoln as his Secretary of War. He was with him when he was assassinated in 1881. Lincoln remained in the post under Garfield's replacement, Chester Arthur. Lincoln refused all attempts to nominate him as a presidential candidate but in 1889 he accepted the post as minister to England. Lincoln returned to private life, serving as president of the Pullman Company until 1911, and then as its board chairman. In the ensuing years his health began to fail and he made few public appearances. Upon being invited to the White House, Lincoln once said, “If only they knew, they wouldn’t have wanted me there.” He did see the dedication of the Lincoln Memorial on May 30, 1922, but declined to speak.

He died July 25, 1926, in Washington, D.C.
Please rate the information on a scale from 0 (Not informative/Did not help me understand the topic) to 10 (Very Informative/Helped me understand the topic more clearly)

From Paul Halpern's 2007 book, "What's Science Ever Done For Us?:

Traveling close to a black hole is another way time could be slowed down or even stopped compared to ordinary terrestrial time. This represents an example of time dilation due to exceptionally strong gravitational forces rather than high speed. Let’s imagine a scenario in which [Montgomery] Burns decides to blast some of his workers off into space so that they can investigate nuclear technology under vacuum conditions. [Weyland] Smithers equips the spaceship with monitoring devices to make sure the blasted employees don’t slack off. Unfortunately their ship heads into the region of a black hole. As the craft approaches the collapsed star, passengers Lenny [Leonard] and Carl [Carlson], oblivious to the approaching danger, might decide to play a round of poker. Due to the warping effects of the nearby black hole, their personal clocks would begin to tick at a slower and slower rate compared to Earth time—not noticeable to them but only to outsiders. Keeping a close watch on their activities, Smithers would observe their poker moves seemingly becoming more and more lethargic. Upon hearing this, Burns might grumble that not only are his workers slacking off, they appear to be slacking off in their slacking off.

Each black hole is girdled by a zone of no return—an event horizon—that corresponds to the boundary of the region inside which escape would be physically impossible. If Lenny, Carl, and their coworkers enter that zone their clocks would stop completely relative to Earth time. In other words, an infinite amount of Earth seconds would pass for a single second to pass the ship. Smithers would observe the ship to be frozen forever at the bleak precipice of the event horizon. When Burns learns of this, he might be jealous of their apparent immortality. His envy would be misplaced, however, given that the workers would still experience their own time passing at its usual rate, while their ship is stretched out and torn apart by deadly gravitational forces.
Please rate the information on a scale from 0 (Not informative/Did not help me understand the topic) to 10 (Very Informative/Helped me understand the topic more clearly)

From the Wikipedia entry on "event horizons":

Examples of cosmological models without an event horizon are universes dominated by matter or by radiation. An example of a cosmological model with an event horizon is a universe dominated by the cosmological constant (a de Sitter universe).

The particle horizon of the observable universe is the boundary that represents the maximum distance at which events can currently be observed. For events beyond that distance, light hasn't had time to reach our location, even if it were emitted at the time the universe began. How the particle horizon changes with time depends on the nature of the expansion of the universe. If the expansion has certain characteristics, there are parts of the universe that will never be observable, no matter how long the observer waits for light from those regions to arrive. The boundary past which events can't ever be observed is an event horizon, and it represents the maximum extent of the particle horizon. The criterion for determining whether an event horizon for the universe exists is as follows. Define a comoving distance $d_E$ by

$$d_E = \int_{t_0}^{\infty} \frac{c}{a(t)} dt.$$  

In this equation, $a$ is the scale factor, $c$ is the speed of light, and $t_0$ is the age of the universe. If $d_E \rightarrow \infty$ points arbitrarily far away can be observed, and no event horizon exists. If $d_E \neq \infty$ a horizon is present.

0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

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4-6 = Medium (“Med”)  
7-10 = “High”
9. Political Themes

Please rate the information on a scale from 0 (Not informative/Did not help me understand the topic) to 10 (Very Informative/Helped me understand the topic more clearly)

By Gary Varvel in "The Indianapolis Star":
How well does the following political cartoon illustrate the political event?

0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

0-3 = “Low”
4-6 = Medium (“Med”)
7-10 = “High”
Please rate the information on a scale from 0 (Not informative/Did not help me understand the topic) to 10 (Very Informative/Helped me understand the topic more clearly)

From ABCNews.com

Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac: Mortgage Bailout Will Be Expensive: Mortgage Will Likely Decline, Taxpayers' Bill to Soar

By BETSY STARK, BIANNA GOLODRYGA and SCOTT MAYEROWITZ

Sept. 8, 2008—

The federal takeover of mortgage giants Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac will likely lower the cost of a mortgage for buyers with good credit, but it will also likely stick U.S. taxpayers with a bill in the tens of billions of dollars, analysts have concluded.

The mountain of losses by the two huge quasi-governmental agencies threatened the entire mortgage and credit industry since Fannie and Freddie, as they are popularly known on Wall Street, back up nearly half of the country's mortgages.

Both companies were placed on Sunday into a government conservatorship that will be run by the Federal Housing Finance Agency, the new agency created by Congress this summer to regulate Fannie and Freddie.

... The twin takeover, the largest government rescue mission in U.S. history, is packed with global economic repercussions. But for homeowners with a fixed rate mortgage that is being paid for, nothing changes.

0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

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7-10 = “High”
Please rate the information on a scale from 0 (Not informative/Did not help me understand the topic) to 10 (Very Informative/Helped me understand the topic more clearly)

Samantha Bee from the 2004 book, "America (The Book)"

Would you Mind if I Told you How we do it in Canada?
By Samantha Bee

The story of America’s independence from England is very well known, but did you also know Canada was also once part of the British Empire? It’s true! We Canadians threw off the same British yoke as you, only we took a more leisurely route to liberation. In fact, you might say, we’ve been “declaring” our “independence” for more than 200 years! Kind of!

Our style of revolution centered less on bloodshed and guerrilla warfare and more on the time-tested strategy of “not making a fuss.” For example, at the same time you were declaring war on the English monarchy, we were enjoying privilege granted to us by King George in the Treaty of Versailles, which gave us fishing rights off the coast of Newfoundland, provided we not dry or cure fish on land (And by the way, we later got the right to cure and dry fish on land, thank you very much!)

... 

The point is we took our time, waiting for The Canadian Moment to arrive, rather than forcing it upon the world. We waited, in the cold, watching the U.S., most of Central and South America, Africa and Asia throw off their colonial oppressors. I think it was us and Belize that held out.

And our patience ultimately paid off, for in the glorious year of 1982, we took the bold step of getting permission from England to amend our constitution so that we could amend our constitution—without getting permission from England. Let freedom ring!

Now the only remnants of the tyrannical rule of Queen Elizabeth II are an appointed “Governor General” who represents her in Canadian governmental affairs. And the Queen is still officially our head of state. Plus she’s on all our money. And when we take a government job, we have to swear a loyalty pledge to her. All in all, a small price to pay for an independence achieved without bloodshed, violence, glory or independence.

0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

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From the Canadian Encyclopedia Historica:

Most countries today have written constitutions, that is, one document that contains all the important rules. Examples are the United States and Russia. However, some countries have an "unwritten" constitution, in the sense that they have no one written document. The best-known example is Great Britain, whose constitution consists of many different Acts of Parliament. It also contains court decisions, and traditions and customs that stretch back over centuries. Before 1982, Canada was close to the British example. The BRITISH NORTH AMERICA (BNA) ACT of 1867 declared that Canada had "a constitution similar in principle" to that of Great Britain. In the 1950s, Canada's Constitution was made up of six components: 1) the BNA Act and its amendments; 2) Acts of the Canadian Parliament; 3) Acts of the British Parliament; 4) court decisions; 5) customs and traditions; and 6) other. In 1982, the Constitution Act, 1982 was added to the Constitution. The BNA Act was renamed the Constitution Act, 1867.

0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

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13. Almost There...

Now that you've had a chance to digest the information, let's see how well you remember it
Q14

14. Question 1

According to the information, what charge was Governor Rod Blagojevich arrested on?

Organized Crime = 0
Corruption = 1
Money Laundering = 0
Embezzlement = 0
Perjury = 0

Q15

15. Question 2

Which of the following statements can be attributed to Robert Todd Lincoln when invited to White House functions later in his life?

"Avoid popularity if you would have peace." = 0
"You can fool all the people some of the time, and some of the people all the time, but you cannot fool all the people all the time." = 0
"The people will save their government, if the government itself will allow them." = 0
"If only they knew, they wouldn’t have wanted me there." = 1
"And in the end it's not the years in your life that count. It's the life in your years. " = 0

Q16

16. Question 3

What appears to happen to objects just past the event horizon in a black hole?

Objects appear to be moving much quicker than normal to outside observers = 0
Objects appear to be at a standstill for outside observers = 1
Objects appear to be converted into dark matter = 0
Objects appear to be crushed until they explode = 0
Objects appear to be converted into pure energy = 0
Q17

17. Question 4

What was the main point referred to in the earlier political statement (political cartoon or article)?

The government needs to take more control over mortgage and credit industries = 0
Taxpayers are left with Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac to pay for = 1
The government is too burdened with Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac = 0
Taxpayers now need to bail out GM, Ford, and Chrysler = 0
Wall Street failed the taxpayers = 0

Q18

18. Question 5

In what year did Canada become independent from Britain?

1776 = 0
1934 = 0
1947 = 0
1982 = 1
1997 = 0
Q19

19. News Sources

How often do you get your news from the following sources?

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source</th>
<th>Always =1</th>
<th>Sometimes =2</th>
<th>Infrequently =3</th>
<th>Never =4</th>
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<tr>
<td>Blogs (Q19_Blogs)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Broadcast News (World News Tonight, Nightly News, Evening News) (Q19_Broadcast)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Cable News Networks (Fox News, MSNBC, CNN) (Q19_Cable)</td>
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<td>Comedy Programs (Daily Show with Jon Stewart, Colbert Report, D.L. Hughley Breaks the News, etc.) (Q19_Comedy)</td>
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<td>Internet News Outlets (CNN.com, MSNBC.com, Washingtonpost.com, etc.) (Q19_Internet)</td>
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<td>Talk Radio (Rush Limbaugh, Air America, etc.) (Q19_Talk)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Traditional Newspapers (Q19_Traditional)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Other (please specify) (Q19_Other)</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
20. Education

What is the highest level of education you have received?

Less than High School
High School Diploma
Some College
Undergraduate Degree
Some Graduate
Graduate Degree
Post-Graduate Degree

21. Age

How Old Are You?

_____________

≤19 = 1
20-29 = 2
30-39 = 3
40-49 = 4
50-59 = 5
60-69 = 6
≥70 = 7
Q22

22. Information 4

Do you agree with the following statement?

Obtaining information from comedic/humorous sources (The Daily Show, The Colbert Report, talk show comedians, humorous blogs, etc.) helps me understand the topics more clearly.

Strongly Disagree = 1
Somewhat Disagree = 2
Neither Agree nor Disagree = 3
Somewhat Agree = 4
Strongly Agree = 5

Q23

23. Humor

Do you agree with the following statement?

Information presented through humorous mediums (e.g. The Daily Show, the Colbert Report, Comedians, etc.) help me understand the concepts and content of the material.

Strongly Disagree = 1
Somewhat Disagree = 2
Neither Agree nor Disagree = 3
Somewhat Agree = 4
Strongly Agree = 5
24. Thank You
Thank you for your participation. Have a good day
Appendix E: Interview Subjects

Erik Rydholm
Interviewed on January 27, 2009

Questions:
1. What is the role of humor in our culture?
2. What do you think the value of humor is in society?
3. With the Motley Fool, would you say that you specifically chose humor as that role, to not necessarily bring down the high and mighty firms? Or would you say there wasn’t a niche for humorous takes?
4. In a 2000 interview, you praised Patrick Garner for his customer service abilities. You said that “all great businesses have to serve customer needs in ways that are different, special, better.” The humor, the comedy, the entertainment that was part of the experience that you felt with the customer service needs?
5. Do you find, in the show, a lot of the humor develops in the give and go and the contradiction?
6. What types of feedback do you receive? Going back to the Motley Fool and Pardon the Interruption. What types of feedback do you get anybody in terms of the presentation of the material?
7. In a 2003 article, you mentioned that you grew up in Chicago and you used to watch a sports program that was sports reporters sitting in a smoke-filled room. What was it about that stuck with you?
8. For the role of humor in communications, do you personally feel that humor and comedy is a good device to present information or relevant information?

Dr. Rosemarie Truglio
Interviewed on February 17, 2009

Questions:
1. Are there any particular formulas or techniques that you have found to be more or less successful overall when presenting educational information?
2. On Sesame Street, how do you develop the entertaining or humorous content?
3. Can you talk about that balance [between humor and education] just a little bit?
4. Is there ever a conflict when you are trying to figure out how to balance the educational message with the entertainment one?
5. In G is for Growing, it says that ‘when humor, dramatic tension, or other attractive forces were made to coincide with the heart of the educational message, this interaction could be used to enhance the effectiveness of the educational content. Yet when the two did not coincide, children would recall the attractive material and not the educational message.’ I was wondering if you could go into that a little bit more?
6. How much of Sesame Street’s entertainment is focused on humor, compared to the dramatic tension or some of the other entertaining components?
7. In *G is for Growing*, you wrote that “the relationship between comprehension and appeals is reciprocal.” I was wondering if you could go into that a little further?
8. Do you think humor, past the *Sesame Street* audience, do you think humor has a place in informing the public?

Father Paul McCarren
Interviewed on February 18, 2009

Questions:
1. What do you think the role or the value of humor in society is?
2. What do you feel is the role of humor or comedy in religion?
3. Can you talk for a minute about how you use comedy or humor in your teachings or sermons?
4. In general, do you get any feedback on how you present material, compared to others?
5. Do you find that the way you present your sermons, that hits home a lot closer with some people?
6. You said that [the humor] comes out organically. Do you find that when you are writing sermons and developing topics that you balance out what you are trying to say in terms of humorous components to what you are trying to say in terms of teachings?
7. [Earlier in the discussion] you talked about how humor can be used to communicate information. I was wondering if you could go into this a little?

Sarah Vowell
Interviewed on February 18, 2009

Questions:
1. What do you think is the role/value of humor in society?
2. What is your opinion on the use of humor as an effective means to communicate information and educate individuals?
3. How do you balance the information you present with the humor you convey?
4. Have you received any specific feedback based on how you present information in your works?
5. Do you think humor could find a more prominent place in the classroom?
6. Considering that a significant portion of 18-25 year-olds are getting their news mainly from shows like the Daily Show and the Colbert Report, what do you think of humor as an increasingly popular tool for proliferating information?

Interview with Peter Rees
March 23, 2009

Questions:
1. What do you think the role of comedy is in society?
2. What do you think the value of comedy is in society?
3. What was your motivation behind putting humorous spin and humorous individuals on Mythbusters? 

4. Have you received any feedback on the way information was presented on Mythbusters? 

5. How would you characterize Mythbusters in terms of entertainment and/or educational value? 

6. Are the Mythbuster-type programs growing in importance and value within the entertainment community? 

7. Are there any particular techniques/formulas for programs that you have found to be more successful than others? 

8. Do you intend to utilize humor in any upcoming projects? 

9. Do you think that humor is an effective means to communicate information and to educate viewers?