

The Implicit Cultural Policies of US Late-night Comedy Shows

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Abstract

This paper argues how comedy is used as an implicit tool by US late-night shows to create an informed citizenry. It explores how late-night shows have transcended its original format to emerge as an alternative form of journalism and realized its potential to disseminate political knowledge and debunk political lies through the framework of a cultural entity. These shows successfully package humor as information shortcuts, making it easier to remember facts and leaving a greater lasting impact on both media-savvy and informationally-ignorant audiences. The effectiveness of these shows is strengthened as the use of comedy provides instant gratification, compared to a delayed gratification provided by other hard news sources. This paper further discusses weaknesses of such shows by exploring whether the political allegiance and self-selective set of knowledge of its audience influences the outcome of the viewing. It also argues that US late-night shows create a political/cultural laicity through the use of laughter.

Keywords: implicit, cultural policy, politics, entertainment, audience, information shortcut

For long, the study of cultural policy had focused solely on its explicit forms. Scholars looked at the formal cultural policies drawn up by different governing entities of society and studied how interpersonal and intercultural interactions were changing within the frameworks of those existing policies. Jim McGuigan defined cultural policies as “the clash of ideas, institutional struggles and power relations in the production and circulation of symbolic meanings” (1); but his argument of production and circulation referred to explicit cultural policies, which can be considered as an institutionalized organized form of action. However, over the past decade, there has been an expansion of our interpretation of such policies with the introduction of what Jeremy Ahearne calls implicit or effective cultural policy (143). Although the study of the implicit is new, such policies have been arguably active incognito throughout history with direct or indirect contribution from different agents of society. Ahearne goes on to claim that such implicit policies are “as old as political power itself” (143). But because culture is made of an evolving collection of habitual attitudes and values of a society, the effectiveness of different implicit policies has arguably evolved as well over the years. However, as the term “implicit” suggests, the population targeted by agents of such policies have always been unaware participants. It is indeed the informal and invisible nature of symbolic representations that has partly made implicit cultural policies so effective compared to the explicit policies that can be more easily identified and rejected by the public.

One of the issues up for debate is whether these implicit cultural policies are always intentional or not. According to Oliver Bennett, a cultural policy becomes a policy only when there is a “deliberate intention” of influencing a respective culture (157). If we accept Bennett’s argument, then even an implicit policy should be identifiable through its explicit intentions. Another way of identifying these implicit policies could be to analyze its “unthematized” nature, and its effectiveness in shaping cultures compared with explicit or “nominal” policies (Ahearne 151). So



once the existence of implicit policies is recognized, the challenge becomes the identification and analysis of its agents.

This paper aims to identify one such agent: late-night comedy television shows in the United States of America. For the purpose of this paper, examples of such shows could be considered as comedy-oriented talk shows or *fake news* programs like *The Late Show with Stephen Colbert* (previously hosted by David Letterman) or *The Daily Show with Trevor Noah* (previously hosted by Jon Stewart). Although none of these shows act on any shared explicit rule, all of their operating policies can be termed implicit because, according to MacGregor, “since the media never use the phrase ‘cultural policy’ to apply to their work, any policy is by definition thereby implicit, covert and tacit” (240).

As a TV genre that occupies a well-coveted slot of media consumption in the US, there is little doubt on the potential of these shows to generate mass public opinion or to steer cultural discourse. This paper will argue that late-night comedies enforce an implicit cultural policy by using humor to “confront political dissembling and misinformation and to demand a measure of accountability” (Baym 268). Why this enforcement is implicit, instead of explicit, can be found in how late-night shows have transcended its original format to emerge as an alternative form of journalism. When political subjects first started to appear in late-night talk shows in the early 1990s, its producers ran on the premise that politics was drama, and as such always had entertainment value for the nation (Jones 14). So they created a hybrid form of journalism by packaging entertainment and political commentary together. But unlike mainstream TV journalism, which is arguably also an agent of implicit cultural policies to some extent, late-night comedy shows are not bound by any explicit rule of reporting the news and can exploit the comedic liberty of criticizing through satire. The freedom to operate as an entity of entertainment has allowed these shows to be more implicit and target a wide range of audience, especially in the backdrop of a mass media age where alternative news sources are increasingly gaining more legitimacy.

This paper further aims to look at the potential mobilizing powers of the shows and whether its contents are shaping the cultural and political practices of the targeted audience. Using existing research on this field and by drawing on secondary data from surveys, this paper will also explore how the effective reach of the shows directly contributed to changes in political campaigning strategies.

11:30 pm – Implicit Cultural Policy in Action

From its origins as niche variety shows to its current overwhelming dominance over the popular 11:30 pm slot of US television, late-night comedy shows have become a genre of its own. Through its evolution, these shows have seen the audience grow and change, while the proliferation of television in US households made these shows a part of Americana. By introducing segments of commentary monologues and celebrity interviews, late-night shows were (un)knowingly setting up the stage for a pivot towards a more political line of programming. Although politicians had arguably been presenting themselves as sources of amusement since the 1950s (Postman 135), the shift for late-night programs came in the 1990s, when there was a deliberate move to merge entertainment with political information and create a hybrid form of TV journalism.

According to Jeffrey P Jones, the first major blurring of the line between political news and entertainment programming was seen ahead of the 1992 US presidential election, when candidates first started making frequent appearances in entertainment talk shows (6). It was the first sign of collapse of what Jones called an “artificial separation between politics and popular culture” (6). It

was also arguably the first time that the producers, as well the audience, realized the potential of these shows to disseminate political knowledge through the framework of a cultural entity. Late-night shows became the tool for debunking political lies. Ahearne drew from Debray's idea that governments hide their inactions or incompetence through degrees of "bullshit" (142). For a late-night show, calling out the "bullshit" of politicians arguably became the main implicit operating agenda. Not only are these shows making the audience think twice about the credibility of what their leaders tell them, they are acting as a source or reference point for political knowledge as well.

Over the past century or so, there has been little change in the way people gather political knowledge. When Anthony Downs looked at how citizens were collecting campaign information in the 1950s, he claimed that people were reluctant to gather large amounts of information because they viewed their individual contribution to the overall political outcome as being minimal (228). Downs said that in order to reduce the burden of acquiring political knowledge, citizens relied on information shortcuts such as free information and explicit value judgment of experts (228). At the time when Downs suggested this, television had not yet established itself as the dominant medium we see today; but based on recent media consumption trends, it can now be argued that late-night comedy shows, which provide "information shortcuts" wrapped as entertainment content, were probably just the thing Downs was prescribing (220-237).

A key difference between the information shortcuts presented by TV news and those set out by late-night comedies is that the audience are keenly aware of what they can expect from the "hard news" of TV journalism. The information presented in TV news is explicit – facts, quotes, and images meant to feature only the denotative meaning. In comparison, the content of the late-night show is implicit – skepticism, satire, and images emphasizing the connotative meaning. Ahearne's argument of the implicit being the more effective form proves more appropriate when we consider that messages with humor are more easily remembered (Berg and Lippman 120). So when late-night shows use humor to explain news facts that are otherwise more difficult to understand, it has the potential to leave a far more lasting impact on the audience. Whatever potential was left for mainstream TV news to act as an agent of implicit policy, has been largely diminished because of what Jones argues to be an "increasingly media-savvy" audience who are aware that journalists often act "more like lapdogs to power than watchdogs of it" (182). Drawing on Michel Foucault's idea of *regime of truth*, Jones also argues that the news industry, for most of the twentieth century, had served as a primary institution in America's regime of truth (63-64); but in the twenty-first century, journalism's central status in this regard is being challenged by government authorities, new media actors, and active audiences, with new forms of political entertainment television leading such a challenge. So, with the explicit nature of journalism being exposed, a chance has opened up for these comedy shows to act implicitly and more effectively.

It must be noted that there exists a counter-argument for the perceptibility of a "media-savvy" audience, suggesting that electronic media can bypass stages and filters of literacy (Meyrowitz 60). According to this idea, people do not need to acquire a gradual sense of cultural sophistication in order to grasp any social phenomena; instead issues are thrust upon them through the visual screen. The removal of this need for analytical literacy allows late-night comedies to utilize electronic media's strength of highlighting more on feeling, appearance, and mood; unlike printed word's strength of emphasizing ideas (Meyrowitz 60). As a result, instead of the need to fully comprehend and analyze difficult issues such as foreign affairs strategies, the audiences of late-night shows get

a summarized version of events with additional simplified context. Apart from the basic political knowledge the viewers are expected to have, contents are packaged in a manner that would allow the lay people to understand the jokes or laugh at the silliness of the politicians. Any person with a sense of humor can be expected to appreciate satire without the need to comprehend every single fact attached to a joke, as long as they have the elementary context. Even though Jones and Meyrowitz present opposing arguments, both attest to the implicit nature of late-night shows.

Another quality that makes late-night shows agents of effective (or implicit) cultural policy is its ability to use comedy to provide a relatively instant gratification to its viewers, compared to a delayed gratification caused by the need to decipher other information sources. By triggering instant positive or negative emotions, late-night shows can directly, but implicitly, influence public perceptions. According to Brader and Wayne, emotions of positive feeling can lead people to more positive judgments and negative feelings to negative judgments (213). With the combination of simplifying the analytical literacy requirements and permeating the thoughts of the audience, these shows have the power to create what can be called a *political/ cultural laicity*. The viewers are no longer required to be experts on details of a national security issue or a specific bill being presented in the Senate; instead the shows make such issues accessible to the lay viewers using a language easy to understand – humor. In many cases, the viewers might agree to political stances if the comedy makes them feel good about it, and oppose it if the contents are presented in a negative light.

In the case of US late-night shows, it is also the control of rhetoric that makes their actions an implicit cultural policy. Acting as “soft news,” or an alternative source of information separated from the mainstream news reporting, these comedy shows exercise – if we borrow from Joseph Nye – a form of media “soft power” over their audience (5). Instead of confronting the audience with only hard facts and coercing their opinions, late-night shows use satire to co-opt people. In the 1970s, Jürgen Habermas emphasized how citizens could act as a public only when they were free of coercion. He wrote:

Citizens act as a public when they deal with matters of general interest without being subject to coercion; thus with the guarantee that they may assemble and unite freely, and express and publicize their opinions freely. When the public is large, this kind of communication requires certain means of dissemination and influence. (Habermas 45)

At the time, Habermas named television as one of the mediums serving the public sphere. In 2017, the agent of such a service can arguably be narrowed down to TV genres such as late-night shows. The humor of these programs has an immense potential to bring political and cultural changes. Waisanen advocates for leaving as much space as possible open for “humorous free speech and liberating laughter in the public arena” because of their potential to “reinforce democratic norms or rightly challenge structures of power” (310). The jokes or issues raised in these shows are not ephemeral, but like most other television programming, they trigger “free-floating ideas” stored in the “preconscious or unconscious mind” to be later recalled and used to elaborate meanings of different encounters (Lembo 112). Again, it is this influence on the subconscious that makes late-night shows in particular, as well as television in a broader sense, agents of implicit cultural policies.

Real-life Effects and Mobilizing Power

In the overwhelming shadow of revenue-generating priorities for television’s entertainment programs, it can be easy to forget that along with TV news, entertainment shows can also

strengthen democracy through information. Long before late-night shows pivoted toward politics, Hans Magnus Enzensberger wrote about electronic media's ability to shape consciousness of the people, and how the direct potential of media's mobilizing power becomes more evident when contents are consciously used for subversive ends (13-26). Although Enzensberger was writing from a strong Marxist point of view and did not mention the term "implicit," it can be argued that such a method of subversion is itself an implicit policy. The implicit subversion in late-night shows comes in the form of humor which criticizes and questions the political authority. The dissemination of subversive political knowledge through these programs becomes more significant during presidential election years. By criticizing candidates with jokes, late-night shows subversively and "accidentally" inform the audience about primary campaigns as they seek out amusement (Brewer and Cao 31). Such implicit dissemination of knowledge through new media helps remove the cultural monopoly of the bourgeois intelligentsia and shows the egalitarian structure of new media (Enzensberger 20).

While these shows deserve credit for presenting an alternative form of journalism, it would be remiss, however, if we fail to analyze the weakness of the content as well. Much of the humor in these shows remain non-issue oriented, focusing more on the personal foibles of political leaders (Niven et al. 130). Waisanen critiques this tendency of reinforcing stereotypes as it offers only a limited range of topics and bypasses detailed facts. He writes:

In an effort to fit each day's news through the structure of a stand-up comedy monologue, a more nuanced and detailed understanding of politics is often bypassed. For years, Leno and other similar comedians have told jokes that simply reinforce stock stereotypes about, for instance, President Clinton as a womanizer and President Bush as unintelligent. (Waisanen 303)

Facing a need to generate laughter, the journalistic burden of accurately representing interviewees often takes a backseat. As Geoffrey Baym finds, producers at *The Colbert Report* presented interview segments as "5-minute constructions assembled from actual interviews that last as long as 90 minutes. In the editing process, Colbert's staff pays little regard to accuracy or facticity" (309).

Another weakness of late-night shows is its limited effect on audiences who are already firm on their political allegiance and hence possess a self-selective set of knowledge to draw from. As a result, Baum writes that these shows are "far more amenable to preaching to the choir than converting the flock" (326). Young and Tisinger also point out that even late-night show hosts and producers admit that their viewers would not be able to make sense of any issue-based jokes unless they had some existing knowledge on that particular subject (115). The problem remains that it is the audience who choose which perspective of political context they are drawing from. All these shows can do to create an informed citizenry is to add "nuggets of information" to enrich the existing knowledge of the viewers (Young and Tisinger 115). Furthermore, Waisanen points out that humor "can sometimes undermine our capacities to rationally reflect upon people, events, and the world at large – instead working to regulate or discipline our thoughts" (301).

Despite these criticisms, the growing popularity of late-night shows is irrefutable. Thus it is essential to understand which population is being influenced the most by these implicit cultural policies. A lot of these late-night show audiences is made up of the 18-49 age demographic, crucial both to advertisers and vote-seeking politicians. Different surveys over the years have all reached the same conclusion: late-night comedy shows are more popular among the young than



the old. In the 2000 presidential election year, a survey by the Pew Research Centre found that 47% of people under thirty were “informed at least occasionally” through late-night shows about the campaign or candidates. Even though the internet rapidly grew popular as an information source in the subsequent years, the popularity of late-night programs sustained through to the 2004 election cycle, when around 21% young people said they “regularly” got campaign news from comedy shows such as *Saturday Night Live* and *The Daily Show*, while 61% of people between 18 and 29 years of age said they *regularly* or *sometimes* learned something new from comedy and/or late-night talk shows (Kohut). A survey by University of Pennsylvania (National Annenberg Election Survey), which collected information from over 19,000 respondents, also found truth in the growing influence of late-night programs among the youth, but pointed out a weakness in the myth of how much effect it really was having. In its findings, the survey noted that the largest audience of the shows consisted of those least likely to vote – Americans aged 18 to 29. The late-night show audience was also identified as “relatively young, ideologically moderate, slightly more likely to be Democrats than non-viewers and also large consumers of traditional news like network news and newspapers” (National Annenberg Election Survey). Although the survey called the young viewership a weakness, it can be argued that targeting a younger demographic makes late-night shows more effective as its implicit operation begins to take effect from an early age.

Taking advantage of the implicit influence of these late-night shows, politicians started using these programs as an explicit tool for their own campaigns. Compared to the 25 late-night show appearances by candidates running in the presidential primaries of 2004, there were 110 appearances in 2008 (Jones 11). Politicians reshaped their campaigns to step into the entertainment game as these programs gave them a chance to “address hard-to-reach audiences, show their more ‘human side’ [...] while typically experiencing an interview that steers clear of controversial matters and doesn’t engage in tough questioning” (Jones 11). According to Niven et al., during the 2000 presidential campaign, late-night shows allowed presidential candidates more airtime to speak in their own words than an average month’s worth of coverage on evening news (130). This level of unprecedented reach through a new communications source introduced a new dimension to election campaigning. Niven et al. quoted the communications director for Republican candidate John McCain’s campaign, Dan Schnur, as saying “[Late-night shows] often reflect what voters feel, and their observations have a tremendous effect on how voters view the candidates, much more so than evening news shows” (119). Not only for election campaigning, the implicit capabilities of late-night shows were used to disseminate knowledge about explicit government policies as well. In order to promote his healthcare reform plans, President Obama carried out a massive media blitz – agreeing to interviews on both news programs and entertainment programs like late-night shows. Unsurprisingly, his one-liners with David Letterman drew nearly 7.2 million viewers, compared to only 3.1 million the day before on an ABC news interview (Baum 325).

It is important to remember, however, that these shows are not just a bullhorn for politicians. Instead, they act as “alternative journalism, one that uses satire to interrogate power, parody to critique contemporary news, and dialogue to enact a model of deliberative democracy” (Baym 261). This approach to serving the public is also a testimony to the implicit agenda of these late-night programs. Taking the example of *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*, Baym also found that even though the primary approach of the show was comedy, oftentimes “the silly is interwoven with the serious, resulting in an innovative and potentially powerful form of public information” (273). As credibility of these shows as a form of journalism grew, so did their ability to influence

public opinion. So much so that Senator McCain's communications director Schnur said: "During the campaign season, you're often covering at 11:30 – what are these guys [hosts] going to say?" (Niven et al. 119).

Donald Trump's Hair (and Beyond)

The role of late-night shows prior to, and also during, the presidency of Donald Trump will surely be analyzed extensively in years to come. Compared to previous presidencies, these shows have arguably been more vocal against the policy decisions of Trump, and in turn, have provoked an unforeseen level of attack from the administration.

Taking a look at Trump's pre-election stance, one could argue that he followed a similar strategy as his predecessors – relying on the popularity and entertainment value of late-night shows to boost interest among a key demographic of voters. According to Hall et al.:

Trump's campaign to become the Republican nominee was successful because it was, in a word, entertaining – not just for the white rural underclass, not just for conservatives, but also for the public at large, even those who strongly oppose his candidacy. (72)

Although the most popular shows satirized Trump's idiosyncrasies and portrayed him as a comic figure, they also arguably "humanized" him (Shepherd). Probably one of the most relevant examples of how a millionaire business tycoon from New York was turned into an everyman American could be found in a September 15, 2016 interview, where late-night host Jimmy Fallon ruffled the-then presidential candidate Trump's hair (CNN). Instead of grilling Trump on his policy plans, Fallon chose to take a rather easy-going tone and pursued what could be argued as a slapstick route. Fallon's actions created an instant backlash and the interview was "widely criticized for its fawning, forgiving tone" (Itzkoff).

As discussed previously in this paper, politicians frequent these shows – even the ones hosted by comedians most critical of them – because these TV programs have the power to merge the candidates' political image with their personal ones and allow them to permeate the audience sphere. As a result, the powerful men and women on the screen become more "accessible," "relatable," and "authentic" (Scacco and Coe 13). This is part of the culture industry's agenda of creating a faux reality that extends beyond the TV screen. According to Adorno and Horkheimer:

The more intensely and flawlessly his [media producer's] techniques duplicate empirical objects, the easier it is today for the illusion to prevail that the outside world is the straightforward continuation of that presented on the screen. (35)

So when Trump's hair, which had been the center of ridicule for years, was literally touched by one of the most likeable personalities on screen – Jimmy Fallon – the implicit message or the illusion presented was that the rest of the US population could also make a human connection with the New York tycoon. However, Fallon later claimed that he ruffled Trump's hair not to humanize him but to "almost [...] minimize him" (Itzkoff). So even though his implicit intention was to serve a particular purpose, the audience had the final say in how it was interpreted – in this case choosing to accept the humanizing image of Trump instead of ridiculing his comic figure. It shows that the implicit intention of the source and the implicit meaning being interpreted by the audience can often be polar opposites. So the original implicit cultural policies of a show can boomerang to strike the media producers – as was the case for Fallon's show.

This paper has so far argued that it is the late-night shows that impose implicit cultural policies on the population; but at the same time, further exploration needs to be done into how the audience also controls the shaping of such policies. An argument can also be made for how such continuous comedy routines would eventually create a new wave of “media-savviness” and shift further power of determining cultural policies into the hands of the audience. Jay Leno, one of the legends of late-night shows, argues that the “constant pounding” against politicians by late-night shows “does have a tendency to anesthetize your feelings” (Itzkoff). The strategy of these shows of imposing implicit cultural policies could also be co-opted by politicians, as was arguably the case with Trump, who understood that “crude humor has the power to bring down the princely classes – aka, the political establishment – as well as anyone who opposes him” (Hall et al. 82). So, by letting Fallon use crude humor and ruffle his hair, Trump allowed the rest of the country to virtually touch his hair as well – successfully establishing the human connection.

The fallout from Fallon’s 2016 interview could still be felt two years later when the issue started a war of words between the US president and late-night show hosts. Trump criticized the host for “whimpering” about how he should have done the interview differently, and ended the tweet writing “Be a man Jimmy!” (@realdonaldtrump). Later, at a public rally, the president went on to call Fallon a “lost soul” and even attacked other hosts – calling Stephen Colbert a “lowlife” and Jimmy Kimmel “terrible” (Le Miere). Such comments show how politicians can exploit the implicit messages offered by late-night shows, but turn on the same practices when these shows challenge their policies. Trump’s Twitter tirades against such shows give grounds to the argument that the implicit cultural policies of late-night entertainment are drawing explicit reactions from the US political realm, especially from the Trump administration. Such dynamics also open new avenues of exploring the relationship among entertainment, the audience sphere, and the state apparatus. Hall et al. argues that when Bakhtin’s idea of the carnivalesque – and its relationship with Trump – is applied to broader modes of cultural analysis, entertainment becomes “a common anthropological trope for examining contestations of social hierarchy in everyday life, particularly with respect to humor, joking, and laughter” (73). This is why understanding the implicit cultural policies of late-night comedy shows are necessary for analyzing the existing political and cultural power struggles.

Conclusion

This paper has analyzed whether late-night shows in the US can act as agents of an implicit cultural policy that creates a *political/cultural laicity* among its audience. The hybrid form of entertainment-journalism has opened a new channel of creating an informed citizenry who can be better at self-governance. The very core of this hybridization process is implicit in nature, as it was previously mentioned that any “cultural policy” of the media is covert by definition (MacGregor 240). While studying the implicit cultural policy of US late-night shows, there is further scope of determining whether these programs are only subversive in their questioning of the authorities, or whether they are also serving any implicit state agenda as well. Regarding this, these late-night shows might be potential components of a cultural or communications ideological state apparatus (Althusser 80). In the context of the US, which constitutionally ensures freedom of speech to media, the extent of state propaganda being served might be argued; but at the same time, the apparent absence of the “explicit” in late-night shows also makes it effective as an implicit policy. All things considered, a certain level of caution must be maintained when judging the success or failure of these shows in influencing public opinion.

The indisputable outcome of US late-night shows is its ability to create an informed citizenry, irrespective of the different levels of reception capabilities by different audiences. The effectiveness of the shows' implicit cultural policy can be measured by how the people end up utilizing the transmission of information. Frank Vibert wrote:

A better-informed public and a public with more reliable information and analysis at its fingertips will be more questioning of political authority, make its own judgements on the facts and wish to make its own informed decisions and interpretation of those facts in ever-increasing areas. (94)

The ability to empower and shape people's decision-making abilities is arguably what makes late-night shows so effective as agents of implicit cultural policy. As US society's understanding of media legitimacy evolves and the demand for alternative journalism grows, late-night shows can be expected to play a greater role in the coming decades as young people – the key targeted demographic – become policymakers themselves. If “soft news” can replace “hard news” as the choice of authentic information source, it will potentially have a major impact on the US culture and economy in the near future. With growing numbers of both media-savvy and informationally-ignorant audience turning on their TVs for a laugh at 11:30 pm every night, the content of late-night shows is transcending its original purpose and evolving rapidly towards becoming an unprecedented cultural force – something that can be identified as an effective implicit cultural policy.

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