ELEMENTS OF AN ECHO CHAMBER: PARTISANSHIP AND PREVIOUS EXPOSURE
AS MODERATORS OF *LAST WEEK TONIGHT*'S MEDIA EFFECTS

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A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the Jack J. Valenti School of Communication

University of Houston

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In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

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By

Samuel Truett Scott

December, 2018

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ABSTRACT

The 2016 presidential election cast light on political polarization in the United States. Generally, the discussion regarding polarization in communication scholarship is concerned with selective exposure to partisan media and its effects. The prospect of political 'echo chambers' that result worries communication scholars our polarized media is detrimental to democratic discourse. One example of partisan programming is *Last Week Tonight with John Oliver* (*LWT*), an acclaimed political comedy program that critiques and comments on contemporary politics with a 'liberal' slant. Influenced by the Reinforcing Spirals Framework, the present study finds Democrats are more likely to agree with John Oliver on net neutrality issues, but only if the participants were exposed to John Oliver's video clip on net neutrality. Similarly, previous exposure to *LWT* was associated with higher intentions to participate for those exposed to the clip. The results shed light on the process of political polarization in the United States.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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1. Political Comedy and Polarization in the United States

Leading up to the 2016 presidential election, and immediately following, the United States appeared mired in an unprecedented period of ideological division. Americans were not only polarized on the issues, but also on what the issues were. An October 2017 Pew Research Center report showed the partisan divide on political issues was the widest since data collection began in 1994 (2017). This disparity not only characterized the presidential election, it represents a larger fragmentation of political ideology that continues in the United States today. While the source of this polarization is disputed, the dialogue in mass communication research largely revolves around the cultural effects of media fragmentation. Some scholars worry the greater variety of media choices allows individuals to choose content that reflects too much their own opinion, creating an 'echo-chamber' of ideas that facilitates extreme positions (Sunstein, 2009; Jamieson & Cappella, 2008). In respect to news media and information about politics, the possibility the media are polarizing and not conducive to democratic discourse is troublesome. In communication research, one area of academic work has focused on why individuals selectively expose themselves to certain media types while another area has focused on the effects of media exposure. Utilizing a survey-experiment method, this study contributes to both traditions by examining the influence of partisanship and previous media exposure on attitudinal media effects.

One conceptual framework concerned with media effects and selective exposure is Slater's Reinforcing Spirals Framework (2007). Slater's goal in introducing this model is to marry these two areas into an approach that recognizes the mutually reinforcing relationship between them. In this way, the Reinforcing Spirals Framework provides a theoretical model for demonstrating that the continued use of a media type can lead to a strengthening of its

effects. Areas in which Reinforcing Spirals has been employed include the relationship between violent media use and aggressive youths (Slater, Henry, Swaim & Anderson, 2003); news media use and political knowledge (Eveland, Shah & Kwak, 2003); and the relationship between partisan news media use and attitudes toward global warming (Zhao, 2009; Feldman, Myers, Hmielowski, & Leiserowitz, 2014). However, there is a lack of studies with a Reinforcing Spirals approach aimed at political-comedy programming. Inspired by the Reinforcing Spirals Framework, the present study examines the persuasive effect of a *Last Week Tonight with John Oliver* (*LWT*) video clip on attitudes, behavior, and knowledge with a focus on partisanship and previous exposure to *Last Week Tonight* as moderators. The results suggest partisanship and previous exposure interact with *LWT* direct effects, thus showing *LWT* may play a polarizing role.

While there is no academic consensus on the definition of an echo chamber, it is a widely used term to refer to digital media usage that serves to confirm and strengthen ideological views. According to Colleoni, Rozza, and Arviddson this concept helps scholars to understand how media either "support the formation of a public sphere, where a diversity of opinion and information can interact, or, conversely, … function as an echo chamber that reinforces established perspectives and opinions" (2014, p.1). While entertainment programs are generally not weighed to consider their influence on the public sphere and democratic process, communication scholars aren't quite sure if political comedy programs function as purely entertainment, a form of news or even journalism. Because of *Last Week Tonight*'s unique format, success, and audience, a better understanding of its influence on polarization will contribute particularly to assessing the role of political comedy and generally to the understanding of the process of polarization.

1.01 Political Comedy Tonight

Over his sixteen-year tenure on *The Daily Show*, Jon Stewart developed a program of political entertainment that now boasts its own library of communication research. However, while Stewart's *Daily Show* is widely regarded as ground breaking and influential, his final episode aired August 6, 2015, leaving behind a political-comedy vacuum. In the years following Stewart's absence, and in light of the contemporary political comedy climate, Stephen Colbert, John Oliver, Samantha Bee, and Larry Wilmore—all *Daily Show* alums— have made significant contributions to political comedy. Oliver—who worked under Stewart for seven years on *The Daily Show*—is now the host of the acclaimed *Last Week Tonight with John Oliver*. Referred to as the 'heir apparent' to Stewart before leaving *The Daily Show* (Fox, 2013), Oliver's biting, pseudo-journalistic critiques are reminiscent of Stewart's own style. While there are others in political comedy who enjoy significant audiences, Oliver's *LWT* is perhaps the most appropriate for this study because of its unique format. The program is filled with humor and sarcasm, but Oliver resembles Stewart by including solemn criticisms of political figures and policies. And as *Last Week Tonight* consistently voices a progressive, left-leaning ideology, it represents a ripe opportunity to study how viewers of the show may be influenced.

Something else that makes Oliver's program unique is his frequent calls to action. This presents an opportunity to measure an effect on political behavior. However, perhaps the most important reason to study *Last Week Tonight* is the general lack of research on the program. While there are numerous studies on *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report*, there remain only a few examples of scholarly inquiry into *LWT*, arguably the preeminent show in political comedy today.

1.02 Media Market Fragmentation

In communication research, the fragmentation of media audiences is generally seen as the precipitating phenomenon for polarization and ideological echo chambers. Therefore, it is necessary to discuss audience fragmentation before moving to political polarization. Audience fragmentation is the result of both technological and economic factors. Advances in digital technology led to the blending of traditionally distinct media channels (Webster & Ksiazek, 2012). For example, television programs were traditionally mediated by broadcast, cable, or satellite channels, but now they have made their way to over-the-top technologies such as Roku or Apple TV. This blending of media channels and expansion of the amount of content-options to be consumed naturally fragments audiences (2012). When in the past they were dictated by technology to choose between three network channels, audiences are now dispersed over thousands of entertainment options.

The economic rationale of fragmentation is often characterized by *long tail* distributions—graphs that show the concentration and fragmentation of a media market by displaying the size of various audiences of outlets (Figure 1). The more concentrated audiences are shown on the left-hand side of the graph and are much greater than those that follow. The distribution resembles a steep slope initially, however the slope eventually levels off far below the earlier values and the tail continues for the high number of media outlets that exist. This representation shows that while the first few outlets have much higher audiences than the rest, the total of their markets pale in comparison to the combined number of audiences of the long tail (Anderson, 2006). These highly-fragmented audiences heralded a new era of ultra-targeted advertising—a method that could reach many more-defined markets (the long tail) instead of a few broad markets in the traditional, more-concentrated

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mass audiences. By providing the public with a variety of choices, media outlets also

provided advertisers a greater choice in audience types.
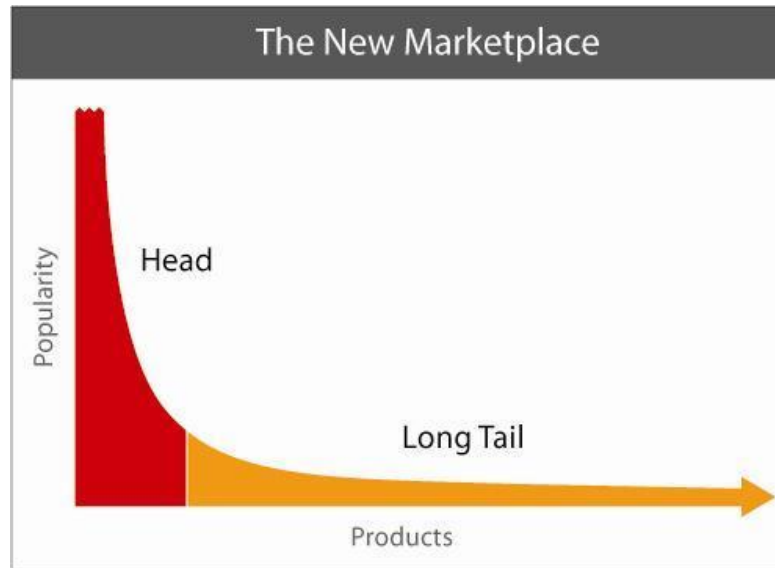
Figure 1. A long tail distribution shows the economic rationale of audience fragmentation
(Mortensen, 2011)

The explosion of media choices is the most important result of fragmentation. Just as

the inception of a mass audience in the early 20th century led to the building up of a national

mass culture, the fragmentation that started near the end of the 20th century inevitably began

a breaking up of the country's culture (Anderson, 2006). The consequences of this process

were far reaching and continue today. Most significantly, many sub-cultures were created;

sub-cultures in music, television, film, and *politics*. The political reality in the United States

is there are two major parties that cultivate the ideological basis of dialogue—the Democratic

Party and the Republican Party. There are other parties that come into play, such as the

Libertarian Party and the Green Party, but historically they have had overwhelming

challenges in achieving political success. Because of the clout of the Democratic and

Republican parties, the ideological rationale generally associated with them ('liberal' and

'conservative,' respectively) is present in nearly all political media, with varying degrees of

bias. Because of this and audience fragmentation there is an anxiety that individuals will only choose to consume media that reflects the rationale of one of the major parties—the result of which would be ideological pockets—or echo chambers—that only reinforce pre-existing opinions. Proponents of this view, such as Sunstein (2009), believe this may lead to deeper ideological divisions that thwart diversity of thought and ultimately harm the democratic process.

The foundation of this anxiety stems from theory surrounding the public sphere. The public sphere, the essence of which was posited by Jurgen Habermas (1964), is a social space where public opinion can be formed without constraints and without bias of the government or private business. If the media is made up of a plurality of distinct ideological spheres, then it can be suggested that it is failing in its capacity to act as a unified space conducive to public discourse. In this way, understanding how audiences interact with *Last Week Tonight* can help us weigh the societal ramifications of polarizing political comedy.

1.03 The Rise of Political Comedy

For this study, 'political comedy' refers to television programs that include humor that is political in nature or presupposes political knowledge in the audience. Included in this are programs often regarded as "fake news" and "news parody" (Baym & Jones, 2012) (Note: It's important to clarify here this study's use of the term 'fake news' refers to news satire and not fabricated news stories as the term was popularly used after the 2016 Presidential Election). As shown by Baym and Jones (2012), news parody and political comedy programs are not uniquely American phenomena. Foreign programs such as Chris Morriss's *The Day Today* and *Brass Eye* in Britain, *De Uaktuelle Nyheder ("*News of No Current Interest")* in Denmark, and *Striscia la Notizia* ("The News is Creeping") in Italy, are

representative of the global nature of political comedy and its various forms (2012). However, because this study is interested in the influence of political comedy in the United States, it will focus on American political comedy programs and their effect and function in the U.S. This review includes research on multiple programs. Naturally, since there are differences between distinct programs, this is meant to show the various conclusions having to do with political comedy in general.

An important aspect to the rise of political comedy is the evolution of traditional news. Jones and Baym (2010) suggest the relatively recent popularity of 'new political television' (political comedy) hails from the failure of network and cable news to perform their democratic function. They describe this process as occurring through the transition of the news paradigm from "high modern" to that of "'postmodern' televisual spectacle" (p. 280). They argue that broadcast news was viewed as more of a profession in the mid-to-late 20th century, opposed to contemporary news. Tenets of this 20th century professionalism were objectivity, a lower prioritization of profit concerns, and a format that was distinct from entertainment. This 'high modernism' stands in stark contrast to the more 'post-modern' paradigm that characterizes the blurring of concepts in news today: e.g., the mixing of fact and opinion; public service and corporate gains; and information and entertainment (2010). Jones and Baym's dialogue presents a compelling rationale for the emergence of programs such as *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report*; essentially, the 'real' news isn't very real anymore so alternative forms are able to compete, even programs referred to as 'fake news'.

Jones and Baym point out that Jon Stewart—who described his own *Daily Show* as merely entertainment and 'fake' news—was voted the most trusted news person in a 2009 online *Time* poll (2010). Related to this is Fox, Kolohen, and Sahin's (2007) study on the

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amount of 'substance' in *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* and the broadcast network news. Interestingly, while the study found that *The Daily Show* did in fact include more humor than substance, it included just as much substance as the network news (2007). This is consistent with Jones and Baym's assertion that political comedy is more than just comedy and may have as much information value in the postmodern news landscape as traditional outlets. In this way, Jones and Baym argue that political comedy can resemble journalism. As mentioned above, this prospect requires an examination of political comedy's effects. The body of research that supports the claim that political comedy functions as journalism is generally associated with the learning effects of political comedy on the uninformed. The effects of political comedy will be discussed in detail below. However, it should be noted here that the decline of traditional news should not mean there should be a lower standard for journalism. Also, Jones and Baym, in their attempts to give political comedy legitimacy, seem to ignore political comedy's lack of social responsibility.

While there are scholars who believe political comedy can function as journalism, others feel that it functions more as media criticism. For example, Borden and Tew (2007) claim both Jon Stewart and Stephen Colbert serve the role of media critic—by creating a space for discussion about how journalists are screwing up, Stewart and Colbert were simultaneously creating a space for the discussion of journalism ethics. Baym (2007) espoused a similar sentiment, describing *The Daily Show* as engaged in the "serious exploration of political issues" that a healthy democracy needs by 'making fun' (p. 112). Similarly, Painter and Hodges (2010) argue that Jon Stewart's humor on *The Daily Show* performed three functions. It (1) helped to make traditional news media accountable to the public, it (2) reminded viewers what the standards of journalism should be, and (3) it taught

media literacy by exposing the inner workings of news media (2010). In this way the authors argue *The Daily Show* at least serves as a watchdog for the media. Berkowitz and Schwartz (2015), in an analysis involving the 'fake' news platform *The Onion*, argues that fake-news organizations along with bloggers and columnists act as the "fifth estate" (p. 13). These publications and organizations watch over and criticize the mainstream press, Berkowitz and Schwartz argue, as part of boundary work and paradigm repair processes (2015). So instead of suggesting political comedy is replacing traditional news such as Jones and Baym (2010), they argue it is an attempt to 'fix' it.

While abstaining from calling political humor a form of journalism, Peifer (2012) argues that it strengthens democracy by "prompting healthy skepticism and keeping the powerful honest" (p. 275). Peifer argues that because of its power, political humor has a social responsibility just like the traditional press—that is, political humor should "honor values of human dignity, truthfulness, and nonmaleficence" (2012, p. 275). This point is Peifer's weakest, because any episode of *Last Week Tonight* or *The Daily Show* arguably tests the limits of human dignity and especially nonmaleficence. It seems evident these programs are not held to the same standards as traditional news.

1.04 Bias in Political Comedy

The content of political comedy is overwhelmingly left-leaning and reflective of 'liberal' and 'democratic' ideology. While the issues and figures discussed vary by each program, they all reflect a generally progressive, anti-conservative message. Unfortunately, there is a lack of research on the ideological content of political comedy programs, however the literature does exist. For example, Morris (2009) found *The Daily Show'*s coverage of the Democratic and Republican Party Conventions ahead of the 2004 presidential election

differed greatly depending on the party. The program was more critical of Republicans by focusing on policy and character flaws while the criticism of Democrats focused on "innocuous physical attributes" (2009, p. 79). In another content analysis, Young (2013) found that both *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report* covered the radically progressive Occupy Wall Street movement in a positive light. As discussed below, literature on the attitudinal effects of political comedy can be inferred to provide examples of 'liberal' bias in political comedy because of its positive effect on progressive attitudes (Morris, 2009; Baumgartner, Morris, and Walth, 2012; Greenwood, Sorenson, and Warner, 2016). However, after conducting a content analysis of *The Daily Show* from January 2008 to June 2008, Teten (2008) argued that 'left-leaning' is an inaccurate way to describe the program. During the time period analyzed, Teten points out there were twice as many jokes about Democratic candidates than Republican. However, the study lacks a qualitative element as Teten doesn't discuss the differences in the types of jabs leveled at Democrats and Republicans.

Considering the ideological bias of political comedy along with the possibility of persuasive effects brings about the question of the overall impact of these programs. For example, Tsfati, Stroud, and Chotiner's (2014) study demonstrated that exposure to conservative/liberal media makes viewers "perceive a more conservative opinion climate and vice versa for liberal media" (p. 15). The implications of this perception are important for the present study and raise questions pertaining to why individuals consume political comedy. Literature on the possible reasons individuals watch political comedy should be considered.

Regarding *The Colbert Report*, Schill (2014) surveyed avowed fans of the program to find they watch because they either want entertainment or because *The Colbert Report* gratifies a social need for "community, validation, and confidence they are in the right"

(2014, p.771). This is an interesting result. It suggests the information on *The Colbert Report* may be less to blame for a polarizing effect than the audience's desire to gratify their own opinions. Young, on the other hand, (2013) found that humor and entertainment were the most prevalent reasons participants preferred programs such as *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report*.

1.05 Humor and Political Comedy

While humor may appear to be a straightforward concept, the issue has been discussed in psychology for well over a century (Freud, 1991). Peifer (2012), in trying to develop a normative rationale for political comedy, outlines the three main schools of thought in explaining humor. These are superiority theory, relief theory, and incongruity theory.

Superiority theory, which is concerned with the relationship between humor and power, holds that by laughing at something or someone's shortcomings, we are deriving humor from a momentary feeling of superiority. Relief theory, however, is concerned with the humor that comes from the release of 'nervous energy,' stress, or tension. For example, if there is an uncomfortable lull in conversation, someone may crack a joke to 'break the ice' and relieve tension. Lastly, Peifer describes incongruity theory. This has to do with humor resulting from differences from what someone expects and what actually happens; Peifer provides the example of a toddler saying a swear word.

While these theory traditions show that humor can be used and enjoyed in multiple ways, the focus of political humor is concerned with leveraging power (Peifer, 2012), particularly by commenting on the realm of formal politics. Naturally, political comedy is primarily concerned with the superiority theory of comedy. By lampooning certain issues or

figures, political comedy effectively makes them inferior to another issue or figure. This is not to say that political comedy cannot relieve tension, because the use of political comedy certainly does provide relief in the naturally tense area of politics (2012). However, the primary end of political comedy is to use humor to influence others and to leverage power.

1.06 The Effects of Political Comedy

When discussing the effects of political comedy, the three areas of focus are effects on knowledge, political participation, and political attitudes. Starting with knowledge, there are several studies that have found that viewers can glean information from political comedy. However, much of the literature suggests those who learn from political comedy are disinterested in politics or don't have a basic understanding of politics to begin with. For example, Xenos and Becker (2009) found that for less politically interested viewers political comedy may stimulate interest in news media content that follows. Consequently, these individuals may have a greater ability to learn news information after viewing the political comedy. In another study, Baek and Wojcieszak (2009) developed a model to measure political knowledge and utilized it to test the knowledge gained by watching late-night comedy. They found that watching late-night comedy does increase political knowledge, however this is generally only true for "widely known, thus relatively easy, political facts and issues" (2009, p. 797). They also found that the increase in knowledge was associated with individuals who were previously apathetic to public affairs. Baek and Wojcieszak conclude politically attentive viewers don't gain knowledge from late-night comedy. Similarly, Baum (2002) found that only politically uninvolved individuals can become attentive to news concerning foreign crises and other public affairs through the viewing of soft news. In this way, soft news can 'piggyback' information to be passively learned by indifferent viewers

(2002). While this can be seen as 'journalistic,' Baum admits that entertainment-oriented soft news media is a "relatively narrow lens" through which to see the world and it's only significant for the inattentive (2002, p. 106). In a study that suggests one's approach to political comedy will influence its effect on knowledge, Feldman (2013) found that viewers of *The Daily Show* who approached it as news or a mixture of news and entertainment were likely to learn more than individuals who approached it as purely entertainment. Feldman attributed this result to news-oriented-individuals putting more mental effort into consuming the program (2013).

While much of the literature suggests that political comedy may only have an educational function for those that are uninformed or uneducated, Becker and Bode conclude that *Last Week Tonight*, "like [*The Daily Show*] and [*The Colbert Report*] before it," contributes generally to citizen knowledge gain. According to Hardy, Gottfried, Winneg, and Jamieson (2014) and Becker and Bode (2017), the viewer-learning from political comedy is not limited to indifferent or lower-educated individuals on simple issues but can also be seen on complicated issues. For example, Hardy, et al's (2014) analysis of a random sample of adults found exposure to *The Colbert Report* increased how knowledgeable people felt about super PACs as well as increased their real knowledge about campaign finance regulation. They also found strong support that *The Colbert Report* influenced knowledge-gain more than any other type of news media. In a more recent study on issue-specific learning and engagement that compared political satire exposure and traditional news exposure, Becker and Bode (2017) found that *Last Week Tonight with John Oliver* is as good as news for learning about complicated issue debates—however, exposure to traditional news led to higher perceptions of the importance of the issues. These studies are consistent with that of

Jones and Baym (2010) and Baym (2005) who view political comedy—although primarily concerned with comedy and entertainment—as an "innovative and potentially powerful form of public information" (2005, p. 273). This contradicts Kim and Vishak (2008), who found that *The Daily Show* led to lower acquisition of political knowledge than traditional news media and a lower degree of accuracy in information 'holding.' Kim and Vishak suggest this difference arises from the inherently lower level of political knowledge in *The Daily Show* (2008). Similarly, in response to Baum (2002), Prior (2003) concluded there was little evidence that individuals learn from soft news and that it is unlikely to lead to a more-informed electorate.

The present study is particularly interested in the influence of partisanship, or political ideology, on political comedy effects. Canfield (2017) found evidence of this in his thesis on the effects of watching *The Colbert Report* on individuals' political knowledge and participation (2017). He found that non-Republican viewers gained political knowledge from exposure to the program. The Republican viewers, however, appeared to watch *The Colbert Report* solely for entertainment. These results will be discussed in greater detail below.

While much of the literature has to do with viewers' ability to learn from political comedy, research is also focused on the effects the programs can have on attention. For example, Feldman and Young (2008) found that exposure to late night comedy was associated with higher levels of attention to the 2004 presidential campaign in traditional television news. The viewers of *The Daily Show* maintained a high level of news attention regardless of election coverage. Similarly, Cao (2010) found a positive relationship between the issues that inattentive viewers of *The Daily Show* followed and those that the show covered. However, this relationship decreased the more politically-attentive the viewers

were, consistent with most of knowledge-effects research. At any rate, Cao suggested the finding reinforces the notion that political comedy can "direct viewers' attention to politics" (p. 42).

1.07 Political Comedy's Effect on Opinion

Concerning attitudinal effects, research on political comedy is interested in how the programs affect the political opinions or ideology of the viewers. The literature includes effects on attitudes toward political figures as well as political issues. There is a significant amount of evidence suggesting political comedy has a positive effect on liberal- and democratic-friendly opinions. For example, the results of Morris's (2009) analysis of panel data showed exposure to *The Daily Show's* coverage of the major party conventions was associated with greater negative feelings toward the Republican candidates for president and vice president, even when controlling for party identification. Morris notes this persuasive effect distinguishes it from the other late-night comedy programs and news sources included in the study. Other than influencing opinions in a specific ideological direction, Baumgartner and Morris (2006) found that young viewers who saw jokes about candidates of the 2004 presidential election on *The Daily Show* were likely to rate both candidates more negatively. These results led Baumgartner and Morris to conclude that *The Daily Show* could influence cynicism in the younger electorate and ultimately lead to a greater pessimism toward the political system. In a study of the effects of exposure to Tina Fey's impression of Sarah Palin on *Saturday Night Live*, Baumgartner, Morris, and Walth (2012) identified that young adults who watched the impersonation were associated with a greater decline in approval for Palin than those who did not. The authors conclude comedic caricatures of political figures may have a significant influence on individuals' attitudes about them, a suggestion relevant to all

forms of political comedy. Baumgartner and Morris's (2008) study paints a different picture of the effects of satirical political comedy concerning *The Colbert Report*. They found that exposure to *The Colbert Report* in young adults led to the opposite of the intended persuasive effect. While Colbert's show included implicit criticisms of George W. Bush and Republicans, those exposed to his program became more supportive of Bush and Republican policies. The authors argue that Colbert's brand of deep satire may have confused young viewers, in contrast to Jon Stewart's more-obvious satire. Because of this, Baumgartner and Morris claim that Colbert's humor coupled with explicitly Republican rhetoric serves to create a persuasive effect in the direction of the Republican message instead of the implicit criticism (2008).

More recently, Greenwood, Sorenson, and Warner (2016) studied exposure effects of *Last Week Tonight* in a simulated online environment. Using an experiment method, they found John Oliver's political comedy did have a persuasive effect on viewers' attitudes toward police militarization, racial discrimination, and payday lending, but this effect was lessened when coupled with conflicting Facebook comments. This study is important because it tested the effects of political comedy in a social media setting—an environment which has become notoriously associated with political discussion. Short video excerpts from political comedy programs such as *Last Week Tonight* or *The Daily Show with Trevor Noah* have become tools for individuals to express their political opinions. While Greenwood, Sorenson, and Warner's study was interested in *Last Week Tonight*'s effects on political attitudes, similar to the present study, they were concerned with the moderating effect of a social media setting. The present study is also concerned with effects on political attitudes, however, it deviates from the previous study in that it is concerned with the moderating effect of

previous exposure to political comedy and political disposition. Warner, et al. (2018), in a survey-experiment method similar to the present study, found that exposure to *Late Night with Seth Meyers* led to message-consistent persuasive effects, namely that exposure to criticism of Donald Trump led to lower evaluations of his image.

1.08 Political Comedy's Effect on Behavior

Other literature on the effects of political comedy are concerned with the shows' influences on behavior. Generally, the bulk of the data suggests political comedy does positively influence political participation. Hoffman and Young (2011), for example, found that exposure to political satire or parody may lead to higher levels of political participation. They suggest that viewing *The Daily Show* or *The Colbert Report* led to higher levels of individual efficacy, which the researchers equate to higher political participation. Interestingly, they found late-night comedy programs such as *The Tonight Show* or *The Late Show* did not have the same effect (however, it is worth noting this was before Colbert's move to *The Late Show*). Hoffman and Thomson's (2009) study on the civic participation of high school students achieved similar results. Political efficacy, as in Hoffman and Young (2011), resulted from the student's exposure to late-night TV comedy viewing and ultimately led to civic participation. Cao and Brewer (2008) also found results concerning exposure to political comedy and political participation. Their study suggests that Americans who reported learning about the 2004 presidential race from political comedy were positively associated with attending a campaign event or joining an organization. Also, according to Warner, et al (2018), as a result of attitudinal effects on Donald Trump's image, participants were less likely to intend to vote for him.

1.09 Selective Exposure and Echo Chambers

While effects research is important for this study, an understanding of literature pertaining to selective exposure and echo chambers is equally important. Theory on selective exposure—that is, the tendency for individuals to selectively expose themselves to media that reflects their own opinions—can be traced back to cognitive dissonance theory (Festinger, 1957). Cognitive dissonance theory holds that so as to not create dissonance in their heads, individuals will expose themselves only to information that they agree with. However, cognitive dissonance eventually came to be seen as too weak a reason to avoid political information, and interest in individuals' partisan selective exposure faded—that is until the era of media market fragmentation arrived as well as the explosion of choice for media audiences (Iyengar & Hahn, 2009). This explosion of choice led to audiences having a greater ability to select media that reflect their own opinions: "Given this dramatic increase in the number of available news outlets, it is not surprising that media choices increasingly reflect partisan considerations" (2009, p. 20). Iyengar and Hahn, using an experiment method, found Republicans and conservatives preferred to read news attributed to Fox News and to avoid NPR and CNN. Conversely, they found Democrats and liberals preferred to read NPR and CNN and avoided Fox News (2009).

Other research on partisan selective exposure includes Knobloch-Westerwick and Meng's (2009) study which used a cognitive dissonance theory approach. In their experiment, they found that participants were exposed to 'attitude-consistent' content 36 percent more than counter-attitudinal messages. Stroud (2008) similarly concluded that individuals practice partisan selective exposure concerning the news they consume. According to Stroud's analysis, 64 percent of conservative Republicans consume at least one

conservative media outlet in contrast to only 26 percent of liberal Democrats. Conversely, 76 percent of liberal Democrats consume at least one liberal outlet compared to 43 percent of conservative Republicans (2008). Gil de Zuñiga, Correa, and Valenzuela (2012) also found evidence for partisan selective exposure, consistent with Iyengar and Hahn (2009). They found conservative Republicans were more likely to be exposed to FOX News while liberal Democrats were more likely to watch CNN. Through an experiment, Garrett and Stroud (2014) found evidence news items that reinforced opinions were selected more frequently than those that did not. Interestingly, they also found Republicans and Democrats reported they would rather be exposed to more balanced news stories than more-partisan items. Garrett and Stroud made sense of this by suggesting that individual bias leads people to believe partisan sources are actually more balanced than less partisan sources (2014). In a more digitally aware study, Flaxman, Goel, and Rao (2016) studied the browsing histories of 50,000 individuals in the US. They found that "individuals generally read publications that are ideologically quite similar, and moreover, users that regularly read partisan articles are almost exclusively exposed to one side of the political spectrum" (p. 317).

There are less studies on selective exposure concerning political comedy specifically. However, in an experiment Stroud and Muddiman (2013) tested the partisan selective exposure of satirical news compared to regular news. They concluded that news with a comedic slant was more likely to make individuals selectively expose themselves to political information and that they were also less likely to be tolerant of opposing viewpoints. Because of this, they suggest political comedy is not conducive to democratic discourse. There is literature in support of Stroud and Muddiman's conclusion. For example, Young and Tisinger (2006), using secondary data, found that viewers of *The Daily Show* were more

likely to be liberal compared to other late-night audiences: "Political ideology is also a strong component of *Daily Show* preference such that moving one step in the liberal direction on the 5-point scale increased *Daily Show* preference by 32 percent" (2006, p. 126). Coe, et al. (2008) also found that 'Liberals' were likely to report watching *The Daily Show* and CNN and very unlikely to watch Fox News and *The O'Reilly Factor*. Interestingly, the authors found that liking "news that shares point of view" also predicted exposure to *The Daily Show* (and *The O'Reilly Factor*, although the relationship is weaker) (2008). This suggests the audience of *The Daily Show* (and perhaps other political comedy programs) may watch to reaffirm their own viewpoint. However, in a later study, party affiliation and political ideology were not found by Young (2013) to predict motivation to view political comedy. Similarly, Hmielowski, Holbert and Lee (2011) conducted a survey to find that political party identification and political ideology were not significant predictors of political comedy viewing. However, individuals who consume 'liberal-oriented' cable TV news were also likely to watch political comedy.

One of the most important concepts for this study is that of the 'echo chamber.' Echo chambers are the reinforcement phenomena that are a result of selective exposure and polarized media (Barberá, Jost, Nagler, Tucker, & Bonneau, 2015). There is a lack of an echo chamber paradigm in communication research. However, there is a general understanding of what an echo chamber is. According to Barberá, et al, echo chambers occur when "individuals expose themselves to information that simply reinforces their existing views" (p. 726). There is concern this reinforcement of ideas can lead to extremism and further political polarization. Recently, evidence of limited echo chambers has been found on social media (Barberá, et al, 2015; Colleoni, et al, 2014; Jacobson, Myung, & Johnson, 2015), however

research on the echo chamber roles of television programs alone is scarce, likely due to methodological barriers. Next, I'll discuss a theoretical tradition that provides a model for understanding and testing the creation of echo chambers.

1.10 Introducing Moderators of Political Comedy Effects

What is unique about the present media landscape is the unprecedented level of fragmentation. It begs the question; how does the formation of public opinion happen when there is no longer a unified mass culture but instead an array of diverse ideological subcultures? Slater (2007) proposed a framework for understanding the effects of media selectivity called the Reinforcing Spirals framework. This approach holds that if the use of a medium has a certain effect on beliefs and behaviors, and then also that if these beliefs and behaviors influence the use of the same medium, then the "process should be mutually enforcing over time" (p. 284-285). With the Reinforcing Spirals Model approach, Zhao (2009) analyzed cross-sectional survey data to find that newspaper and web consumption "mediated the effects of age, race, and education on perceived knowledge about global warming" while the perceived knowledge on global warming predicted the future "seeking of information" of global warming and the polar regions (p. 716). Similarly, Feldman, Myers, Hmielowski, and Leiserowitz (2014) used a two-wave survey method to find that those who watched conservative media were associated with lower levels of belief in global warming and lower levels of support for mitigating global warming. In contrast, nonconservative media-use had opposite results.

For this study, however, the interest is in the moderating effects of partisanship and previous *LWT* exposure on the attitudinal and behavioral effects of *Last Week Tonight with John Oliver*. The attitudinal aspect of the study is concerned with *LWT's* persuasive influence

on political attitudes and the behavioral aspect is concerned with its influence on intention for future political action. Much of the literature we have discussed has examined political ideology or partisanship as a moderator of political comedy effects. Many of the studies were able to control for political ideology or found that it had no significant effects (Young, 2004; Baumgartner & Morris, 2006; Baumgartner & Morris, 2008; Morris 2009; Hoffman & Thomson, 2009; Hoffman & Young, 2011; Hmielowski, Holbert & Lee, 2011; Young, 2013). However, there is also evidence that political ideology may moderate effects of political comedy. For example, Canfield (2017) found that Democrats and Independents were the only groups that acknowledged learning from *The Colbert Report* while Republicans only acknowledged being entertained. Baumgartner, Morris, and Walth (2012) found that Independents and Republicans were the most likely to have a more negative attitude about Sarah Palin after watching Tina Fey's impersonation on *Saturday Night Live*. While not concerned with the media effects of *The Colbert Report*, LaMarre, Landreville, and Beam (2009) examined how political ideology predicted perceptions of Colbert. They found that Colbert's 'deadpan satire' was interpreted by viewers according to their political beliefs. While Colbert was generally considered funny, the perceived target of jokes and his evaluation of liberalism or conservatism was dependent on the political ideology of the viewers. This suggests the influence of the program was moderated by political ideology. Since the results of these studies vary, it appears likely that the individual programs have varying effects. For example, *Last Week Tonight with John Oliver* does not reflect the same deadpan satire as *The Colbert Report*. However, the political nature of the show would suggest partisanship plays a role in how the content is interpreted and whether the viewer would intend to watch the program again.

Considering previous communication research on political comedy effects it seems likely that *Last Week Tonight* will have attitudinal, behavioral, and cognitive effects on its viewers. And while fewer previous studies have found political ideology and partisanship to moderate political comedy effects, the evidence of liberal/progressive selective exposure to political comedy suggests that *LWT* may contribute to a reinforcing spiral of attitudes. While literature pertaining to the Reinforcing Spirals Model is concerned with the influence of previous media exposure in other media types, how previous exposure to political comedy may moderate the effects of later viewing of political comedy in particular is largely missing from the literature. In an attempt to investigate the existence of a reinforcing spiral of opinions surrounding *LWT* (that is, the attitudinal effects of *LWT* will lead to a greater likelihood to consume the program and subsequently to continue being affected by it) this study will (1) examine partisanship and its influence on *LWT's* attitudinal, behavioral and knowledge effects and also (2) if previous exposure to *LWT* influences *LWT's* attitudinal, behavioral and knowledge effects. Depending on the results, there may be evidence there are characteristics of an echo chamber surrounding *LWT*.

1.11 Hypotheses

H1a: Individuals exposed to the *Last Week Tonight* video clip will be more knowledgeable about net neutrality than people who were not exposed to the video clip.

H1b: People exposed to the *Last Week Tonight* video clip will be more likely to have pro-net neutrality attitudes than people who were not exposed to the video clip.

H1c: People exposed to the *Last Week Tonight* video clip will be more likely to express their intention to take political action concerning net neutrality than people who were not exposed to the video clip.

H2a: Individuals with democratic partisan identity who were exposed to the *Last Week Tonight* video clip on net neutrality will be more knowledgeable about net neutrality than individuals who were not exposed to the video clip.

H2b: Individuals with democratic partisan identity who were exposed to the *Last Week Tonight* video clip on net neutrality will be more likely to have pro-net neutrality attitudes than individuals who were not exposed to the video clip.

H2c: Individuals with democratic partisan identity who were exposed to the *Last Week Tonight* video clip on net neutrality will be more likely to express their intention to take political action concerning net neutrality than individuals who were not exposed to the video clip.

H3a: Individuals with a higher previous exposure to *Last Week Tonight* who were exposed to

the *Last Week Tonight* video clip on net neutrality will be more knowledgeable about

net neutrality than individuals who were not exposed to the video clip

H3b: Individuals with a higher previous exposure to *Last Week Tonight* who were exposed to

the *Last Week Tonight* video clip on net neutrality will be more likely to have pro-net

neutrality attitudes than individuals who were not exposed to the video clip.

H3c: Individuals with a higher previous exposure to *Last Week Tonight* who were exposed to

the *Last Week Tonight* video clip on net neutrality will be more likely to express their

intention to take political action concerning net neutrality than those who were not

exposed to the video clip.

2. Method

The method for this study was a survey-experiment with the post measurement of knowledge about net neutrality, attitude toward net neutrality issues, and intention to take action with regard to net neutrality. A sample of 215 undergraduate students were offered extra credit as an incentive to participate. This sample was based on convenience and the involvement of instructors in the University of Houston's School of Communication.

The participants were randomly divided into two groups and provided with one of two links to online surveys. The first survey group, or test group, had 115 participants. The second survey group, or control group, had 100 participants. Of the participants 80.9 percent (n = 174) were 18-24 years old, 15.8 percent (n = 34) were 25-34 years old, and 3.3 percent (n = 7) were 35-44 years old. The respondents were 63.3 percent female (n = 136) and 36.3 percent male (n = 78). In both groups, the surveys measured (1) the participants age (18-24, 25-34, 35-44, 45-54, or above 55), (2) gender (male, female, other), (3) race (White, Black or African American, American Indian or Alaska Native, Asian, Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander, or Other), (4) their political disposition, as in liberal or conservative, on a seven-point scale (extremely liberal to extremely conservative), (5) partisanship, as in Democrat or Republican, on a seven-point scale (strong Democrat to strong Republican), (6) internet news consumption, (7) television news consumption, (8) print news consumption, and (9) radio news consumption, individually, on an eight-point scale (none, one day a week to seven days a week), (10) general previous political comedy exposure on a five-point scale (never to always), (11) previous *Last Week Tonight* (*LWT*) exposure on a five-point scale, (12) interest in the issue of net neutrality on a five-point scale (extremely interested to not at all interested), (13) perceived importance of net neutrality on a five-point scale, and (14) self-reported knowledge about Net Neutrality on a five-point scale.

Table 1. Sample distribution of key demographic and control variables

		Control Group	*LWT* net neutrality clip exposure	Group Comparisons
Gender				*Chi-Square =* 9.93(2), *p* = .382
	Male	33%	39.1%	
	Female	66%	60.9%	
	Other	1%	0%	
Age				*Chi-Square =* 2.14(2), *p* = .343
	18-24	85%	77.4%	
	25-34	12%	19.1%	
	35-44	3%	3.5%	
Race				*Chi-Square =* 2.22(3), *p* = .528
	White	35%	41.7%	
	Black	20%	13%	
	Asian	26%	26.1%	
	Other	19%	19.1%	
Partisanship				*Chi-Square =* 5.17(2), *p* = .075
	Democrat	47%	47%	
	Republican	38%	27%	
	Independent	15%	26.1%	

Note. Chi-Square significance at *p* < .05.

In both surveys, the participants were asked to watch a short video clip embedded in the survey. The test group clip was a five-minute excerpt of the May 7, 2017, episode of *LWT* on net neutrality. In this video, Oliver argues in favor of net neutrality and preserving the open internet rules. This episode was chosen because the topic of net neutrality is not necessarily partisan and so it is less likely that previous political ideology alone accounted for the study results. The control group video clip was an excerpt from the *Friends* television show that had no bearing on net neutrality.

After the participants were exposed to the video clip they were directed to complete the second half of the survey. In this portion, the participants were asked to confirm the name of the program they just watched and the topic as a manipulation check. They were then

asked a series of questions measuring their knowledge about net neutrality: (1) What is net neutrality?; (2) Who is in charge of regulating net neutrality?; (3) What Internet Service Provider (ISP) was FCC Chairman Ajit Pai employed by?; (4) President Donald Trump is in favor of net neutrality rules (T/F). Using likert-type instruments, the survey then measured participants' attitudes toward aspects of net neutrality present in the *LWT* episode on a seven-point scale (strongly disagree to strongly agree), including the consequence of net neutrality rules and the importance of preserving net neutrality rules. The statements they were asked about were: (1) Net neutrality rules put too much of a regulatory burden on Internet Service Providers; (2) Net neutrality will disrupt growth and investment; (3) It's important to preserve net neutrality rules; (4) Net neutrality enables and protects free speech; (5) Net neutrality is important for small businesses and startups.

In the next few survey questions, the participants were asked about their likelihood to participate politically on a seven-point scale. They were asked (1) How likely they were to express their opinion on social media (like Facebook, Twitter, etc.) or online public forums (like Reddit, etc.) about net neutrality; (2) How likely they were to write a comment on the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) webpage; and (3) How likely they were to contact their political representatives or public officials concerning net neutrality. Finally, the participants' likelihood to watch *LWT* in the future was also measured on a seven-point scale (extremely likely to extremely unlikely).

To prepare for analysis, certain measures were merged to create individual variables pertaining to their purpose. For the dependent variables, the composite variables were knowledge about net neutrality, intention to participate politically concerning net neutrality, and attitude toward net neutrality issues. The measures that were merged to create the

composite variables are available to see in Appendix B. For knowledge about net neutrality, measures 3, 4, 5, and 6 were merged. For intention to participate politically regarding net neutrality, measures 12, 13, and 14 were merged. For attitudes toward net neutrality, measures 7, 8, 9, 10, and 11 were merged. Also, to help with analyzing the data the independent variable groups were simplified. For example, partisanship was measured on a 7-point scale, but the respondents were broken down into three groups based on their measurements: (1. Democratic, 2. Independent, or 2. Republican). The same process was used for previous exposure to *LWT* (1. Never, 2. Rarely, and 3. More than half the time).

Table 2. Variable descriptive statistics

	N	*Mean*	*SD*	*Min*	*Max*
Knowledge about net neutrality	215	34.07	20.76	1	55
Attitudes toward net neutrality	215	4.84	1.43	1.2	7
Intention to participate politically	215	3.36	1.76	1	7
Partisanship	215	1.74	.78	1	3
Previous exposure to *LWT*	215	1.5	.72	1	3

Note. The knowledge variable is comprised of cumulative measures while all other variables are averaged scales.

3. Analysis and Results

3.01 Hypothesis 1 Analysis

ANOVA tests were conducted to analyze the data and test the hypotheses. To test H1, a one-way ANOVA was run to analyze the main effect of exposure to the *LWT* net neutrality video clip. The results of the test (table 1) showed a significant difference between the test group (those who were exposed to the *LWT* video clip) and the control group (those who were exposed only to the *Friends* video clip) on knowledge (F (1, 213) = 41.639, p = .000). Unsurprisingly, those who were exposed to the *LWT* video clip (M = 41.87, SD = 18.186) were much more knowledgeable about net neutrality than the control group (M = 25.09, SD = 19.954). Interestingly, there were no significant differences between the test group and control group concerning intention to take political action and attitude toward net neutrality issues.

Table 3. The main effects of exposure to *LWT* net neutrality clip on dependent variables

	Control group N=100	*LWT* clip exposure N=115
Knowledge about net neutrality (n = 215) F(1, 213) = 41.64, p = **.000**	25.05* (19.95)	41.87* (18.19)
Attitude toward net neutrality issues (n = 215) F(1, 213) = .47, p = .493	4.77 (1.36)	4.9 (1.50)
Intention to participate politically (n = 215) F(1, 213) = 2.34, p = .128	3.16 (1.74)	3.53 (1.77)

Note. Means are reported with standard deviations in parentheses. Asterisks (*) denote means are significantly different at $p < .05$.

For the rest of the analyses on moderating variables, two-way ANOVAs were conducted for each dependent variable to find interacting effects between the independent variable and the moderating variables.

3.02 Hypothesis 2 Analyses

To test H2, a series of two way ANOVAs were conducted using partisanship and exposure to the *LWT* video clip as the independent variables and knowledge about net neutrality (H2a), attitudes toward net neutrality(H2b), and intention to take action regarding net neutrality (H2c) as the dependent variables. The tests found there was a significant interaction effect between partisanship and exposure to the *LWT* net neutrality clip on attitudes about the net neutrality issues ($F(2) = 3.49$; $p = .032$). Democrats who were exposed to the clip ($M = 5.18$, $SD = 1.42$) were much more likely to have pro-net neutrality attitudes than Republicans who were exposed to the clip ($M = 4.06$, $SD = 1.43$). Interestingly, those who identified as independent were the most likely to have pro-net neutrality attitudes ($M = 5.23$, $SD = 1.43$). These results support H2b.

However, our data did not support H2a and H2c. There were no significant interaction effects between partisanship and the *LWT* clip exposure on knowledge ($F(2) = .666$; $p = .515$) nor on intention to participate politically ($F(2) = .18$; $p = .835$). However, the analysis did show there was a direct effect of partisanship on intention to take political action ($F(2) = 7.88$; $p = .000$). Democrats in general ($M = 3.82$, $SD = 1.75$) had greater intention to take action regarding net neutrality than Republicans ($M = 2.73$, $SD = 1.49$).

Table 4. The interaction effects between partisanship and exposure to *LWT* net neutrality clip

	Control group N= 100	*LWT* clip exposure N= 115
Knowledge		
Democrats	24.60 (19.86)	44.31 (16.97)
Independents	24.57 (20.35)	38.54 (19.76)
Republicans	27.89 (20.40)	40.94 (18.61)
	$F(2) = .666; p = .515$	
Attitudes*		
Democrats	4.80 (1.37)	5.18 (1.42)
Independents	4.67 (1.48)	5.23 (1.43)
Republicans	4.89 (1.01)	4.06 (1.43)
	$F(2) = 3.49; \boldsymbol{p = .032}$	
Participation		
Democrats	3.65 (1.84)	3.96 (1.68)
Independents	2.91 (1.65)	3.31 (1.94)
Republicans	2.27 (1.18)	2.97 (1.59)
	$F(2) = .18; p = .835$	

Note. Means are reported with standard deviations in parentheses. Asterisks (*) denote means are significantly different at $p < .05$.
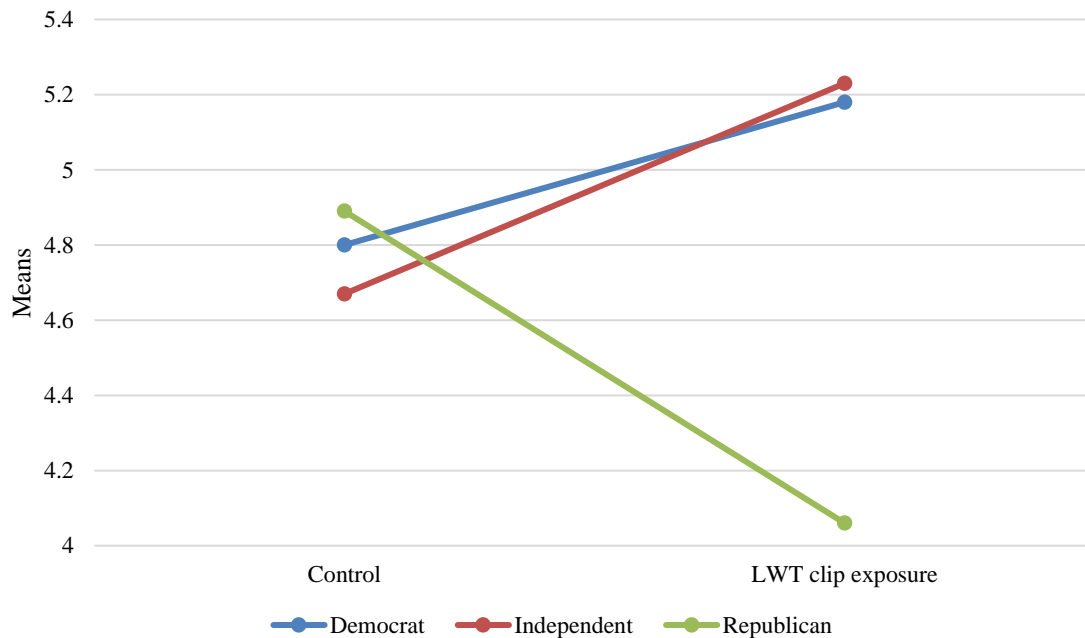

Figure 2. Interaction effect between partisanship and *LWT* clip exposure on attitudes toward net neutrality

3.03 Hypothesis 3 Analyses

To test H3, another series of two-way ANOVA tests were run to investigate the interaction effects of previous exposure to *LWT* (that is, the cumulative viewing habits before the experiment) and exposure to the *LWT* net neutrality clip on the dependent variables.

The results showed there was a significant interaction effect between previous exposure to *LWT* and exposure to the *LWT* net neutrality clip on intention to take political action regarding net neutrality (F(2) = 3.15; *p* = .045). For those who were exposed to the net neutrality clip, individuals who watched *LWT* more than half the time (M = 4.67, SD = 1.77) were more likely to intend to take political action than those who watch the program rarely (M = 3.35, SD = 1.69). The data support H3c. It's also important to note there was a significant direct effect of previous exposure to *LWT* on intention to act politically (F(2) = 3.48; *p* = .033). Those who watched the show more than half the time (M = 3.88, SD = 2.00) were much more likely to intend to act politically than those who never watched *LWT* (M = 3.15, SD = 1.73).

However, our data did not support H3a and H3b. Previous exposure and exposure to the *LWT* clip did not have a significant interaction effect on knowledge (F(2) = .352; *p* = .704). Moreover, there was no significant interaction effect between previous exposure and exposure to the *LWT* video clip on net neutrality on attitudes (F(2) = .501; *p* = .607). However, there was a direct effect of previous exposure to *LWT* found on attitudes about net neutrality (F(2) = 4.95; *p* = .008). Those who said they watched *LWT* more than half the time before the experiment (M = 5.49, SD = 1.53) were more likely to have pro-net neutrality attitudes than those who never watched the program before (M = 4.64, SD = 1.39) and those who rarely watched it (M = 5.00, SD = 1.39).

Table 5. The interaction effects between previous exposure to *LWT* and exposure to *LWT* net

neutrality clip

	Control group N = 100	*LWT* **clip exposure** N= 115
Knowledge		
Never exposed to *LWT*	23.31 (19.35)	39.33 (19.27)
Rarely exposed to *LWT*	28.53 (21.637)	48.32 (13.63)
More than half the time exposed to *LWT*	25.06 (19.27)	46.63 (15.14)
F(2) = .352; *p* = .704		
Attitudes		
Never Exposed to *LWT*	4.58 (1.38)	4.69 (1.41)
Rarely exposed to *LWT*	4.93 (1.29)	5.10 (1.54)
More than half the time exposed to *LWT*	5.16 (1.39)	5.86 (1.66)
F(2) = .501; *p* = .607		
Participation*		
Never Exposed to *LWT*	2.80 (1.68)	3.39 (1.74)
Rarely exposed to *LWT*	3.83 (1.59)	3.35 (1.69)
More than half the time exposed to *LWT*	3.20 (2.00)	4.67 (1.77)
F(2) = 3.147; ***p* = .045**		

Note. Means are reported with standard deviations in parentheses. Asterisks (*) denote means are significantly different at p < .05.
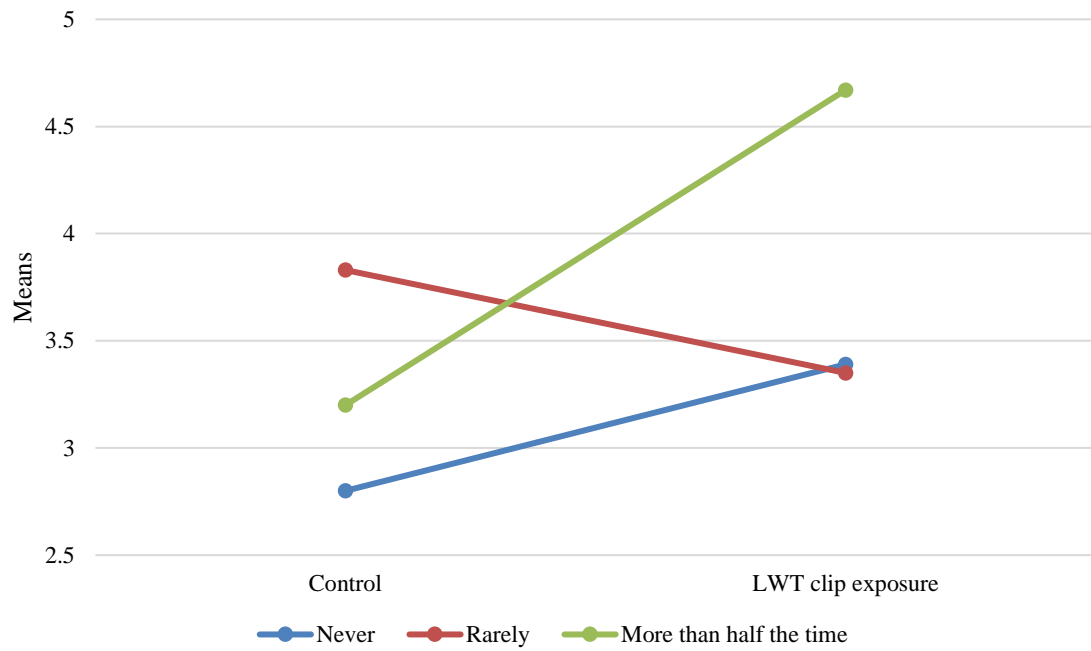
Figure 3. Interaction effect between previous *LWT* exposure and exposure to *LWT* net neutrality clip on intention to participate politically

4. Discussion

4.01 Direct Effect of *Last Week Tonight*

As much of the limited media effects communication research suggests, the direct effects of *Last Week Tonight* were slight. There were no significant effects on attitude toward net neutrality issues or intention to take political action. However, there was a significant effect on knowledge about net neutrality with those who were exposed to the *Last Week Tonight* video clip being much more knowledgeable about net neutrality than the control group. This is to be expected since the control group watched a video clip that had nothing to do with net neutrality. However, in the very least it shows that *Last Week Tonight* has basic informational value. This is consistent with most of the previous literature on cognitive effects that holds that the politically inattentive and uneducated are likely to learn basic information from political comedy (Baum, 2002; Xenos and Becker, 2009; Baek and Wojcieszak, 2009). However, it's difficult to confidently say that *LWT* has strong knowledge effects on more complex issues, as suggested by Becker and Bode (2017) and Hardy, et al (2014). However, what is also important to consider are the direct effects that are not present. There being no significant difference between the test group and control group on intention to take political action and attitudes puts the onus on this study's moderators: partisanship and previous exposure to *Last Week Tonight*.

4.02 Moderators of *Last Week Tonight* Effects

The results of the analyses suggest *Last Week Tonight with John Oliver* may at least contribute to an echo chamber effect. Individuals who identified as Democrats were much more likely to have pro-net neutrality attitudes after watching the *LWT* clip than Republicans. This same result was not found in the control group. Also, those with more previous

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exposure to *LWT* were more likely to express an intention to take political action regarding net neutrality after watching the *LWT* clip. This was also not found in the control group. The goal of this study was to determine if partisanship and previous exposure to *Last Week Tonight* would moderate *Last Week Tonight'*s effect on viewers' attitudes toward net neutrality issues, intention to take political action, and knowledge about net neutrality. The focus on attitudes comes from the ideological significance of political echo-chambers. As discussed in the literature review, there is an anxiety among communication scholars that audiences are fragmenting themselves into polarized groups based on the media they consume (Sunstein, 2009). Also discussed in the literature review, there is wide academic agreement that selective exposure occurs generally (Iyengar & Hah, 2009; Knobloch-Westerwick & Meng, 2009; Stroud, 2008; Gil de Zuniga, Correa & Valenzuela, 2012; Garrett & Stroud, 2014; Flaxman, Goel, and Rao, 2016) and there is substantial evidence that selective exposure is strong in political comedy programs (Stroud & Muddiman, 2013; Young & Tissinger, 2006; and Goe, et al, 2008). This literature, in tandem with literature that suggests political comedy has a "liberal" ideological slant (Morris, 2009; Young, 2013) and strong attitudinal effects (Morris, 2009; Baumgartner, Morris & Walth, 2012; Baumgartner & Morris, 2006; Greenwood, Sorenson & Warner, 2016), shows there is a strong potential for a political echo chamber of liberal/Democratic ideology.

Slater's (2007) Reinforcing Spirals Framework presents a conceptual rationale behind the formation of political echo chambers. While communication research on selective exposure and attitudinal effects has largely been separate, the Reinforcing Spirals Framework considers these two areas related. In this framework, selective exposure and attitudes are seen as mutually reinforcing. Because previous research suggests selective exposure and

attitudinal effects are present in political comedy—and because there is a lack of studies

investigating political comedy with a Reinforcing Spirals approach—the subsequent step in

communication research is to investigate political comedy with a method influenced by the

Reinforcing Spirals Framework approach. In the present study, this meant measuring *Last*

Week Tonight's effect on attitudes in consideration of the participants' partisanship and

previous exposure to *Last Week Tonight*. Because of *Last Week Tonight's* liberal bias, the

Reinforcing Spirals framework would suggest that Democrats with a higher level of exposure

to *Last Week Tonight* would mean a greater persuasive effect of *Last Week Tonight*. The

results of this study partially supported this prediction.

The analyses found that partisanship (Democrat/Republican) moderated *Last Week*

Tonight's effects on attitudes toward net neutrality. In the test group, those who identified as

Democrats were more likely to have pro-net neutrality attitudes than those who identified as

more Republicans. Interestingly, these same results were not found in the control group:

After watching the *Last Week Tonight* video clip, Democrats disagreed with Republicans.

However, for the control group who weren't exposed to the video clip, there was no such

disagreement between groups with the Republicans actually having marginally more pro-net

neutrality attitudes than Democrats and Independents. This suggests there is an interaction

between partisanship and *Last Week Tonight* on attitudinal effects. This reflects previous

findings (Baumgartner, Morris, & Walth, 2012; Morris, 2009; Greenwood, Sorenson, and

Warner, 2016; Warner, et al., 2018). The results of the analyses showed previous exposure to

Last Week Tonight did not moderate the attitudinal effects of *Last Week Tonight*. There is a

lack of literature on the effects of previous exposure to political comedy to compare these

effects to, however, these results are not consistent with the Reinforcing Spirals rationale that

continued ideological media use will reinforce attitudes (Zhao, 2009; Feldman, Myers,

Hmielowski, and Leiserowitz, 2014).

Another goal of this study was to gauge whether partisanship and previous exposure

to *LWT* would moderate the effect on intention to take political action. Intention to take

political action was included in this study because of the unique calls-to-action on *LWT*; and

while behavior is traditionally unrelated to research on political echo chambers, it represents

the manifest political effects on society and can be seen as an aspect of echo chambers.

Previous literature has found strong evidence that political comedy may influence political

participation (Hoffman & Young, 2011; Hoffman & Thomson, 2009; Cao & Brewer, 2008).

The results of the analyses were consistent with this literature. In the test group, individuals

that watched *LWT* more than half the time before the experiment were more likely to intend

to take political action than those who watched it rarely or never. However, no interaction

effect was found for partisanship.

Finally, this study was also interested in the moderating effects of partisanship and

previous exposure to *LWT* on the program's knowledge effects. However, no such effects

were found. This contradicts the findings of Canfield (2017), but perhaps the simplicity of

the issues and study design influenced the lack of results in this case.

4.03 Other Findings

While several aspects of the hypotheses were not supported, the analysis still showed

some interesting results. For example, a strong direct effect was found between partisanship

and intention to take political action. Democrats were much more likely than Independents or

Republicans to intend to take political action. This is difficult to make sense of and could be

a result of several things. Perhaps the issue of net neutrality is particularly important to

Democrats and so they are more likely to feel like they should act. Maybe Democratic undergraduates are particularly passionate about politics compared to their Republican and Independent counterparts. Also, the analysis showed there was a near significant direct effect between exposure to the *LWT* net neutrality clip and intention to take political action. This suggests a single viewing of a *LWT* episode may have a uniform effect on intention to participate. Perhaps a larger sample would find a more representative result.

Similar to partisanship, previous *Last Week Tonight* exposure was found to have a direct effect on intention to take political action. Those who watched *LWT* more than half the time before the experiment were more likely to intend to take political action than those who rarely watched the program and those who never watched the program. While this result is not related to the hypotheses, it is important for this study because it suggests a uniform cumulative effect of *LWT* on intention to participate politically. What is missing from the results is how partisanship influences the ways in which the viewers intend to participate. At any rate, these results support the findings of Hoffman and Young, 2011; Hoffman and Thomson, 2009; and Cao and Brewer, 2008.

5. Conclusion

The greatest issue with this study is a result of its method. A larger sample size would have provided stronger results, especially since the nature of this study requires secondary groups that have a much smaller number than the original sample. For example, only 13 respondents watched *LWT* more than half the time in the test group. Another weakness of this study is the lack of details concerning knowledge gained about *LWT*. It would be worthwhile to include varying levels of knowledge measures to better understand the depth of knowledge gained. Similarly, it would also be prudent to include participation measures that consider partisanship (e.g., "vote Republican/Democrat"). Obviously, the survey-experiment method carries inherent weaknesses. It's difficult to fully understand the effects of a single viewing of *LWT*, as well as its cumulative effects, through an online survey. Also, the self-reporting of intention to participate is problematic and cannot fully equate to behavior. Future research should employ an innovative methodology to better measure and understand political behavior.

To conclude, H1c, H2a, and H3b were supported. The support of H1c suggests *LWT* has a strong direct effect on knowledge and so has at least basic informational value. The support of H2a and H3b, however, suggests political comedy, or at least *Last Week Tonight*, may play a role in polarizing audiences and contributing to an echo chamber effect. Because there were differences between the test group and control group on attitudes about net neutrality, it appears *Last Week Tonight* may have cued partisans on how to feel about net neutrality. Those who didn't watch the clip had no indication of how John Oliver felt about net neutrality and so didn't base their opinions on him. However, Democrats who watched the clip were notified of how Oliver felt about the issues and so received a direction on how

they should feel. Similarly, Republicans realized where Oliver stood and were directed to disagree with him. It suggests John Oliver is a standard-bearer for the liberal camp, and because of this he is a guideline for both liberals and conservatives on how to stand on political issues. So, it can be argued that *Last Week Tonight* is at least a yardstick for partisans to base their opinions on. Future research should code for the content of the program to make claims about the agreement or disagreement with the program. However, the confirmation of H3b supports the echo-chamber argument. The amount of *LWT* exposure was associated with a greater intention to participate in the test group but not the control group. This suggests watching *LWT* consistently makes viewers more likely to act on John Oliver's calls to action. This can be likened to the Reinforcing Spirals model. However, the strong direct effect between previous *LWT* exposure and intention to participate complicates this, which is why future research should consider the partisan direction in the types of political action, similar to Warner, et al (2018). For the literature that uses a Reinforcing Spirals approach, this study provides evidence in support of a reinforcement process surrounding *LWT*: more *LWT* exposure leads to greater behavioral effects. Because there is a lack of conceptual agreement on political echo chambers, the Reinforcing Spirals model is a useful tool to use when considering research methods in this area. While this study's method couldn't prove the existence of an echo chamber, it at least suggests the right elements are in place.

Relevant here is Stroud and Muddiman's (2013) study that suggested political comedy has a unique, polarizing quality. It's also worth recalling Schill's (2014) study that found individuals watch political comedy in order to boost their confidence they are on the 'right' side of the issue. Perhaps both studies are correct in that the content of political

comedy is especially polarizing and that is the draw for the audience. Future research should continue to investigate the external qualities of media and political comedy that, as Stroud and Muddiman (2018) suggest, are particularly polarizing, but research should also focus on the socio-psychological schema of political polarization. It's disconcerting to think the internal processes that lead to an intense desire to 'feel' right should overcome the need to actually be right. Another area related to this is thought leadership and how thought leaders become polarizing figures. More research in these areas may help us to understand the ways in which Americans are allowing others to do their thinking for them.

Pre-video clip measures:

1. How old are you?
    a. 18-24
    b. 25-34
    c. 35-44
    d. 45-54
    e. Above 55
2. What is your gender?
    a. Male
    b. Female
    c. Other
3. What is your race?
    a. White
    b. Black or African American
    c. American Indian or Alaska Native
    d. Asian
    e. Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander
    f. Other
4. We hear a lot of talk these days about liberals and conservatives. Here is a seven-point scale on which the political views that people might hold are arranged from extremely liberal to extremely conservative. Where would you place **yourself** on this scale, or haven't you thought much about this?
    a. Extremely Liberal
    b. Liberal
    c. Slightly Liberal
    d. Moderate; middle of the road
    e. Slightly conservative
    f. Conservative
    g. Extremely conservative
    h. Don't know
5. Generally speaking, do you usually think of yourself as a…
    a. Strong democrat
    b. Not strong democrat
    c. Independent-democrat
    d. Independent
    e. Independent-republican
    f. Not strong republican
    g. Republican
6. During a typical week, how many days do you watch, read, or listen to news on the Internet, not including sports?
    a. None
    b. 1 day

c. 2 days
d. 3 days
e. 4 days
f. 5 days
g. 6 days
h. 7 days

7. During a typical week, how many days do you watch national news on TV, not including sports?
    a. None
    b. 1 day
    c. 2 days
    d. 3 days
    e. 4 days
    f. 5 days
    g. 6 days
    h. 7 days

8. During a typical week, how many days do you read news in a printed newspaper, not including sports?
    a. None
    b. 1 day
    c. 2 days
    d. 3 days
    e. 4 days
    f. 5 days
    g. 6 days
    h. 7 days

9. During a typical week, how many days do you listen to news on the radio, not including sports?
    a. None
    b. 1 day
    c. 2 days
    d. 3 days
    e. 4 days
    f. 5 days
    g. 6 days
    h. 7 days

10. How often do you watch late night comedy shows (The Daily Show, Full Frontal with Samantha Bee, Real Time with Bill Maher, etc.)?
    a. Never
    b. Rarely
    c. About half the time
    d. Most of the time
    e. Always

11. How often do you watch the comedy show *Last Week Tonight with John Oliver?*
    a. Never
    b. Rarely

  c. About half the time
  d. Most of the time
  e. Always
12. How interested are you in the issue of Net Neutrality?
  a. Extremely interested
  b. Very interested
  c. Moderately interested
  d. Slightly interested
  e. Not at all interested
13. How important is the issue of Net Neutrality to you?
  a. Extremely important
  b. Very important
  c. Moderately important
  d. Slightly important
  e. Not at all important
14. How knowledgeable are you about the issue of Net Neutrality?
  a. Extremely knowledgeable
  b. Very knowledgeable
  c. Moderately knowledgeable
  d. Slightly knowledgeable
  e. Not knowledgeable at all

Post-video clip measures:
1. Which of the following is the name of the show you just watched?
  a. Last Week Tonight with John Oliver
  b. The Colbert Report
  c. The Daily Show
  d. Friends
2. What topic is discussed in the video clip?
  a. Net Neutrality
  b. Sharing food
  c. Illegal immigration
  d. Unemployment
3. What is Net Neutrality?
  a. All data on the internet has to be treated equally
  b. Content on the internet has to reflect a neutral political point-of-view
  c. Any information has to be offered offline as well
  d. Neutral content gets preference online
4. Who is in charge of regulating net neutrality?
  a. The Federal Communications Commission (FCC)
  b. Cable companies
  c. Local utility companies
  d. Congress
5. What Internet Service Provider (ISP) was FCC Chairman Ajit Pai employed by?
  a. AT&T

b. Comcast
c. Verizon
d. Time Warner Cable
6. President Donald Trump is in favor of Net Neutrality rules.
   a. True
   b. False
7. Net Neutrality puts too much of a regulatory burden on internet service providers.
   a. Strongly disagree
   b. Disagree
   c. Somewhat disagree
   d. Neither agree nor disagree
   e. Somewhat agree
   f. Agree
   g. Strongly agree
8. Net Neutrality will disrupt growth and investment.
   a. Strongly disagree
   b. Disagree
   c. Somewhat disagree
   d. Neither agree nor disagree
   e. Somewhat agree
   f. Agree
   g. Strongly agree
9. It's important to preserve Net Neutrality rules.
   a. Strongly disagree
   b. Disagree
   c. Somewhat disagree
   d. Neither agree nor disagree
   e. Somewhat agree
   f. Agree
   g. Strongly agree
10. Net Neutrality enables and protects free speech.
   a. Strongly disagree
   b. Disagree
   c. Somewhat disagree
   d. Neither agree nor disagree
   e. Somewhat agree
   f. Agree
   g. Strongly agree
11. Net Neutrality is important for small businesses and startups.
   a. Strongly disagree
   b. Disagree
   c. Somewhat disagree
   d. Neither agree nor disagree
   e. Somewhat agree
   f. Agree
   g. Strongly agree

12. How likely are you to express your opinion on social media (like Facebook, Twitter, etc.) or online public forums (like Reddit, etc.) about Net Neutrality?
    a. Extremely likely
    b. Moderately likely
    c. Slightly likely
    d. Neither likely or unlikely
    e. Slightly unlikely
    f. Moderately unlikely
    g. Extremely unlikely
13. How likely are you to write a comment on the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) webpage?
    a. Extremely likely
    b. Moderately likely
    c. Slightly likely
    d. Neither likely or unlikely
    e. Slightly unlikely
    f. Moderately unlikely
    g. Extremely unlikely
14. How likely are you to contact your political representatives or public officials concerning Net Neutrality?
    a. Extremely likely
    b. Moderately likely
    c. Slightly likely
    d. Neither likely or unlikely
    e. Slightly unlikely
    f. Moderately unlikely
    g. Extremely unlikely
15. How likely are you to watch *Last Week Tonight with John Oliver* in the future?
    a. Extremely likely
    b. Moderately likely
    c. Slightly likely
    d. Neither likely or unlikely
    e. Slightly unlikely
    f. Moderately unlikely
    g. Extremely unlikely

Appendix B: Video Clips

Figure 4. Last Week Tonight with John Oliver, *net neutrality II (test): https://youtu.be/92vuuZt7wak*

Figure 5. Friends, *Joey doesn't share food (control): https://youtu.be/96DDkJMZd-Q*

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