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The Swiss "Tina Fey Effect": The Content of Late-Night Political Humor and the Negative Effects of Political Parody on the Evaluation of Politicians

Jörg Matthes [a] & Adrian Rauchfleisch [b]

[a] Department of Communication , University of Vienna , Austria

[b] Institute of Mass Communication and Media Research , University
of Zurich , Switzerland
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The Swiss ''Tina Fey Effect'': The Content of Late-Night Political Humor and the Negative Effects of Political Parody on the Evaluation of Politicians
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This article investigates the content and effects of political humor on late-night television. Besides conducting a systematic content analysis of a Swiss late-night show, this article examines the effects of late-night political parody on competence evaluations of politicians. An experiment manipulated the televised parody of a politician and measured political knowledge. Results show that exposure to a televised political parody decreased competence ratings of politicians only for individuals high in political knowledge. The reason is that viewers must already have an understanding of current political affairs to ''get the joke''—that is, the implicit message transported by the parody. The implications of such a negative ''Tina Fey Effect'' are discussed.

Keywords: Competence; Cynicism; Political Humor; Political Knowledge; Political Parody

Over the past few years, research on televised political humor has been rapidly increasing (see Baym, 2010; Baym & Jones, 2012a, 2012b; Compton, 2011; Day, 2011; Matthes, 2013; Young, 2011). The bulk of the evidence suggests that late-night

political humor shows can lead to negative evaluations of political candidates (Baumgartner & Morris, 2006; Young, 2004), foster high school students' civic participation (Hoffman & Thomson, 2009), or prime character traits when evaluating candidates (Brewer & Cao, 2006). Hardly any research, however, has studied the persuasive effects of parodying politicians on television. One prominent example is Tina Fey's imitation of Sarah Palin. In this context, it has been argued that political parody can have a "Tina Fey Effect"—that is, a negative effect on the evaluation of political leaders (Esralew & Young, 2012; Young, 2011). By political parody, we mean the humorous imitation of politicians. As we argue in this article, such political parody is fundamentally different from other forms of political humor, such as *news parodies*. In news parodies, as for instance *The Daily Show with John Stewart*, viewers are usually provided with news excerpts that give important background information (see Baym & Jones, 2012a). Parodies of politicians, in contrast, do usually not offer such background information, and viewers must have some background knowledge to "get the joke."

In this article, we explore the persuasive effects of such political parodies using a parody of a Swiss politician. Moreover, we also examine the content of a Swiss political satire TV show. We begin by summarizing content analytical studies on U.S. and European TV comedy shows. We then report findings from a descriptive content analysis of a market-leading Swiss late-night show. It is shown that political parody is a regularly used element in this show. The third part of the article turns to the persuasive effects of political parody on competence evaluations of politicians. We argue that political parodies influence competence evaluations by activating previously established negative knowledge structures. However, for this process to work, this negative information must be available and accessible in viewers' memory stores. As has been stated by humor theorists (Cunningham & Derks, 2005; Norrik, 1989), audience members are required to recognize the source text (episode or event) the parody is referring to. If they do, the implicit message of political parody primes this negative information in judgment formation. If viewers fail to recognize the source text, however, they might find the humorous depiction of a politician funny but they will not fully understand the nuanced context of the parody. An experimental study supports this line of reasoning. We show that political parodies can decrease competence ratings of politicians and increase cynicism for individuals *high* in political knowledge. We argue that people high in political knowledge are better equipped to decipher the negative context referred to by a parody.

The Content of Late-Night Comedy

A few studies have shed light on the content of late-night comedy in U.S. television. In their content analysis of four late-night shows (*The Tonight Show, The Late Show, Late Night,* and *Politically Incorrect*), Niven, Lichter, and Amundson (2003) found that politicians were a prominent target of jokes. It is interesting to note that policy issues were only rarely the object of jokes. Only 1 out of 10 political jokes was

directed toward a political issue. Similarly, a content analysis by Young (2004) suggested that most jokes in *The Late Show* with David Letterman and *The Tonight Show* with Jay Leno focused on the personal failings of presidential candidates, rather than on substantial issues. Also Brewer and Marquardt's (2007) content analytical findings suggest that *The Daily Show* has the potential to inform viewers about prominent political figures. Therefore, as Baumgartner and Morris (2006) concluded, "political comedy is largely focused on personality traits of public figures rather than policy" (p. 345). A more recent study by Morris (2009) provided a more fine-grained analysis of late-night content. He analyzed *The Daily Show*'s coverage of the Democratic and Republican Party conventions in 2004. Morris distinguished seven different tones of humor, complimentary, self-deprecating, physical, stereotypical, dismissive, policy-based, and character-based. It was found that political humor was heavily based on self-deprecation. Furthermore, roughly one-third of the humor used in *The Daily Show* exploited conventional stereotypes about Democrats and Republicans. Compared to Republicans, Democrats were more likely to be portrayed as pandering and politically bumbling. Jokes about Republicans, in contrast, focused on policy failures (21%) or character flaws (13%). Physical (7% Republicans and 28% Democrats) and character-based humor (1% Republicans and 13% Democrats) was also quite prominent. Compared to all these forms of person-centered humor, policy humor occurred less frequently (21% Republicans and 6% Democrats).

There are grounds to argue that U.S. late-night shows are different from European late-night shows. Political humor shows need to be understood in reference to the political culture, the journalistic culture, and the humor culture of a specific country. To begin with, there are differences between the European and the U.S. political cultures (e.g., Kaid & Holtz-Bacha, 2006). For instance, there is a difference between the two-party system found in the United States and the multiparty system of most European countries. In a two-party system, a stereotypical characterization of political parties is much more likely than in a multiparty system where the differences between political parties are less obvious.

When it comes to the journalistic cultures, one could argue that U.S. shows may be less likely to joke about foreign political actors compared to European shows. The reason is that foreign topics are more frequently covered in European news programs than they are in their U.S. counterparts (Wilke, Heimprecht, & Cohen, 2012). Along similar lines, there is an abundance of evidence that European politics is less personalized than U.S. politics (Adam & Maier, 2010). One could, therefore, expect that European shows are more issue-oriented and less person-oriented compared to U.S. shows (see Morris, 2009). There might also be differences between the United States and Europe when it comes to cultures of humor (see Baym & Jones, 2012a, 2012b). For instance, there are strong country differences in how humor is used in advertising (see Weinberger, Gulas, & Weinberger, 2012). However, we lack systematic knowledge about country differences when it comes to political humor.

In sum, we can conclude that U.S. shows are dominated by jokes about stereotypical or physical traits of political figures, rather than jokes about issue content.

It is important to note that such physical or stereotypical remarks can also signify other characteristics such as character flaws or policy performance.

Because the United States might differ from European countries with respect to the political culture, the journalistic culture, or the humor culture, a detailed analysis of a European political humor can provide useful insights. We, therefore, investigated in Study 1 the content of the prominent and market-leading Swiss late-night show *Giacobbo/Müller*. Because the literature does not unequivocally inform us about differences between U.S. and European shows, we do not formulate any hypotheses. However, to make the findings comparable, we adopted the content analytical codes by Morris (2009)—that is, we were interested in the issue of the jokes, the object of the jokes, and tone of the humor. In addition, we investigated the visualization of jokes. This leads to our first research question:

> RQ1: *How is political humor displayed in the show* Giacobbo/Müller, *in terms of issues, objects, tone of humor, and visualization?*

Study 1: Political Humor on Late-Night Television

The late-night Show *Giacobbo/Müller* is broadcasted every Sunday night at 10 p.m. on the public service television channel. Its viewership shares are over 20% higher than those of the benchmark national evening news show. *Giacobbo/Müller* is a satirical review of the week and has two anchors, Viktor Giacobbo and Mike Müller, roughly comparable to Jay Leno or David Letterman. Typical elements of the show are comedy, live music, guests, and a current affairs discussion between the two anchors. The parody of politicians and celebrities in special segments is another typical element of the show.

Method

For our content analysis, we selected all 28 shows that were broadcasted between May 2009 and May 2010. This frame was chosen to capture the Swiss–Libyan crisis, which is the topic of our stimulus material used in Study 2. Our codebook was derived from Morris (2009). The unit of analysis was the joke. In line with Morris, only jokes that targeted an object and that drew laughter from the audience were analyzed. Verbal jokes were statements about a target that prompted audience laughter. Visual aid jokes additionally displayed a picture or photograph. Video jokes encompassed video clips about a target prompting laughter. Finally, parodies were defined as small episodes imitating of a person to achieve a comic effect (Hariman, 2008; Henry & Rossen-Knill, 1998; Norrick, 1989). In line with past research (e.g., Young, 2004; see also Morris, 2009), the following variables were coded: joke issue, joke object, and joke visualization. Following Morris, we coded the tone of the humor for all jokes (the codebook is available from the authors).

Two coders analyzed all 28 shows and identified a total of $N = 1,211$ jokes. That makes approximately 43 jokes per episode. Intercoder reliability was determined

by coding a random sample of three shows ($n = 118$ jokes). The rather small sample seemed justified, as almost all of the jokes were obvious and easy to code. Krippendorff's alpha was calculated with a bootstrapping sample of 10,000 (Hayes & Krippendorff, 2007; $\alpha = .84$). No substantial differences in reliabilities between the several variables were observed.

Results

Table 1 shows the topics and the visualization of the jokes. As can be seen, more than one-half of the jokes used no visual aid. For roughly one-third of them a visual aid such as text or a picture was used. Only a small share of the jokes was based on a video clip or a clip showing a parody of a politician or celebrity. The topic of most jokes dealt with current affairs (42.4%), followed by politics (38%). The rest of the jokes were about celebrities, the two show anchors, sports, and other topics. In the last part of the show, a guest usually joins the anchors. There was at least one guest in every show. More than one-half were politicians (54%), followed by other prominent people (25%) and artists (21%).

More germane to the purposes of this article, only 138 out of 460 political jokes (i.e., 30%) focused on political figures or political parties. The rest of the jokes dealt with foreign policy (28.5%), the economy (13.0%), immigration/Islam (11.3%), environment/green topics (5.2%), the Army (4.3%), and other miscellaneous topics (7.7%).

When political figures or persons were targeted, then politicians from the centrist parties were most frequently joked about in the show (33.3%), followed by rightwing politicians (19.8%) and leftwing politicians (12.2%). Jokes about politicians holding executive office occurred twice as often as jokes about politicians in legislature. This can be explained by the higher national profile of executive politicians. Former minister Hans-Rudolf Merz was the most frequent target of political jokes (66 jokes), followed by Muammar Gaddafi (49 jokes). The rest of the jokes targeted other members of the Swiss government, all of them receiving about the same share of jokes.

Table 1 Topic and Visualization of Jokes on Late-Night Television (Study 1)

Topic of the Joke	Total	Visualization			
		Jokes without visual aid	Jokes with visual aid	Jokes with a short clip	Clip showing parody
Politics	460 (38.0%)	284 (40.7%)	142 (36.1%)	16 (18.2%)	18 (56.3%)
Celebrities	90 (7.4%)	53 (7.6%)	34 (8.7%)	3 (3.4%)	—
Sports	57 (4.7%)	32 (4.6%)	16 (4.1%)	4 (4.5%)	5 (15.6%)
Current affairs	514 (42.4%)	276 (39.5%)	180 (45.8%)	51 (58.0%)	7 (21.9%)
Show masters	72 (5.9%)	49 (7.0%)	20 (5.1%)	3 (3.4%)	—
Miscellaneous	18 (1.5%)	4 (0.6%)	1 (0.3%)	11 (12.5%)	2 (6.3%)
Total	1,211 (100%)	698 (57.7%)	393 (32.4%)	88 (7.3%)	32 (2.6%)

Twelve out of 32 parody clips were about Minister Hans-Rudolf Merz, whereas Muammar Gaddafi was shown in 10 parody clips. Although small in number, the parody clips usually lasted for 1 min, whereas ordinary jokes tend to last just a couple of seconds.

Regarding the tone of the humor (see Morris, 2009), one-third of all political jokes dealt with flawed policies (34.3%), followed by physical humor (22.8%), character-based humor (19.1%), and stereotypical humor (14.1%). When it comes to the jokes individual political figures, 37% of them dealt with physical appearance. For instance, 19 out of 49 jokes about Muammar Gaddafi, 16 out of 25 jokes about Federal Council member Doris Leuthard, and seven out of 16 jokes about Federal Council member Micheline Calmy-Rey focused on physical appearance (e.g., Gaddafi's uniform, Leuthard's beautiful looks, or Calmy-Rey's distinctive pageboy haircut). The rest of the jokes about political figures focused on policy issues (34%), followed by character traits (19%), personal stereotypes (8%), political publicity campaign (1%), and dismissive (<1%).

We ran an additional analysis to test if there was a systematic relationship between the use of visual aids and the tone of humor. It can be assumed that visualization is more likely to be employed with physical humor than policy humor. This was tested with a binary logistic regression. The use of visual aids was coded as 1 (with no visual aid coded as 0), and the dependent variable, the tone of the humor, was coded with 1 for physical and 0 for policy. This model predicted 73% of the variance—that is, visualization is a highly significant predictor of the tone of humor ($b = 2.00$, $p < .001$).

Discussion

Answering *RQ1, Giacobbo/Müller* can be best described as a hybrid form of *The Daily Show,* which has a stronger focus on (fake) news, and *The Late Show,* which is less political and based more heavily on prominent guests. In contrast to American shows (see Morris, 2009; Niven et al., 2003), however, *Giacobbo/Müller* is less focused on select prominent political opponents such as presidential candidates. Also contrary to U.S. formats, a large share of jokes dealt with substantial issues, rather than individual political actors. When individual political actors were targeted, still one-third of jokes referred to policy issues. This is in line with other studies demonstrating that European politics is less personalized than U.S. politics (Adam & Maier, 2010). However, it would be premature to conclude that U.S. political humor is more person-centered than European humor. Morris's study analyzed Democratic and Republican conventions that are, of course, focused on candidates. Moreover, even if the humor primarily focuses on candidates, jokes may also have an issue dimension. The distinction between issue dimension and personal dimension, however, is arguably hard to code in content analysis.

Also stereotypical humor is not as common in *Giacobbo/Müller* as it is in *The Daily Show* (Morris, 2009). This can be explained by the Swiss political system. In contrast to the United States, Switzerland has over 11 parties in the National Council, and the major parties include a broad spectrum of politicians. Only some parties like

the Swiss People's Party (rightwing party) or the Green Party (leftwing party) are associated with stereotypes. However, most other parties cannot be associated with typical stereotypes.

Political parody is a recurring element in the show. There was approximately one parody clip per show. It is important to note that *Giacobbo/Müller* does not follow a fake news show format like *The Daily Show*. This means that jokes were usually not accompanied by visual aids or excerpts from real news clips or newspapers. This suggests that people need to possess a certain degree of background knowledge to understand the political humor of the show. The political parody about Merz and Gaddafi—the stimulus material used for our experimental study—was not accompanied by detailed explanations.

The Effects of Late-Night Comedy

Having presented a content analysis of one European late-night show, we can now turn to the effects side. We start with a discussion of the effects of late-night comedy more generally. We then turn to the distinction between the explicit and implicit message of political humor. Finally, we derive several hypotheses about the effects of political parody and present an experimental study.

Persuasive effects of political humor. Young (2004, 2006) demonstrated that exposure to late-night shows had a negative effect on how viewers evaluated presidential candidates. Similarly, Baum (2005) found evidence that daytime talk shows lead politically less-informed individuals to evaluate Bill Clinton's management of foreign policy more negatively. Baumgartner and Morris (2006) also reported that exposure to *The Daily Show* with Jon Stewart resulted in negative ratings of presidential candidates, especially for those individuals who rarely watched the show. By the same token, Morris's (2009) analysis of the National Annenberg Election Survey during the 2004 national party conventions revealed that watching *The Daily Show* increased negativity toward President Bush and Vice-President Dick Cheney. All these negative effects of political humor are usually explained by the negative content of jokes that ''are built around simplistic, preexisting negative stereotypes'' (Baumgartner & Morris, 2008, p. 625). Furthermore, scholars assume that political humor decreases the ability and motivation to counter-argue (Baumgartner & Morris, 2008). This makes negative information particularly powerful.

Studies suggest that humor effects are more pronounced for individuals low in political knowledge (Baum, 2005; Young, 2004, 2006). Viewers low in knowledge might be unable to exercise resistance to the information conveyed in late-night comedy (Young, 2004). In contrast, highly knowledgeable individuals ''have well-formed belief systems, as well as, due to their greater attentiveness to politics, a far greater number of accessible considerations regarding typical political issues that they can bring to bear to 'counterargue,' and thereby resist *accepting*, dissonant messages'' (Baum, 2005, p. 216).

Explicit versus implicit message effects. As informative and plausible as these con-clusions are, we believe that there are some blind spots in extant research. The first issue concerns the complexity of humorous content. Some forms of politic humor, such as satire, offer both an explicit and an implicit message. The explicit message refers to the direct evaluative statements a satirist gives. The implicit message, in contrast, is indirect and requires cognitive effort and background knowledge (Baumgartner & Morris, 2008; Holbert, Hmielowski, Jain, Lather, & Morey, 2011). Following this line of reasoning, Baumgartner and Morris (2008) argue that ''in the case of satiric humor the audience may be drawn to the explicit or direct message rather than the implicit or indirect message'' (p. 626). The idea is that people simply follow the obvious, simplistic, and unflattering message that the show offers.

Yet, humor may vary in the extent to which an implicit message is present. In Young's (2004) study, for instance, the political humor referred to trivial aspects such as ''Bush's intelligence'' or ''Gore's stiff appearance and dull personality'' (p. 8). It can be speculated that audience members did not need much background knowledge to understand the meaning of these rather simple jokes. The same is true for bits on *The Daily Show* that explain candidates' shortcomings and flaws (see Baumgartner & Morris, 2006).

Other types of humor require more elaborate background knowledge to disen-tangle the implicit meanings (Hoffman & Young, 2011; Young, 2008). Baumgartner and Morris's (2008) study, for instance, dealt with Stephen Colbert's more complex and cognitively demanding satire. They found that persuasion was based on the explicit, rather than the implicit, message in *The Colbert Report*; thus, people did not really understand what the satirist wanted to convey in the first place. In a similar vein, Holbert et al. (2011) argued that ''the degree to which audience members have a basic level of understanding of the topic of the satirical message will influence the overall persuasiveness of the message'' (p. 193; see also Caufield, 2008; Schutz, 1995). They showed that cognitively demanding Juvenalian satire was more persuasive for people high in issue-specific knowledge than for less knowledgeable people. Also, Banjo (2011) theorized that ethnic humor messages ''are best interpreted when the perceiver has a preexisting knowledge-base of the topic'' (p. 141). It follows that people with high background knowledge seem to be able to decipher less obvious implicit messages in political satire. Therefore, Young's (2004, 2006) findings on the moderating role of political knowledge cannot be generalized to more demanding forms of political humor.

Furthermore, most research has focused on prominent humor features in *The Daily Show* or *The Late Show*. However, some forms of humor such as parody have been neglected (Esralew & Young, 2012). This is surprising, especially in light of Tina Fey's famous imitation of Sarah Palin in the 2008 election. As we will argue below, parody differs from more blatant forms of satire as it always contains references to real occurrences and episodes that viewers must be able to decode. There is an impor-tant difference between political parody and news parody (see Baym & Jones, 2012a, 2012b). News parody like *The Daily Show* transports an explicit, rather than an

implicit, message. By contrast, political parody always involves an implicit message that audiences need to understand. The effects of such implicit messages in political humor have remained virtually unexplored.

Explaining the Effects of Political Parody

As one form of satire, parody is usually defined as the exaggerated imitation of a person or a person's work to achieve a comic effect (Hariman, 2008; Henry & Rossen-Knill, 1998; Norrick, 1989). Parody involves four intentional acts (Henry & Rossen-Knill, 1998): (a) the imitation of some prior situation or text, (b) the flaunting of this situation or text, (c) a critical act, and (d) a comic act. More specifically, the relationship between the comic and the critical element makes parody ''more complicated than simple critique'' (p. 46). It follows that parody, as a complicated and abstract type of humor, requires cognitive ability. As Norrick explained, the parodist displays knowledge of the original situation (i.e., the source text) and challenges the audience to discover it—that is, the audience needs to refer back to the original situation or text and separate the comic from the critical element. Henry and Rossen-Knill described the following:

> The parodic message, whether it highlights criticism or humor, cannot take an explicit form .... Even the minimal parodic message must be ''worked out'' by an audience, with the understanding that the Speaker expects her audiences to work it out. (p. 46)

Based on these insights, we conclude that parody may speak to different audiences in different ways. Parody often refers to a negative prior situation, event, or text that audiences need to discover. If they succeed they will understand the critical element intended by the parodist. If they fail, however, they might respond with amusement due to the silliness of the parodic act, yet they are unable to separate the critical from the comic element and the deeper (implicit) meanings will not be understood.

In terms of the parody's persuasive effects, we can, thus, theorize that people high in background knowledge are more likely to be influenced by the hidden, implicit message. To reiterate, when the hidden message (or the source text) refers to negative information about the parodied person, highly knowledgeable people will be able to activate these negative knowledge structures. Similar to a *cognitive priming* process, the activated knowledge structures will then be used in forming a judgment about the humor object. Because this activation is accompanied by humor, the negative information will be processed by the peripheral, rather than the central, route (see Petty & Cacioppo, 1986), and counter-arguing will be inhibited (see Baumgartner & Morris, 2008; Young, 2004, 2008). For less knowledgeable people, in contrast, no activation of a negative source text should occur, because this negative information is not accessible in these people's memory stores. In such a situation, as Baumgartner and Morris (2008) put it, ''the 'true message' that the satiric humorist is attempting to convey may not be the one that audiences are processing'' (p. 626).

Hypotheses and Research Question

We test this idea with stimulus material consisting of a parody of the former Swiss minister Hans-Rudolf Merz that mocks his failed negotiations with former Libyan ruler Muammar Gaddafi. The footage was aired on the popular Swiss late-night comedy show *Giacobbo/Müller* in 2010. Just as Tina Fey imitated Sarah Palin, show anchor Mike Müller imitated Merz's negotiations with Gaddafi. Conceptually, the parody used in the current study is a form of Juvenalian satire because it can be characterized as contemptuous and abrasive.

In the negotiations that took place in 2010, minister Merz failed to protect national interests and his negotiation skills were generally perceived to be poor. We theorize that if people lack background knowledge they might find the silly imitation of Merz funny but fail to understand the implicit content. Because Merz's real negotiations with Gaddafi were informative about his negotiation and leadership skills, we expect an effect on the overall evaluation of Merz, his leadership skills, and his negotiation skills. Furthermore, since Hans-Rudolf Merz was a leading member of the government, we additionally assume that the negative effect of this parody for highly knowledgeable people will also increase political cynicism in general. The assumption is that knowledge about Merz's real performance primes the image of incompetent Swiss politicians. Taken together, we hypothesize the following:

> H1: For people high in political knowledge, exposure to a political parody about a
>   politician will have a negative effect on perceived leadership skills.
> H2: For people high in political knowledge, exposure to a political parody about a
>   politician will have a negative effect on perceived negotiation skills.
> H3: For people high in political knowledge, exposure to a political parody about a
>   politician will have a negative effect on overall evaluation.
> H4: When people are high in political knowledge, exposure to a political parody
>   about a politician will have a positive effect on general political cynicism.

An additional research question was formulated to explore the effects of parody for people low in political knowledge. Viewers low in political knowledge should be more likely to follow the explicit, rather than the implicit, message of the parody—that is, according to Baumgartner and Morris (2008), when viewers react more to the explicit than the implicit message, the elaboration likelihood model "suggests that the humor may block, disrupt, or distract further processing or elaboration of the message in the central route in viewers by causing positive affect in the viewer" (p. 635). This positive affect has a direct influence on evaluative judgments in turn (Baumgartner & Morris, 2008). In terms of affective priming (Forgas, 1995), this would mean that exposure to political parody puts low knowledge people in a positive mood which, in turn, shapes the evaluation of the humor object. Rephrased, for less knowledgeable individuals, the humor-based positive mood automatically increases the accessibility of positive thoughts. As a result, positive thoughts about minister Merz become salient in people's memory stores and more positive attitudes follow. Such an *affective priming* mechanism, however, is inhibited for people with

strong background knowledge. These people's attitudes are, rather, based on a cognitive priming mechanism activated by the parody's implicit message. It can, therefore, be expected that the positive mood created by the perceived funniness of the stimulus material should impact only the attitudes of less knowledgeable individuals, not those of highly knowledgeable individuals. Because these relationships are rather complex, we formulate a general research question:

> RQ2: *Does the positive mood created in low-knowledgeable individuals yield any persuasive effects?*

Study 2: The Persuasive Effects of Political Parody

Method

A total of 51 participants participated in the experiment (41% female, age: $M = 28.70$, $SD = 10.01$). Participants were invited through student mailing lists. Most participants were students. As an incentive, participants were entered into a lottery (with a value of about $200.00) in exchange for their participation.

Design

We employed an experimental design including a control group and a parody condition. Political knowledge was measured as a quasi-experimental factor.

Data Analyses

Because of the small sample size, all analyses were tested with bootstrapping to demonstrate their robustness. Political knowledge was treated as a continuous moderator.

Stimulus Materials and Procedures

The parody clip showed the former minister Hans-Rudolf Merz, mocking his failed negotiations with Muammar Gaddafi over the release of two Swiss citizens held by Libya. In 2008, one of Muammar Gaddafi's sons was arrested in Geneva on domestic violence charges. Annoyed by the whole process, Muammar Gaddafi announced an economic boycott of Switzerland, and two Swiss citizens were arrested in Libya for supposed visa irregularities. In August 2009, Hans-Rudolf Merz travelled to Tripoli and formally apologized for the arrest of Gaddafi's son. In addition to delivering this rather unusual apology, Merz failed to receive any written security that the hostages would be released. Merz's actions were widely criticized in the Swiss press and considered inappropriate.

As stimulus material, we used a televised parody of several meetings between Merz and Gaddafi. The parody clip was embedded in a shortened 7 min version of the show *Giacobbo/Müller*. The parody ridiculed Merz as a spineless servant of Gaddafi. It is,

thus, not a simple mimicry, but an aggressive and contemptuous form of satire (i.e., Juvenalian satire). Merz was shown serving Gaddafi tea, being forced by Gaddafi to throw darts at his own picture, and behaving in an overly obedient and polite fashion. The parody alluded to the real negotiations between the two by using a very similar visual setting and by shortly mentioning Gaddafi's sons, as well as the hostages. As is typical in parodies, the full background of the Swiss–Libyan crisis was not explained. All key elements of parody were present (Henry & Rossen-Knill, 1998): There was an imitation of a prior event (i.e., the failed negotiations); the flaunting of this event; and, thus, a critical message (i.e., Merz failed and did a poor job), as well as a comic act (i.e., the silly, exaggerated, and funny imitation of Merz and Gaddafi).

The control group was exposed to a 7-min, non-humorous science show about sunglasses. Participants were randomly assigned to one of the two conditions.

Measures

Nine items rating the competence of Hans-Rudolf Merz on a 5-point scale formed the dependent variables. A principal component analysis with oblimin rotation revealed two factors: leadership skills (5 items; $M = 2.55$, $SD = 0.58$; $\alpha = .74$) and negotiation skills (4 items; $M = 2.46$, $SD = 0.59$; $\alpha = .70$). As a third measure, global likeability was gauged by one item ("How much do you generally like Hans-Rudolf Merz, both as a politician and as a person"), with response options ranging from 1 (*not at all*) to 10 (*very much*) ($M = 4.84$, $SD = 1.87$). Political cynicism was measured with four standard items. One item referred to the poor performance of politicians in protecting the country's interests, an important aspect of cynicism for small countries. Cynicism was uncorrelated to global likeability and negotiation skills but significantly correlated with leadership skills ($r = -.41$, $p < .001$)

To capture political knowledge, participants were asked five standard multiple-choice questions about civic knowledge and the Swiss Federal Council (for a similar measure, see Young, 2004). Political knowledge was calculated by adding up the number of correct answers (0–5 right answers; $M = 2.90$, $SD = 1.06$). Political knowledge did not differ between the two experimental groups ($F < 1$). We measured the perceived funniness of the stimulus material with three items ("funny," "amusing," and "hilarious"; 5-point scale; $M = 2.81$, $SD = 1.31$; $\alpha = .96$). Party identification, political interest, and political ideology were controlled. The measures are available from the authors.

Results

The humor manipulation worked very well: Respondents in the parody group reported significantly higher perceived humor ($M = 3.80$, $SD = 0.99$) than respondents in the control group ($M = 2.06$, $SD = 0.99$), $F(1, 51) = 38.60$, $p < .001$. It is interesting to note that the effect of condition (parody group $= 2$, control group $= 1$) on perceived humor was slightly higher for people high in political knowledge

compared to people low in knowledge, although not significant by conventional criteria (ordinary least squares regression; interaction between condition and knowledge; $b = 0.175$, $p = .054$). However, the effect of condition on perceived humor was also highly significant ($b = 0.39$, $p < .001$) for those with very low levels of political knowledge (1 SD below the mean).

H1 through *H4* predicted that exposure to parody should lead to more negative evaluations of Merz in particular and politicians in general, especially for people high in political knowledge. Results of a moderated regression analysis confirmed these expectations. When it comes to Merz's leadership skills ($R^2 = .28$), we found a significant interaction effect of condition with knowledge ($b = -0.19$, $p < .05$). The negative sign of this interaction indicates that the negative effect of parody becomes stronger with rising levels of political knowledge. To further interpret this interaction, we estimated the effect of condition for all levels of the moderator (Bauer & Curran, 2005; Hayes & Matthes, 2009). When political knowledge was higher than 3.30 on a 5-point scale, the effect of condition on leadership skills was significantly negative ($p < .05$, ranging from $b = -0.19$ to $b = -0.51$). In contrast, when political knowledge was very low (below .20 on a 5-point scale), the effect of condition was significantly positive ($p < .05$, ranging from $b = 0.39$ to $b = 0.42$). The interaction is visualized in Figure 1.

The same negative interaction was found for negotiation skills ($b = -0.17$, $p < .05$; $R^2 = .28$) and global likeability ($b = -0.54$, $p < .05$; $R^2 = .29$). For people scoring higher than 4.01 on political knowledge, exposure to political parody had a negative effect on negotiation skills ($p < .05$, ranging from $b = -0.28$ to $b = -0.43$). In contrast, for people with a knowledge score below 0.13, parody had a positive effect on perceived negotiation skills ($p < .05$, ranging from $b = 0.39$ to $b = 0.42$). For global likeability, highly knowledgeable people (higher than 4.8) reacted with negative attitudes following parody exposure ($p < .05$, ranging from $b = -0.17$ to $b = -0.28$).
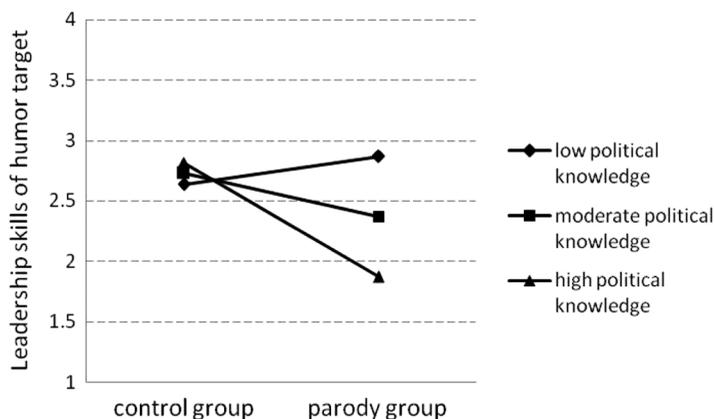
Figure 1 Evaluation of leadership skills by condition, estimated with moderated regression at low (1 *SD* below the mean), moderate, and high (1 *SD* above the mean) levels of political knowledge.

Again, the opposite was true for people low in political knowledge (scoring below 1.05; $p < .05$, ranging from $b = 0.86$ to $b = 1.40$). This confirms *H1* through *H3*.

In line with *H4*, we found a significant positive interaction between condition and knowledge ($b = 0.20$, $p < .05$; $R^2 = .37$) on cynicism. Extremely knowledgeable individuals reacted with cynicism after they were exposed to the Merz–Gaddafi parody (scoring higher than 4.80; $p < .05$, ranging from $b = 0.48$ to $b = 0.50$). However, people low in political knowledge exhibited no significant effect of condition on cynicism.

To answer *RQ2*, we estimated additional moderated mediation models. The relationship between condition and the evaluation of Merz was mediated by perceived funniness. Then, the effect of perceived funniness on evaluation of Merz was moderated by political knowledge. A moderated mediation analysis for global likeability revealed an effect of condition on perceived funniness ($b = 0.58$, $p < .001$). More important, the effect of perceived funniness on global liking was moderated by political knowledge (interaction term: $b = -0.74$, $p < .05$). The negative sign of this interaction suggests that funniness increases global likeability with decreasing levels of political knowledge. In fact, the conditional indirect effect of condition was significantly positive when political knowledge was 2.25 or less ($p < .05$; statistically different from zero using a 95% bootstrap confidence interval based on 5,000 bootstrap samples; z ranging from $z = 2.09$ to $z = 2.35$; b ranging from $b = 0.51$ to $b = 1.48$). There were no effects whatsoever when political knowledge was above 2.25.

The same pattern was found for negotiation skills: Besides the effect of condition on funniness ($b = 0.60$, $p < .05$), a significant interaction between funniness and knowledge occurred when explaining negotiation skills (interaction term: $b = -0.17$, $p < .05$). The conditional indirect effect of condition on negotiation skills through funniness was positive when political knowledge was below 2.00 ($p < .05$ using 5,000 bootstrapping samples, z ranging from $z = 2.01$ to $z = 2.10$; b ranging from $b = 0.16$ to $b = 0.37$). The effect was visible, but less strong, for leadership skills. Although the effect of condition on funniness was highly significant ($b = 0.58$, $p < .05$), the interaction between funniness and knowledge exceeded established levels of significance ($p = .055$). Still, we found that the conditional indirect effect using 5,000 bootstrapping samples was statistically different from zero when knowledge was below 1 (z ranging from $z = 1.77$ to $z = 1.85$; b ranging from $b = 0.21$ to $b = 0.30$). For political cynicism as the dependent variable, there were no conditional indirect effects (i.e., interaction of funniness and knowledge $b = 0.13$, $p = .24$). This makes sense because we also found no effect of condition for low-knowledge people when testing *H4*.

Discussion

The results of this experiment support our theorizing that the effects of political parody depend on viewer's knowledge levels. It was only when viewers were able to understand the background, hints, and negative allusions employed in a political parody that negative images about the target were activated. The parody mocking minister Merz's negotiations with Gaddafi reminded high-knowledge individuals of
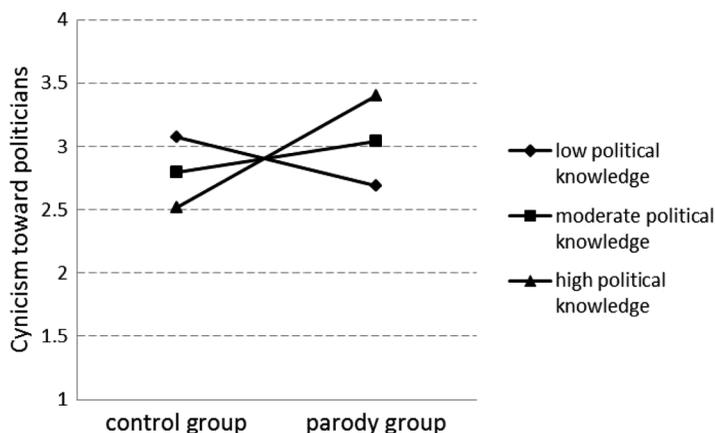
Figure 2   Political cynicism by condition, estimated with moderated regression at low (1 *SD* below the mean), moderate, and high (1 *SD* above the mean) levels of political knowledge.

Merz's poor and scandalous performance. The implicit message of the parody was negative; it carried a number of subtle allusions. Yet, the decoding of these allusions required a basic understanding of day-to-day politics as measured by political knowledge.

We also demonstrated that less knowledgeable individuals were influenced by the positive affect that the parody elicited. They found the explicit message of the parody funny and this positive affect carried through to their evaluation of Merz. This affective mechanism, however, was inhibited in highly knowledge people. The positive effect for low-knowledge people is consistent with the findings by Baumgartner and Morris (2008) showing that younger viewers—that are typically less politically knowledgeable compared to older ones (p. 634)—were persuaded by the explicit but unintended message, rather than the implicit and actual message of *The Colbert Report*.

It is interesting to note that the effects for low-knowledge individuals were considerably smaller than the effects for their high-knowledge counterparts (see Figures 1 and 2). This indicates that the (implicit) negative effects were stronger than the (explicit) positive effects. It is also noteworthy that the (explicit) positive effects were largest when general likeability was used as the dependent variable. These effects were not significant for political cynicism and rather small for leadership skills and negotiation skills. Although caution is warranted in interpreting these tiny differences, these findings could lead to the hypothesis that the positive affective mechanism triggered by the explicit message has more impact on affect-based liking-ratings than more cognitively based competence ratings.

General Discussion

This article adds to previous scholarship in various ways. First, we provided a systematic content analysis of a European late-night show. For the Swiss format we sampled, political humor was found to be less person-centered and more issue-focused

compared to the popular U.S. formats. When political actors were targeted, stereotypical, physical, and character-based humor was less common compared to the United States. Second, our article is—except for the recent study by Esralew and Young (2012)—one of the first attempts to investigate the persuasive effects of one specific form of political satire (i.e., political parody). We found evidence for a "Tina Fey Effect"—that is, a negative effect of political parody on the evaluation of politicians. Third, we have answered the call by Esralew and Young to "consider the moderating effects of individual level constructs" such as political knowledge (p. 351). We provided some first evidence that the persuasive effects of political parody are contingent on viewers' political knowledge.

What we learn from this research is that political parody is a special form of satire that demands background knowledge because a specific situation is referred to but not explained. The true persuasive message is, therefore, implicit. To elicit such intended, yet implicit, effects of parody, viewers must have a basic understanding of the source text to "get the joke." Otherwise, their laughter is based on plain silliness, shaping their judgments through positive affect. All parody—whether European or American—carries such implicit messages that audiences must decode.

The implications of our findings suggest three things. First, it is important to more carefully consider the unique role of parody in political humor research. Parody can vary along several important dimensions including the complexity of the humor, the negativity of the implicit message, silliness, or the extent to which parody actually alludes to true events or source texts. These dimensions, although important, could not be experimentally varied in our study. Second, but closely related, our findings point to the necessity of broadening our understanding of the explicit and implicit content of political humor. Not all political humor carries implicit content, and if it does, this content can be more or less abstract or obvious. Further research is needed to specify all the conditions that help to explain why some people react in completely different ways to humor than others. Political knowledge is without a doubt one relevant factor in this process, but it is certainly not the only one. Future studies should either measure issue-specific knowledge, or causally manipulate background knowledge to trigger the perception of the implicit message.

On the methodological side, we also have barely any knowledge about the durability and, therefore, relevance of such effects. Can political humor—if repeated several times in a campaign—really shape perceptions about individual politicians (or politicians in general) for a longer period, or do these effects vanish once people are exposed to non-entertainment news? Although our data are not able to answer this question, we should keep in mind that Hans-Rudolf Merz was the most frequent target of the show, due to the Swiss–Libyan crisis. This, of course, underlines the external validity of our study. But, more important, one could surmise that such frequent targeting of one single politician about one single issue might have more far-reaching consequences than the results of our experiment suggest.

Limitations

The sample size of our experiment was rather small. However, all moderated regression and moderated mediation effects were rigorously tested by a bootstrapping procedure. Because bootstrapping confirmed all effects, their statistical power is fully sufficient. Political knowledge was not manipulated but measured as a quasi-experimental factor; this is, of course, an impediment to drawing causal conclusions. However, knowledge was unrelated to our parody manipulation. We were not able to explicitly model the activation of negative knowledge structures as a mediator. What is more, our study used negative evaluations as the dependent variable which might be a concept that is too narrow to fully describe the effects of political parody.

Finally, we did not demonstrate that the mechanisms found here do not apply to other types of humor. However, beside the *control condition* and the *parody condition,* we additionally exposed 26 participants to a *news condition* about Merz's negotiations with Gaddafi. Dependent variables were identical to Study 2. There was neither a direct effect of exposure on any dependent variable, nor was there any interaction with political knowledge. In other words, when participants saw a news clip that reported about Merz's failed negotiations, this had no consequence for attitudinal outcomes. This supports the conclusion that the findings of Study 2 are unique to political parody. This also suggests that the implicit message of the parody was much more critical and fierce compared to the news report. As always, more research is needed to back up this conclusion.

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