

# Are Late Night TV Shows in the Polarizing Society? Examining the Ambivalence of New Version of Political Partisanship in the United States?

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## Abstract

This study examines the role of Late-Night Television shows (LNTV) play in the United States and their contributed towards the political polarization society. The study used qualitative content analyses to generate theme emerging from 87 questionnaires that collected from an online survey conducted with 23 LNTV show hosts in the United States. The findings indicate that many LNTVS hosts have a partisan affiliation that they contagiously infuse into their audience. On the other hand, the findings indicate that LNTV hosts have less freedom to create their own content, therefore, providing less ethnical consideration for their audience. Most of all, the findings indicate that LNTV shows rank politics as providing most newsworthy content than any criteria.

**Keywords:** Late-night-television; Polarization; Media-content; Partisanship

## Introduction

The 2016 United States presidential campaigns and elections presented a more polarized society [1]. Current debates in media and communication research are peppered with the notion that social and political polarizations are rapidly increasing [2-4]. Critics attribute this rise to the 2008 Presidential campaigns. According to the 2014 Pew data, the percentage divide of polarization has skyrocketed from 10% to over 21% since 1994. In its survey of 10 thousand participants nationwide, the study found out that while 92% of the Republicans were to the right of the median Democrat, 94% of the Democrats were also to the left of the median Republican. This implies that while there has been a decrease in the ideological overlap between the Democratic and the Republican Parties, their ideological thinking has become more aligned to political partisanship. Abramowitz and Saunders [2] conclude in their detailed survey analysis that the increase in ideological polarization in the United States are reflected in

large different outlooks between the Democrats and the Republicans; red state voters and blue state voters; religious vs. secular, and involve a large segment of the public incorporating most informed, interested, and active citizens. Unfortunately, such a trend has equally taken precedence in today's media as reflected in Late Night Television Shows.

It is, therefore, the objective of this study to examine the influence of Late Night TV Shows in the polarization of the US society. It further seeks to find out the ethical commitments of the LNTVS and how much they base their programming on politics while ignoring pertinent issues affecting society. Overall, the study seeks to reinforce the initial objective of traditional media such as late-night TV shows in service the general public and not dividing people through political affiliations.

The study used qualitative content analyses to generate theme emerging from 87 questionnaires that collected from an online survey conducted with 23 LNTV show hosts in the United States. Findings indicate that LNTV shows in the United States are first a main news source of a young generation, and are increasingly widening the gap of political partisanship.

## Rationale of the study

Studies that have sought to understand and contextualize media polarization in the United States have studied the phenomenon in a broader perspective. In similar studies, media is taken as a whole without characterizing it to either traditional or non-traditional. Prior [4] study employed a similar approach, therefore encountering challenges in quantifying the causal link between partisan messages and changing attitudes. Therefore, the significance of this study lies in the examination of the phenomenon from a narrower perspective of LNTV, hence giving us an opportunity to understand this polarization from a key, yet overlooked standpoint. The three overarching questions the study addressed were:

**RQ. 1:** To what extent do LNTV host safeguard balanced reporting that accommodates various opinions and feelings of other political parties?

**Rationale:** Research done on Late Night TV shows mostly presents a positive vibe about its role in accommodating free speech and mitigating hegemonic narratives. While this might have been true in the past, LNTV shows are becoming a new version for Political partisanship.

**RQ.2:** How would the LNTV hosts describe their freedom to create their own content for the show?

**Rationale:** In a common parlance, editorial freedom is a terra incognita. Since the LNTV shows are now a few face for journalism, the logic of self-censorship would apply to them as well.

**RQ3.2:** How would you describe your commitment to safeguarding professional journalism ethics that renders trust and respect for your undefined audience?

**Rationale:** The fact that Late Night TV shows are known for their adult rated content makes it imperative to assess the deliberate measures that LNTV hosts put forth to ascertain ethical standards in their broadcasts. With the proliferation of the online access, LNTV shows' audiences have become undefined in all demographic characteristics.

## Media and Political Partisanship in the United States

Despite the growing challenges of societal and Political polarization, the US media has always been on a rollercoaster of objective reporting. The earliest Mass Media developed under the revolutionary theme with an intention to champion the cause for independence from England. Bailyn and Hench [5] assert that, during that time, only one of the seven papers in Boston were neutral. Four of them were 'loyalist', while the remaining two were 'patriotic'. Such a trend was perpetuated even after independence in 1776. Newspaper contents were characterized by 'neighborhood gossip rags and occasional police blotters that exposed local criminals and their activities [6].

Political partisanship in the media was especially pronounced after Martin Van Buren concretized the Democratic party with an imperative of being elected President. His campaigns changed media formats into propaganda fledged organs, with editors being under the payrolls of political parties. Such an affront to media credibility bred a journalism that sought to serve the general public with facts, and not political partisan propaganda and thus, the birth of the 'Penny Press'. For Carter [7], it was the American Civil War of 1861 that brought a revolution to the media. During the time, people become less interested in sensational stories, but facts about the war. This brought sanity in the field of journalism; demanding accuracy and concise unbiased information sent from the battle fields through telegraphs. The hectic transmission process also paved a way for the Association Press (AP) to create a hub for new sourcing. This hub had rules and guidelines that called for brevity and newsworthy stories, thus ruling out the possibility for unprofessional journalism and therefore creating a way for ethical reporting.

However, the 1947 Hutchins Commission's dissatisfaction with reporting facts truthfully began to purge away the commitments to accuracy and objectivity in their literal sense. According to the Hutchins Commissions report, "it was no longer necessary to report the facts truthfully, but the truths about the facts". This meant that journalists or rather reporters were given room to infuse in opinions and biases in their stories as long as they brought out the truth about the stories. Notably, Television Stars such as Edward R. Murrow, New York Times columnist, James B. Reston, and many others, began to exercise this privilege as early as the 1950s. This gave power and authority to journalists as sources and custodians of truth and information; reinforced Edmund Burke and Thomas Carlyle statements that the Media was the "Fourth Estate". While this trend gave power to the media and all those that reported the news, worries about objectivity and biased reporting became a mirage. Journalists started serving their interests and those of the organization. This misstep exonerated professional ethics in the media, therefore paving way for journalism into a profession for grabs.

Around the 1950s, 'infotainment' became a virtue. Advertently, Late Night TV shows began to emerge with Steven Allen as among a few pioneers. Nonetheless, David Letterman and Conan O'Brien revolutionized LNTV into what we know them today. The main objective was to convey information or news to the public in a more digested and entertaining way. Essentially, it involved discussing emerging issues within society in a way that concurrently entertains and educates. In other words, they were designed to 'infotain' [8]. While some LNTVS have emerged and disappeared, the recent trend shows a plethora of them competing for the same platform.

Although the main objective is not only to discuss and analyze politics, the current situation proves otherwise. Politics, and especially in the era of Trump has become a defining feature for these shows [1]. Other politicians and those with political agenda have also taken advantage of the conventional wisdom of traditional media to air their views through such platforms [9]. As their spotlight increases with political events, the shows tend to cling to politics alone; disregarding other events that society is facing. Since politics survives under competing views, The Late-Night TV shows are inclined to sticking with a single perspective, so as to win and maintain their audience [10]. In this way, those opinions that are not represented tend to shun away from the show and the publics that do not support their view; thus, contributing to a schism in opinion between society.

## Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

Although there is a plethora of studies about media influence on society, very few have discussed media and polarization. Most of all, scanty research discusses Late-Night TV shows. However, other than Pew Research studies, media pundits, political scientists and other communication scholars as a whole, have begun to raise debates on the notion of persuasion and the ramifications of selective exposure in the

current non-traditional popular media environment [1,4]. Initially, non-traditional and popular media were perceived as positive and championing the negative propagandist roles of the media. Hall and Gramsci's hegemonic understanding of the media called for a panacea that required the general public to participate in setting the agenda for society. Popular media and culture were considered one among a few of the champions for media hegemony.

The case is different in today's media where the elites have taken over both non-traditional and popular culture. The recent past has witnessed the proliferation of many politicians taking control of non-traditional platforms such as Late-Night TV Shows, music, movies, etc., so as to reach a population that they might not reach through mainstream media [11]. As the Pew Research's 2006 Biennial Media Consumption dataset revealed, many young Americans get their news from non-traditional media in compensation for their apathy toward the mainstream media. As such, the importance of Late Night shows has become conventional wisdom for politicians and all that share a political agenda to audiences that are less interested or knowledgeable about politics than the typical audience for traditional news [12]. In their findings after analyzing the 1992 and 1996 elections, Owen and Davis [13] concluded that many politicians utilized non-traditional media in their campaigns. Sarver [11] asserts that this phenomenon is accelerated in the Late-Night world where politicians are turned into a monologue punch line and are willing to put themselves up for potential embarrassment in an effort to reach voters.

### LNTV shows and the political hegemonic narratives

Although the trend for politicians to take control of the Late-Night TV shows has existed since the 1960s (as observed in Nixon, John Kelly, etc.), Niven, et al. [14] observed that political jokes were consistent among the TV shows regardless of the political affiliations of the candidate at stake. According to the three authors, comedians had generally developed a template of anti-politician humor that drew upon whichever politician regardless of their political affiliation. However, after the 2008 election, as Schweikart [6] claims, the TV shows and their hosts began turning into partisanship; giving opportunities and less scrutiny and embarrassment to a party they affiliate themselves with. This has divided the society especially into Democrat or Republican with no room to opening up to other party's opinions among the audience. It is no wonder Gitlin [15] and Waxman [9] argued that today's Late-Night TV shows are a new version of political parties. This implies that an avid viewer or subscriber for a certain LNTVS automatically characterizes one and makes them partisan for the party that show propagates.

Such sentiments are however refuted by other eminent political science scholars such as Fiorina, Abrams, and Pope [16] who argued that increasing polarization was largely a myth. In their book, "In Culture War? The Myth of a Polarized America", the three authors conclude that studies that have argued for the polarization of the US society have misreading

data. Therefore, they hold that most Americans have moderate views on most issues. This study also reflects the findings of Glaeser and Ward [17] who held that the notion of American Political polarization was merely a myth of American political geography. While this debate remains inconclusive questions as to whether political polarizations is a myth or are still imperative. As expressed by Gentzkow [1], the inconclusiveness could be the result of differences in how scholars and the American society as a whole summarize their own views. These perspectives are rooted in the way they identify a political party and describe its ideologies.

### Method

As noted earlier, the study's purposive and convenient sample was drawn from 23 recognized Late-Night TV show hosts. At first, the study employed a standard 'Survey Analytics' questionnaire designed with a total of 27 questions. An attempt was made to incorporate a representative sample of all the current Late-Night TV shows in the United States. Television Networks (ABC, CBS, NBC, TBS, Comedy Central, HBO, PBS, Showtime, and TV One) that run the LNTVS were identified. The first approach in identifying the host and the show they run. The actual sampling was carried out in stages.

The first stage was to create a list of all Late-Night TV shows in the United States. Because of the different genres that the shows run (e.g. Trevor Noah's show vs. Oprah Winfrey show), the paper employed Holbert's nine-part typology for the study of entertainment and politics. Of the nine-part, we focus on one category he calls, Traditional Satire. Traditional Satire includes all late-night talk show monologues that run political messages predominantly implied by the very nature of being grounded in humor.

The data collection was carried out from May through August 2017. Questionnaires designed through the Survey Analytics software were sent to the 10 television networks via email. Our hope was that the main host of the show and their supporting hosts fill in the questionnaires. However, our questions were accommodative to representatives hosts as well. However, only 87 respondents were able to respond, therefore, yielding a response rate of 67% percent. This was rendered inadequate for quantitative data analysis.

Nonetheless, since the questions on the survey were designed with a qualitative perspective, the responses were made relevant for a qualitative study. Therefore, the researcher generated themes from the 87 questionnaires returned. The themes generated were designed to reflect and answer the overarching research questions for the study. Below are the main themes designed from the questionnaire:

- Value of covering political news other than other pertinent issues
- Hosts' perception of their freedom to create content
- Hosts commitment to safeguarding media ethics
- Hosts' perception of the value and motives of their TV networks.

## The Profile of the Respondents

While considering other forms of gender, this question was specially designed to determine what gender dominates Late Night TV shows in the United States. Of the 87 responses received, 51.62 percent came from respondents that identified themselves as male, and 32.48 percent from female respondents. 14 respondents (16.09) chose not to register their gender. Therefore, the findings indicate that most of the Late-Night TV shows that base their comedy on politics in the United States are male dominated. Education background of the hosts was not considered as relevant in this study despite the fact that it plays a vital role in understanding the knowledge possessed by those creating content for us. This topic will be saved for a different study.

## Results

One among the key questions in this study was to determine the motivation of the Late-Night TV show hosts for the job they do, and why they work for their network. Below is the summary of their response. Dominant in the narratives of LNTV show host was the description that the love for comedy was their strongest motivation. Many of them described their motivation as being driven not driven by financial incentives, but by the love that they have developed throughout their experience. Nonetheless, in spite of 'the love for comedy' being the main motivation characteristics, their narratives were also tied into remuneration. This expression of rather idealistic motivations correlates with what similar studies have revealed [11,13]. Late Night TV shows provide the opportunity to participate in the major issues of public life in the United States and influence public opinion.

### Perception of hosts' freedom to create content

Three central indicators were used to gauge the perceptions of the autonomy the hosts had in creating content: autonomy in selecting the stories to run, Autonomy in deciding aspects of the story to be emphasized, and the ability to get the subject or idea that one thinks is important. It is not surprising, however, that the autonomy to create their own content recorded a low motivation index. For many hosts, while they had the opportunity to create content, their messages were not always accepted. To this, many hosts described how it was important to create content that reflected their goals; which in practices are the goals of the owners of the television networks they work for. Most surprisingly, the opportunity to contribute to national development did not come out as absolutely important to many hosts. Many respondents described their freedom as centered on the mission, goals and objectives of the television network. However, a number of them described their desire to add content beyond what they present.

In quantitative terms, most of the hosts for the Late-Night TV shows have a high autonomy to select the stories they wish to run. This is indicated with a percentage of 43.70 of 'somewhat' freedom. A 20.68% indicates that the hosts have

almost complete freedom, but with 10.34% concluding that they have no absolute freedom. On the other hand, only 21.83% of the respondents indicated that they had complete freedom to decide what aspect of the story to emphasize. However, a relatively high percentage of 24.26% falls under the 'somewhat' degree of freedom. Overall, if one adds the positive responses, statistics suggest that a larger percentage of the respondents feel that they have a high degree in deciding what aspect of the story should be emphasized. Regarding the ability to get the idea they thought need to be covered, 46.09% of the respondents indicated that they had the opportunity to set the agenda of the subject as opposed to 12.62% that thought they did not have any freedom at all. Similar studies on Journalism freedom support these findings.

### Hosts' commitment to media ethics

The commitment towards ethical and moral standards of the media was central to this study especially that the hosts use mainstream media for their comedy. The proliferation of media access has led to a diverse demography in age and opinion. With this in mind, the theme was created to determine the host's consideration of ethical standards given the fact that their audience could include teenagers. One respondent had this to say, "Comedy is a creative art, and it's impossible to talk of ethics in creativity...We do comedy, therefore our main objective to entertain". A number of respondents shared the same sentiments although they did acknowledge that ethics was necessary. They argued that they do make an effort to balance their content through the inclusion of a multiplicity of sources or perspectives to the story. Nonetheless, many of them justified their circumstances as necessary and a reflection of our current society. Surprising percentages, depending on the issue, think that these practices (widely. A relatively large number were not sure, didn't know or refused to commit to the statement.

The only ethical violation that got considerable rejection was the practice of taking a bribe to censor or kill a story. Many of them contended that it was impossible to do that unless that story was from the inside and tarnish on the show's image. "Its common knowledge, you cannot or rather it's hard to self-criticize".

### Value of covering political news other than other pertinent issues

The set of questions regarding public affairs were designed to test the degree of awareness of important issues and also to test what the TV hosts considered newsworthy for their programming. In their narratives, a number of hosts believe that issues of government and politics in the United States rank first in what was newsworthy for the public. They went to an extent of questioning whether it was possible to separate society from political issues. For many, they indicated that political issues were characterized by government issues. Other related issues of 'farming potatoes in Idaho' were not important for political discussion.



Also, of high importance are issues of corruption and Transparency as well as celebrity news and gossips. The respondents put Health and Religious issues as well as development issues in the lowest category. As they continued to argue, their role was to entertain. One respondent narrated that "When we as comedians are looking for ideas for comedy, we go for something that we believe has humor in it. Human interest is our priority. We don't just go for anything because it is pertinent to society, but because it can bring humor to our audience".

Overall, an overwhelming majority (82.8%) of the hosts indicated the necessity for Late Night TV shows in the United States to include other pertinent issues outside politics in their programming. They perceived that the actual performance by many television hosts was only at a level of good to fair. Most would rate their television network as only fair or weak in reporting issues outside politics that had direct effects on the public society.

### Hosts' perception on the value and motives of their TV networks

Respondents were also asked to indicate their assessment of what constituted the goals and motives of their television networks. Despite the fact that the Late-Night TV show comedians are not necessarily considered as professional journalists, they identify themselves with the market model of professional journalism and agreed to the fact that audience research was essential for bringing about the adaptation of the programming to contemporary and pertinent contexts. One respondent argued that it was important to continually improve the professional quality of their shows. This respondent asserted that the shows were dependent of their audience, so as much as their TV networks objectives were a priority, they were in no way supposed to conflict with the objectives of their audience. However, many could not answer whether that statement implied even in conflicting situations where the demands of both the republican and democratic parties were fulfilled.

Nonetheless, the fact that 45.97% of the respondents still think that marketing/promotions were more important than professionalism is a revealing factor. This finding counteracts the 39.08% that believes that profit supersedes professionalism. It is not surprising to note that many comedians that work for television networks are excluded from the position of professional journalists. Above all, it is not surprising that 29.88% of the respondent believe that the 2016 presidential campaigns have improved or increased the viewership of their program. In the same way, 32.20% agree to some extent, giving a positive response total of 62.08%.

## Discussion

The findings in this study present many pertinent issues that could explain how the media in the United States has led to a political polarization of its society. A number of themes were developed, but more importantly, those that looked at the motivation of the hosts of the Late-Night TV shows, their

perception of freedom to create content, their ethical considerations, and the values they attach to their programs in relation to the unity or polarization of the United Society. The findings presented infer to the fact that the motivation of the hosts are neither rooted in trying to unite the United States nor in polarizing society [18]. Their main objective as repeatedly described was to present humorous events. However, given the fact that the love for comedy, remuneration and the chance to influence their audience rank first, we can deduce that these motivations are directed towards polarizing the US society politically.

When it comes to freedom to create content, it is overwhelming to learn that a larger percentage of the hosts believe that they have that opportunity to influence content. However, studies in journalism argue that press freedom is mostly regulated by editors and self-interested ownership [19-21]. It is arguably true that Late Night TV shows are not a one-man show, but a collective work by the media crew as well as editors. Therefore, other than the censorship that is rooted in the policies of the network the hosts' work for, editors equally play the role in gatekeeping through the sifting of what comes in and goes out of content. It is, therefore, a little wonder that many hosts supported the goals of the media they work for despite the fact that they did not agree to some of the objectives and guidelines of the media. For example, if a host worked for a network owned by FOX news, they will in all ways try to align to the values and principles of that institution despite the fact that they might disagree with some grounding values. It is unfortunate that even private media have joined this affiliation trend, emerging to support either republican or democratic party. Purcell, et al. [22] therefore argue that almost all LNTV shows have fallen under the spell of partisanship.

Most of all, it is revealing that a commitment to ethics was not the hosts' main issue in the category. Unity, as opposed to polarization, in any form and state, requires at least a deliberate consideration of ethical values. In uniting the United States society, hosts need to consider how their programming might harm the society in different ways. This includes the way their messages that they might not fully believe in, but still have to disseminate because of the goals of the institution they work for, could affect society. As custodians of truth (at least as many audience members think) they have the duty to present not only facts but also balanced ones with different opinion views. Otherwise, LNTVS have to revert to their original objective of critiquing all politicians with no sides to take. In that way, they would be able to present entertainment and educate their publics without bias, thus concurrently meeting the objectives of the institutions and that of comedy. This will in other ways increase their viewership since everyone will feel at home, and not as being attacked.

## Conclusion

The current study, like many, is obviously prone to limitations. The first limitation is common to this type of research. While we were able to categorize different types of Late Night TV shows using Holbert's nine-part typology, we

also agree to the fact that it is hard to separate shows that are politically inclined from those that are not. In this were, a thorough, and most probably a qualitative in-depth study is recommended.

Second, it is not clear as to who really filled in the survey questionnaires, which we believe might have been filled by representatives that might not be comedians. In this case, we recommend self-administered questionnaires. We believe that although the questions were all encompassing, some were more directed towards the hosts themselves. We assume it is the reason for some incoherence in certain results. Further, given some funding and incentives, the study would recommend that we increase the number of questions in the survey. 27 questions suffice in a situation where no incentives were given to the participant. Therefore, we seek to expand our study in different ways that range from the sample size to the familiarization of distinctions in LNTV shows.

Overall, despite the limitations, the study presents useful information in providing evidence regarding issues that have current superficial impressions about the media and political polarization in the United States. A survey of this type is most useful as a basis for further research.

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