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**Soft News and The Four Oprah Effects**

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Introduction

On September 21, 2009, President Barack Obama became the first sitting U.S. president to appear on a network late-night comedy show when he took to the stage of the Late Show With David Letterman. This appearance – Obama’s fifth on the Letterman show – capped an intensive media push by the President to promote health care reform, a push that included interviews on five Sunday news shows the previous day. The interview addressed a variety of public policy topics, ranging from the state of the economy to the war in Afghanistan, as well as how the President’s children were adjusting to life in the White House.¹

This raises the question of why any politician, let alone a sitting president, would choose to add a late night comedy-oriented talk show to his already-crowded weekend media itinerary of five appearances on traditional news and political interview shows. One obvious answer concerns the magnitude of Letterman’s audience. Nearly 7.2 million Americans tuned in to watch the President on the Letterman show—the largest audience for the show in four years. This represents more than double the 3.1 million who tuned in to Obama’s more traditional news interview the day before on ABC’s This Week with George Stephanopoulos.

A second, perhaps slightly less obvious answer concerns the nature of Letterman’s audience. Compared to the typical audience for traditional news and interview programs such as ABC’s This Week, Letterman’s audience is less politically engaged, less ideologically extreme and less partisan (Baum 2003 and 2005, Baum and Jamison 2006). Consequently, Letterman’s viewers are more likely to be persuaded by a presidential appeal than the relatively more partisan and ideologically extreme audiences of typical traditional news outlets (Zaller 1992).
Finally, such interviews tend to present candidates in a more favorable light than traditional political interview shows. For example, commenting on a different 2008 presidential candidate’s talk show appearances, Gold (2007) observes, “John and Elizabeth Edwards got substantially gentler treatment from Leno on ‘The Tonight Show’ than they did from Katie Couric on ‘60 Minutes.’” In short, appearances on late-night entertainment talk shows, or other soft news programs, afford politicians one of their best opportunities to reach a large group of potentially persuadable voters in a relatively sympathetic venue.

If the combination of audience size and demographics, along with anticipated interview content, accounts for Obama’s interest in appearing six times on Letterman, as well as on other decidedly non-political programs, such as The Oprah Winfrey Show, The View, and The Tyra Banks Show, it does not tell us what viewers take away from exposure to such appearances. The increasing frequency of appearances by presidential candidates on daytime and late-night entertainment talk shows (Baum 2003, 2005; Gold 2007) strongly suggests that politicians believe they are not wasting their time by appearing on such programs. Are they correct? What, if anything, do audience members learn, and with what, if any, effects? This is the primary topic of the present chapter.

Numerous scholars (e.g., Patterson 1994, 2000; Bennett 2003, Norris 2006) and journalists (e.g., Jones 2009) have decried what they consider to be the increasingly bleak state of political news, and its implications for the capacity of voters to fulfill their basic responsibilities as democratic citizens. Proponents of this perspective – termed participatory democratic theory by Clawson and Oxley (2008) — frequently cite the proliferation of soft news as evidence of the news media’s failure to equip citizens with proper or sufficient information. Patterson (2000), for instance, implicitly argues that, ceteris paribus, hard news—defined as
coverage of breaking events involving top leaders, major issues, or significant disruptions in the routines of daily life—is of higher quality than soft news, which lacks a public policy component, featuring instead sensationalized presentation, human interest themes, and dramatic subject matter. As Zaller (2003: 129) states, “soft news is information that is either personally useful or merely entertaining.” In short, a prevalent scholarly critique of the contemporary news media is thus that they offer too little hard news and too much soft news, thereby making it difficult for citizens to obtain sufficient information to make informed vote choices.²

But do soft news shows help citizens better perform their democratic responsibilities? Stated differently: is there an Oprah Effect and if so, what is it? Or is there, perhaps, more than one such effect? In fact, the scholars investigating this question have identified and begun to grapple with at least four distinct categories of potential soft news effects on consumers. These include effects on attention to politics, knowledge about politics, political attitudes, and political behavior. Numerous studies find what might be termed Oprah Effects that fit into to more than one of these discrete categories, and the categories themselves are by no means absolute. Nonetheless, we employ this schema for purposes of enhancing analytic clarity and to hopefully provide a useful framework for integrating the growing literature on the political implications of soft news. Viewing the large quantity of literature through this schema also reveals that as the size and complexity of the soft news market increase, a second effective distinction is emerging—between the effects of more traditional soft news talk programs such as The View or Late Night with David Letterman, and explicitly satirical comedy productions hosted by dramatic characters, particularly Jon Stewart and Stephen Colbert.³

The remainder of this essay reviews the literature in each of these four broad categories, drawing linkages between several of them, as well as assessing their implications for the
behavior of and policies provided by politicians. We conclude by suggesting directions for future research.

**Four Oprah Effects**

Baum and Jamison (2006) define the Oprah Effect as the influence of consuming soft news political content on vote choice. Yet it is possible to conceptualize the Oprah Effect from the perspective of either the suppliers or the consumers of political information. As the introduction makes clear, the two are intimately related. Absent citizen interest (the demand-side), it is unclear why politicians would bother tailoring their appeals to soft news formats and sensibilities. It is also possible to conceptualize the Oprah Effect in terms of influence on public policy outcomes. After all, one can certainly imagine that changes in the tenor of political discourse could lead to consequential changes in the substance, rather than merely the style, of politics (Popkin 2006, Baum 2007). Consequently, in the final substantive section of this chapter we assess the state of research into the supply-side. However, in order to anticipate likely supply-side effects, it is arguably first necessary to explicate the demand-side. In other words, in order to assess how politicians are likely to adapt their behavior and policy agendas as a consequence of soft news coverage of politics, one must first determine how consuming political information via soft news affects citizens. We thus now turn to a discussion of each of the four previously mentioned areas of research into potential demand-side political effects of soft news.

**Attention**

Arguably the lowest threshold of learning of the four Oprah Effects concerns basic attentiveness to political information. Baum (2002, 2003a) characterizes attentiveness as a precursor to knowledge or understanding, making attention an important element of learning
about politics. He reports evidence from a variety of public opinion surveys suggesting that relatively less politically engaged individuals who consume soft news are more attentive to major political events, such as wars, than their counterparts who do not consume soft news. Conversely, consuming soft news does not appear to influence highly politically attentive individuals. Baum explicates an “incidental byproduct” model, which holds that soft news makes political information accessible (that is, interesting and entertaining) for politically inattentive viewers, thereby increasing the likelihood that they will attend to it if exposed. In essence, soft news “piggybacks” substantive political news to information consumed for purposes of entertainment.

Some additional research supports this contention. For instance, Van Zoonen et al. (2007) find that “infotainment” – by which they refer to appearances by presidential candidates George W. Bush and John Kerry on the Dr. Phil Show – does enhance viewers’ overall attention to politics. That said, based on a qualitative analysis, they report that viewers of these candidate interviews were even more attentive to such decidedly non-political subjects as seating arrangements, body language, and the physical appearance of the candidates. This suggests that the political attentiveness-enhancing effects of watching political candidates on entertainment-oriented talk shows may be somewhat limited.

Along similar lines, Moy, Xenos and Hess (2005) report evidence, consistent with Baum’s findings, that exposure to political humor on late-night comedy shows enhances political engagement. However, contrary to Baum’s findings, they argue that such effects are limited to politically sophisticated audience members, who possess sufficient political context to “get the joke.”
This is an area in the literature where potentially important differences between soft news programs are increasingly apparent. Indeed, the root of this seeming discrepancy appears to lie in differences in content across soft news-oriented outlets, a distinction that Moy et al. (2005) emphasize. Some outlets, like *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* or *The Colbert Report*, offer relatively sophisticated political humor clearly aimed at politically attentive consumers, while others, including most daytime talk shows (e.g., *The View*) and arguably some late-night talk shows (e.g., *The Tonight Show with Jay Leno*) and entertainment news magazine shows (e.g., *Entertainment Tonight*), are geared primarily toward less politically sophisticated audiences. It thus seems reasonable to presume, and is largely consistent with the findings of both Baum and Moy et al., that beneficial attentiveness or engagement effects among politically unsophisticated audiences would likely be strongest for venues that do not assume high levels of ex ante political knowledge among their audiences.

The previous discussion illustrates the importance of drawing clear distinctions between different types of media outlets and content aimed at distinct audiences. Most research into the effects of soft news on public opinion finds any such effects to be contingent, depending on media venue, as well as topic and audience characteristics. Such venues vary in the sophistication of their content and hence the likely learning effects among different types of viewers, while some issues are more easily framed in accessible terms than others. Moreover, different types of audience members differ in their propensity to learn about politics via such outlets. Scholars have only partially disentangled these distinctions, and so much of the research in this area suffers from insufficiently precise definitions of the independent (soft news exposure) and/or dependent (public opinion) variables.
Knowledge

Communication scholars (Blumler and McQuail 1969, Wamsley and Pride 1972, Fitzsimmons and Osburn 1968, Robinson 1974) have shown that television allows individuals to learn passively, about politics or other topics, even if they are neither interested in the topic nor motivated to learn about it. This is possible because individuals are more likely to accept information presented in a non-conflictual manner, which does not arouse excitement (Krugman and Hartley 1970). Television arguably represents the ideal instrument of passive learning (Krugman and Hartley 1970). Individuals learn passively by first choosing to expose themselves to some broad class of information, such as network television news, and then surrendering control of the specific information to which they are exposed (Zukin with Snyder 1984).

The theory of passive learning implies that TV watchers gain knowledge via consuming television, without necessarily intending to do so. More recently, Sam Popkin (1993) extended the conceptualization of passive learning to explicate a byproduct theory of political knowledge. Popkin argues that individuals learn about politics through everyday life experiences having little direct connection with politics. Passive learning as a byproduct of seeking entertainment via soft news could, at least potentially, allow consumers to gain political knowledge, even without their intending to do so (Baum 2003).

Recent research in political communication has sought to determine more precisely what (if any) political knowledge consumers actually glean from soft news and who is most likely to gain it. This has produced something of a schism between scholars arguing that consuming soft news is a useful means of gaining relatively limited amounts of political knowledge, primarily among individuals who would not necessarily otherwise gain such information, and those
arguing that soft news has little, if any, value as a source of political knowledge. In the former camp, some scholars have argued that soft news can facilitate political learning either directly, via exposure to substantive political information on soft news venues (Baum 2003a, 2003b, Brewer and Cao 2006) or indirectly, through a “gateway” effect, whereby exposure to small amounts of information on soft news outlets motivates viewers to consume additional political information via traditional news venues (Baum 2003a, Young and Tisinger 2006). In both cases, such political learning effects appear strongest among individuals who are relatively uninterested in and hence unmotivated to learn about politics.

In the latter camp, some scholars, most notably Markus Prior (2003, 2005, 2007) have argued that consuming soft news does not contribute to consequential gains in political knowledge. Prior does not dispute that soft news programs cover political issues. Instead, he challenges Baum’s (2002, 2003a) contention that consequential numbers of consumers learn about politics from such shows. He argues (2005) that extreme media fragmentation in recent years has reduced the opportunities for entertainment-seeking viewers to learn about politics via incidental exposure. The reason is that viewers who prefer entertainment over news are increasingly able to avoid the latter content altogether. As evidence, Prior conducted a series of survey experiments in which he found that individuals who claim to prefer soft news to political news programs typically gain at most sporadic factual knowledge about a variety of political topics from consuming soft news.

Baum (2003b), though not disputing Prior’s finding of limited factual knowledge gains in his experiments, countered—drawing on the online processing model of information processing (Lodge & McGraw, 1995; Lodge, Steenberger, & Brau, 1995) — that factual knowledge is an insufficient measure of politically consequential learning. According to this perspective, typical
individuals rapidly discard factual details regarding the objects to which they devote their attention. But they maintain an online summary evaluation of how they feel about such objects. Each new piece of information about a given object is tagged with an emotional “charge” (i.e., positive or negative). The individual then discards the information and retains the emotional tag, which is added to his or her running tally. If a majority of the emotional tags in the running tally are positive, the individual will have a net positive summary evaluation of the object, and vice versa. Through this process, individuals are able to remember what they support or oppose, or like or dislike, without necessarily remembering why. This suggests that soft news exposure could lead to political learning without necessarily enhancing an individual’s long-term knowledge store or capacity to recall political facts.

Parkin (n.d.) presented information about 2004 presidential candidate John Kerry’s position on Iraq to different groups of participants either in the context of a Late-Night entertainment-oriented talk show (Late Night with David Letterman), or a traditional political interview show (Face the Nation). He finds that young, politically disinterested viewers who read the Letterman version of the transcript — that is, a transcript embedded in a webpage designed to appear like the show’s actual web site — reported increased political engagement and demonstrated increased knowledge about Senator Kerry’s policy positions. However, the exact same information presented in a traditional news context had virtually no affect on younger viewers. Brewer concludes that by making political information entertaining, soft news can at minimum supplement the political learning engendered by consuming traditional news, both directly and via the aforementioned gateway effect. In a complementary study, Pfau, Houston and Semmler (2007) also report that watching late night comedy during a political campaign increases a person’s general political “expertise” during that campaign.
Parkin (2008) combines experimental research on exposure to *Late Night With David Letterman* with content analysis of particularly engaging features of the program to demonstrate that relatively disengaged viewers not only learn and process new political information through consuming soft news, but they are more able to recall this information later because of the manner in which they were exposed to it. Finally, Young (2004a) notes that, ceteris paribus, regular viewers of *The Daily Show With Jon Stewart* are more politically knowledgeable than non-viewers.

Each of the aforementioned studies appears to support the existence of a fairly clear link between consuming soft news and gaining political knowledge. However, other studies have found such effects to be more limited and contingent. For instance, Brewer and Cao (2006) find that viewing late-night comedy shows is associated with greater knowledge of political candidates’ biographies, but not of their policy positions. Along similar lines, Hollander (2004) reports evidence from public opinion surveys suggesting that viewers — particularly younger viewers — who watch late night talk and comedy shows are more likely to recognize campaign issues if subsequently encountered, but are not more likely to recall political events. In other words, soft news enhances recognition but not recall of political issues.

Taken together, these findings appear to suggest that at least some consumers do learn about politics via soft news, but that what they are learning, how much, and how long lasting remains subject to debate. Also unresolved are the questions of whether or to what extent such learning might be politically consequential. In other words, does such learning influence consumers’ attitudes or behavior? It is to these questions that we now turn, beginning with the possibility of attitudinal effects.
Attitudes

For soft news ultimately to influence politics, it must first wield some substantive effects on the attitudes of consumers in general, and voters in particular. After all, if voters’ attitudes are not influenced by any information they glean from soft news, then it would make little sense for politicians to court voters via soft news outlets. Nor would it seem likely that such exposure would alter the substance of public policy. Some democratic theorists might applaud any increases in political knowledge and attention resulting from soft news consumption as representing intrinsically important enhancements to individuals’ capacities to function as democratic citizens. Yet, even if consumers do increase their political attention and knowledge via soft news, such increases only seem likely to matter for the state of democracy in general or democratic citizenship in particular if they influence citizens’ attitudes in some meaningful way.

In fact, some research suggests that exposure to soft news does influence the attitudes of consumers. Some of this literature focuses on the complexity and critical thinking elements of soft news—particularly its more coarse, comedic elements. For instance, Brewer and Marquardt (2007), in a detailed content analysis of 222 episodes of The Daily Show, find a profusion of educational content. They argue that such material increases viewers’ attention to world affairs and encourage critical thinking, rather than engendering a knee-jerk cynical attitude toward political figures and institutions. Baym’s (2005) critical analysis of the same program reaches a similar conclusion. Envisioning this form of soft news as an experiment in journalism, the author argues for its potential as a forum for deliberative democracy.

Other studies probe more deeply the causal mechanisms by which such content could actually shape the attitudes of citizens—particularly the typical soft news consumer who may not
be seeking novel political information. For instance, Baum (2005) investigates survey data from the 2000 presidential election and finds that politically inattentive individuals who watched lots of daytime talk shows – such as The Oprah Winfrey Show, The Rosie O’Donnell Show, or Live with Regis and Kelly — during the Fall 2000 campaign were likely to find the candidates that appeared on those shows more likeable than their counterparts who did not watch such programs. Baum and Jamison (2006), in turn, find, based on an analysis of the same election, that frequent viewers of daytime talk shows did a better job than their non-talk-show-viewing counterparts at figuring out which candidate best represented their own interests and preferences. In both cases, the authors posit that soft news consumers arrived at their political viewpoints not by deliberation or concerted critical thinking, but incidentally, as a by-product of pursuing entertainment.

While this last finding appears somewhat hopeful from the perspective of democratic theory—as it suggests soft news can level the political information playing field, at least in part—some research on political attitudes casts a darker shadow on the possible effects of soft news consumption. The findings of these studies, taken together, suggest that there may be a stark difference between the effects of watching day time soft news such as The Oprah Winfrey Show and those associated with watching the late-night in-character comedy shows, particularly The Daily Show with Jon Stewart.

For instance, Baum (2004) reports evidence from the 2000 American National Election Study that among less-politically informed individuals, but not their better-informed counterparts, consuming daytime talk shows is associated with enhanced isolationism and reduced support for (avowedly multilateralist) then-President Bill Clinton’s management of foreign policy. In a possibly related phenomenon, Elenbaas and DeVreese (2008) report, based
on an experimental investigation that demonstrates significant possibilities for cross-cultural comparison of soft news effects, that increased exposure to soft news enhances political cynicism. Similarly, Baumgartner and Morris (2006) find that experiment-based exposure to jokes from *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* about the 2000 Presidential candidates led viewers to rank *both* candidates more negatively. Moreover, and contrary to the assertions of Brewer and Marquardt (2007), watching this program increased subjects’ cynicism about the electoral system in general as well as the news media at large.

Pease and Brewer (2008), in turn, report findings that appear to bolster the notion that soft news exposure might enhance political cynicism. They find—also through an experimental analysis—that while celebrity endorsements (such as Oprah Winfrey’s oft-cited endorsement of Barack Obama’s 2008 presidential bid) increase participants’ perceptions of candidate viability, they do not increase perceptions of likeability. In other words, celebrity endorsements were largely unpersuasive to the student participants in their experiment, only causing students to expect that the endorsed candidate was more likely to win the contest.

Overall, while there is little evidence that soft news causes its viewers to swing to a different side of the political spectrum or to support particular policy agendas, a main tension in the literature on the attitudinal Oprah Effect is how soft news shapes perceptions of the legitimacy of political institutions. While some scholars report evidence that at least some soft news should bolster a sense of enfranchisement in and an enhanced perception of overall importance of the political system, other experimental research—at least among college student subjects—suggests the contrary. These latter studies suggest that soft news may increase cynicism toward both political leaders and institutions.
Behavior

Finding that soft news influences political attention, knowledge, and even attitudes only takes us part of the way to linking soft news consumption to political outcomes. An additional intermediate step concerns mass political behavior—the fourth Oprah Effect. On this score, evidence is beginning to emerge that soft news coverage of politics may influence the political behavior of at least some consumers.

The most basic act of democratic citizenship is voting. It is here that scholars interested in locating soft news behavioral effects have concentrated the bulk of their investigations. Such research can be usefully divided into two questions. First, are soft news consumers differently likely to engage in the act of voting than comparable non-consumers? Second, are they likely to vote differently, contingent on showing up at the polling station?

Beginning with the former question, Baumgartner and Morris (2006) argue that exposure to soft news is likely to alienate viewers from the political process and thus depress political participation. Markus Prior (2007) presents the strongest case to date that soft news may depress voting, though he proposes a different mechanism through which this might take place. Rather than attributing reduced participation to disaffection, he points to an indirect media election process. Prior argues that media fragmentation and the resulting proliferation of choices available to consumers have increasingly allowed politically uninterested consumers to avoid political information altogether, in favor of pure entertainment. Consequently, he argues, these individuals have become less likely to vote over time. Conversely, people intrinsically interested in politics are now better able to inform themselves than ever before. These individuals, he argues, are thus increasingly likely to vote. Because they are also more partisan and ideological,
this alters the mix of voters who show up at the polls on election day, leading to more partisan and polarized political outcomes. Though not directly “about” soft news, the inescapable implication is that greater access to entertainment—presumably including soft news—via the media depresses the political participation of otherwise inattentive individuals.

Other research has more directly measured the effects of soft news consumption on voting behavior, though not, to our knowledge, on voter turnout. Cao and Brewer (2008) find that the one in four citizens who report learning about a campaign from political comedy shows were also more likely to attend a campaign event and to join a campaign-related organization. Similarly, in an experimental test, Xenos and Becker (2009) find that exposure to political comedy shows on television is associated with various additional information-seeking behaviors, albeit only among subjects who are highly interested in politics.

Baum (2005), in turn, reports that not only do politically inattentive individuals who watch presidential candidates on daytime talk shows come away liking those candidates better, they also become more likely than their non-talk-show consuming counterparts to cross party lines and vote for the opposition party candidate. This, he argues, is because for these relatively less partisan or ideological voters, likeability—or a “likeability heuristic” (Sniderman et al. 1991)—can trump party loyalty. As Bill Geddie, executive Producer of The View (a daytime talk show that in 2008 featured appearances by such presidential aspirants as Hillary Clinton, Barack Obama, and John McCain) commented, “There have been a hundred debates, and who’s seen them? Voters operate on two fronts: ‘Do I like this person?’ and ‘Do I agree with this person?’ A talk show is the first step toward helping them decide if they like a person” (quoted in Gold 2007).
Baum and Jamison (2006), in turn, extend Lau and Redlawsk’s (1997) “correct voting” model and find that the same politically inattentive talk show consumers that Baum (2005) investigated are not only likely to alter their assessments of candidate likeability, but they are also more likely to vote for the candidate who best matches their own self-described preferences over a series of public policy issues and values. This suggests that the likeability heuristic may be effective in helping relatively uninformed voters figure out which candidate is likely to best represent their interests. It also suggests that the party switching identified by Baum (2005) may represent rational responses to newly gained political information.

In one sense, Prior’s findings seem somewhat inconsistent with those of Baum and Baum and Jamison. Unfortunately, because Prior addresses turnout while the latter studies address vote choice contingent on turning out, it is difficult to compare the two directly. After all, leaving aside for the moment the aforementioned debate concerning soft news effects on attention and knowledge, it is entirely possible that the proliferation of soft news might cause fewer politically inattentive individuals to vote, while still improving the reasoning process and accuracy of the vote choice among those who, despite their increased capacity to ignore politics, nonetheless continue to turn out and vote.

**Politicians’ Responses to the Four Oprah Effects**

Arguably, the most crucial step for research into soft news effects on politics is determining whether and to what extent soft news ultimately influences politics and public policy. One can certainly draw inferences from effects on attention, knowledge, attitudes, and behavior, on the one hand, to outcomes, on the other. After all, if a previously inattentive individual becomes attentive, gains new knowledge, changes her opinions and subsequently her
vote choice as a consequence of exposure to soft news, then, if enough such individuals follow suit, it seems plausible that candidate strategies, and perhaps electoral outcomes as well, might change too.

While research in this area is more preliminary than in the other areas considered thus far in this chapter, some suggestive evidence has emerged concerning soft news effects on the behavior of candidates, electoral outcomes, and even public policy initiatives. For instance, Popkin (2006) argues that the mix of policy issues salient to the public has changed since the advent of soft news, with the sorts of topics most often covered in soft news outlets—such as foreign crises, crime, scandal, and morality—growing increasingly salient among citizens and hence increasingly prominent in the public policy agenda, over time. Baum (2003, 2007), in turn, presents evidence that these salience effects are most pronounced among soft news consumers.

Popkin (2006) further argues that democratic politicians—who he describes as “crowd-seeking missiles”—necessarily respond to such changes in public priorities. He provides a variety of historical examples of politicians responding to changes in public priorities, which he argues are traceable to changes in communication technology that enhanced the political knowledge of previously marginalized citizens. Baum (2007) offers several contemporary examples in this regard. For instance, when Bush Administration Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice traveled abroad, she often arranged airport photo opportunities with local celebrities. In Tokyo, she posed for photographs with a popular Japanese-American sumo wrestling champion; in Romania, she met with Olympic legend Nadia Comaneci. These “photo ops” were intended to attract the local media, so that they would pay more attention to the Secretary’s visit and, in doing so, transmit her messages to segments of the local population that
might otherwise ignore her visit. One official predicted that Romanians “will go crazy” over the secretary’s meeting with Comaneci (Brinkley 2005).

A second example concerns presidential communication. In the current era of fragmented media, presidents can no longer rely on nationally televised prime time speeches, or appearances on Sunday morning talk shows, to communicate with the public. Cable and satellite television and the internet – including the soft news media – have robbed presidents of much of their audience (Baum and Kernell 1999 and 2006, Hess 1998). Instead, communicating with the public increasingly involves tailoring messages to the sensibilities of soft news audiences, who constitute a large pool of relatively persuadable potential voters (Baum 2005, Baum and Jamison 2006).

It is therefore unsurprising that politicians court the soft news media. For instance, in a series of pre-9/11 episodes, *The Oprah Winfrey Show* covered the plight of women in autocratic countries. Following the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan in November 2001, President Bush – presumably not coincidentally, and with an eye toward appealing to her vast, and mostly female, audience – asked Oprah Winfrey to be the U.S. special envoy to Afghanistan for women’s issues, an honor she declined.

In the run-up to the March 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq, in turn, the Pentagon granted coveted reporting slots “embedded” within U.S. combat units to such decidedly apolitical media outlets as MTV, *Rolling Stone*, and *People* magazine. Explaining the Pentagon’s rationale for doing so, Bryan G. Whitman, Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Media Operations, explained:

*It is a recognition that not everyone gets their news from The Washington Post and The Wall Street Journal….We consciously looked at those news*
organizations that have reach and impact and provided them with the greatest possible opportunities…. Each of them [embedded reporters] reach a different audience. Our goal was to dominate the information market…(Carr 2003).

This trend is also evident in presidential politics. During the 2000, 2004 and 2008 primary and general presidential election campaigns, virtually all candidates appeared on daytime and late-night, entertainment-oriented talk shows. Consequently, many Americans who might otherwise largely have ignored the presidential campaign encountered at least some information about the candidates. Perhaps presaging President Obama’s September 2009 Letterman appearance, then-President George W. Bush and Vice President Dick Cheney appeared on the celebrity/entertainment newsmagazine show The Insider. This suggests that even sitting presidents are now inclined to enlist the soft news media in their efforts to persuade Americans to support their policies.

Baum (2007) offers an anecdote from the 2005 State of the Union Address that appears to substantiate Popkin’s (2006) assertion that soft news can alter the public policy agenda. In the run-up to the address, President Bush presented a major speech outlining an ambitious agenda for space exploration. The issue, however, failed to capture the public’s interest. In contrast, a second apparent pre-address “trial balloon” focusing on steroid abuse did capture the public’s imagination. Consequently, at the last moment, the president altered a substantial segment of his address to drop any mention of space exploration in favor of condemning steroid abuse among professional athletes.

The president’s focus on steroid abuse paid political dividends. The nation’s sports media – TV, radio, and print – covered the story extensively. Taking up the president’s call to
arms, the Congress quickly arranged a series of high-profile hearings on the subject. These hearings, involving some of the nations’ most celebrated athletes, generated a feeding frenzy of media coverage. By focusing on steroids, the president reached a vast audience of sports enthusiasts who might otherwise have never heard about his State of the Union address. He also generated considerable post-address attention by continuing to promote the issue, even as his allies in Congress arranged public hearings on the subject; hearings that attracted a nationwide audience thanks to predictable media fascination with the lifestyles (and foibles) of America’s rich and famous celebrities, including star athletes.

Direct evidence of soft news influencing electoral outcomes in the United States remains elusive. However, some evidence in this regard has emerged in other nations. Most notably, Salmond (2007) reports the results of a comparative study of parliamentary question time rules. He finds that more permissive rules – that is, those allowing more unstructured debate – tend to attract larger and less politically sophisticated audiences than more highly structured rules. This is because free wheeling debates are more entertaining. By changing the audience mix, in turn, question time rules also influence who is motivated to turn out on Election Day. This alters electoral outcomes. Less politically attentive voters are more likely to be working class and ideologically left-of-center. Consequently, the end result is an increased likelihood of electing a labor government.

Additional research (Taniguchi 2007, Japan Today 2004) suggests that soft news has influenced the political fortunes of individual candidates in Japan. For instance, former Japanese Minister of Foreign Affairs Makiko Tanaka – daughter of former Prime Minister Kakuei Tanaka – built her considerable political constituency in significant measure through repeated appearances on soft news shows. In particular, Tanaka benefitted from public exposure via
Japan’s so-called “Wide Shows” – Japan’s analog to daytime talk shows in the United States. Tanaguchi finds that Wide Show viewers consistently rated Tanaka more positively than viewers of traditional TV news shows or newspapers.

Taniguchi argues that the types of politicians who court soft news outlets tend to be more reform minded, citing former Prime Minister Jun’ichiro Koizumi as a case in point. He also presents evidence that appearing on soft news increases legislators’ chances of re-election. Perhaps most important, Taniguchi argues that soft news changes the policy process and political outcomes in Japan. In the former case, he cites, among other examples, Koizumi’s successful effort to override strong legislative opposition to a postal reform program by going over the heads of legislators and reaching out to the Japanese public via appearances on Wide Shows and other entertainment-oriented TV programs. Indeed, he argues that Japan’s dominant political party, the LDP, is undergoing substantial organizational change as a consequence of the proliferation of politics into the soft news media. In the latter case, he credits intensive Wide Show coverage of foreign policy crises—such as a diplomatic row between Japan and North Korea—with placing tremendous pressure on Japanese leaders to take a harder line than they would prefer to take.

Shirk (2007), in turn, reports evidence that similar developments as those Taniguchi documents in Japan are also underway in China. She notes that commercialization of the media has led to more audience-appealing stories about Japan, Taiwan and the United States. This, in turn, tends to stoke popular nationalism in China, thereby complicating the government’s efforts at diplomacy with those nations.

Finally, Baum (2007) notes that in Saudi Arabia, The Oprah Winfrey Show is the nation’s
highest-rated English-language TV program. The show, which is particularly popular among young Saudi women, provoked a firestorm of criticism in Saudi Arabia for an episode entitled “Women Across the Globe” in which Winfrey interviewed a Saudi woman who was nearly beaten to death by her husband. According to Hana Balaa, director of the TNS Female Research Center in Saudi Arabia, the popularity of Oprah is part of a growing trend in the region. Due in significant measure to the availability of satellite TV channels, Bala notes that “[W]omen are increasingly seeking ways to express themselves and their individuality…They’re expressing their opinions more” (quoted in El-Rashidi 2005).

**Conclusion**

The literature on soft news has begun to recognize and address two types of new complexity in the production and consumption of such content. First, as the market for soft news grows, the genre is becoming more diverse. In particular the audience for late night political comedy programs, like The Daily Show with Jon Stewart tripled from 2001-2005 (Xenos and Becker 2009). A subsequent surge in content analyses and experimental studies on the potential effects of such programming suggests it may differ in key respects from those of other soft news programming. Holbert (2005), for instance, identifies two main contrasts between the content of satirical political comedy and more traditional soft news. That is, Political satire is *primarily* political in content, rather than incidentally so, and contains few explicit statements of political fact. In contrast, when other soft news genres report on politics they do introduce new factual information.

Since the 2008 Presidential election, the satirical comedy sub-genre of soft news, and the scholarly attention to it, have continued to grow. But as the literature on the politics of Jon Stewart’s commentary proliferates, it is possible for scholars to lose sight of the fact that this is
only one of several varieties of soft news, one with a relatively ideological and sophisticated audience and thus perhaps limited possibilities for shaping the behavior of politicians. Meanwhile the more traditional soft news outlets—lighter on political content and heavier on human interest, and aiming to entertain not by satire but by providing light and unchallenging fare—have continued apace, catering to consumers with relatively little interest in politics.

What has been their effect on the political attention, knowledge, attitudes and behavior of citizens? It seems possible that these two genres that are frequently grouped together under the general heading of “soft news” might have quite distinct effects on quite different groups of consumers, as well as on politicians’ strategic behavior. For instance, traditional soft news may be of most value to politically inattentive audiences and politicians seeking to persuade them, while satiric late-night comedy shows may facilitate greater political learning and engagement among relatively sophisticated segments of the public.

In any case, as the soft news landscape grows larger and begins to cater not only to those with little interest or attentiveness to politics but also to more politically attentive, ideological and active citizens, it is important that scholars recognize the changing and potentially increasing power of soft news on the larger political landscape. It may become increasingly difficult to explain politicians’ actions without an intimate knowledge of soft news content and the ways that consumers use it.

This highlights the second emerging complexity that the literature on soft news has identified in recent years: the fragmentation of previous audiences for news of all kinds into ever smaller self-selected niches of news consumption. Not only is the content of soft news growing more complex and varied, but so too are the ways that consumers get their news. Due to
technological innovations and shifts in audience behavior, the organization of news consumption is increasingly personalized and subject to consumer preferences regarding what, when and where they entertain themselves or expose themselves to politically themed news.

Some scholars (Parkin 2008, Xenos and Becker 2009) have speculated that these changes—particularly internet delivery of news as well as the new wealth of filtering technologies consumers can use to set their own daily news menus—will pre-empt inattentive citizens’ incidental political learning. Gone are the days of passive learning, incidental by-products, and other traditional mechanisms of political learning, or so the logic goes. But so far the evidence for such a trend is limited at best. While changes in consumer technologies and habits may be dramatic, thus far scholars know relatively little about the effects of this fragmentation on consumers’ political attentiveness, knowledge, attitudes and behavior. Given the enormity and speed of the changes in this marketplace, and the potential consequences for democratic participation and the strategic landscape for politicians, this is a key area for future research.

New research on the interaction of the supply and demand sides of soft news—that is, on the ways that politicians understand and then take advantage of soft news, and in turn the ways that audiences seek or respond to the resulting content—demonstrates that soft news has become a critical arena for the playing out of the democratic process. This is taking place not only in the United States, but all over the world. Indeed, increased comparative research would lend much to the scholarly understanding of the root mechanisms at play: that is, the effects on both the consumers and the producers of soft news—politicians and media actors alike. Politicians and potential voters have limited time and energy, and although delivered with guffaws or by sleight of hand, or packaged as inconsequential entertainment, soft news may be a very serious channel of communication in the fast-moving, complex political landscapes of the present day.
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Consumption among Late-Night Comedy Viewers and the Predictors of Exposure to Various


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1 This was not an exceptional event. Nine different presidential candidates appeared on Letterman during 2007 (Gold 2007). This, in turn, is only one of many soft news outlets – primarily daytime and late-night talk shows – to attract presidential candidates in the 2008 election cycle.

2 The distinction between hard and soft news in the academic literature appears to date back to Tuchman’s (1973) sociological investigation of newsroom values, in which she noted that “newsmen” distinguished between the two types of news in terms of the prestige afforded to the two types of stories and the kind of work their production requires.

3 That said, many of the studies we discuss in this chapter find the effects of consuming both types of soft news to be fairly similar or, alternatively (rightly or wrongly), aggregate these
program sub-genres in their research. Consequently, this distinction too is not intended to be absolute.

4 See Krauss (1998) for a discussion of how rising competition in Japan’s TV industry, beginning in the 1980s, led to a greater emphasis on the entertainment value of news, including more coverage of soft news themes, like crime, as well as more critical, “opinionated” reporting. According to Krauss, newer TV stations, like Fuji, TBS, and NTV, place greater emphasis on soft news topics and themes than their more traditional counterparts, NHK and Asahi.