

**COMEDY OR NEWS?
VIEWER PROCESSING OF POLITICAL NEWS FROM *THE DAILY SHOW***

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Abstract

Political news is now regularly relayed to viewers on late night comedy programs. This development has triggered speculation regarding the likely effects on viewers of political news that is presented as comedy rather than as serious political news. How credible is information delivered in a format that combines news with comedy? To what extent are viewers' beliefs altered differently or not at all by information presented as comedy as opposed to news? Using an experimental design, we test several possible models for understanding viewer processing of the synthesis of news and comedy.

COMEDY OR NEWS? VIEWER PROCESSING OF POLITICAL NEWS FROM *THE DAILY SHOW*

“When I report the news on this broadcast, people say I’m making it up. When you make it up, they say you’re telling the truth.”

Bill Moyers to Jon Stewart, 7/11/03

Just a few presidential campaigns ago, no respectable political candidate would have been caught dead on anything but a serious news program. But today the line between entertainment and news has been blurred if not completely eradicated. The staff of comedy news programs such as *The Daily Show* openly ridicule the idea that people use their show as a source of news. But a recent study funded by the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press suggests that this idea is not at all ridiculous from the perspective of their viewers. As many people in the under thirty crowd cited *The Daily Show* or *Saturday Night Live* as their main source of campaign news as cited all three of the network news programs combined.¹ This pattern represents a huge increase relative to only four years ago.

The central research question in this study is how television viewers in an era of blurred news genres decide what to believe. Is information in a comedy news show believed to the same extent as a straightforward news program? Or do people discount the information because it is not from a serious news program? Theoretical models for what leads people to believe some things and reject others makes several plausible predictions as to how viewers may react. Our goal in this initial study is to evaluate which model best fits viewer reactions to the same political content embedded in a comedy versus news environment. Using an experimental design in which the same content is viewed as an excerpt from a comedy program, a news program, or not at all, we make an initial attempt to understand this emerging genre.

DECIDING WHAT TO BELIEVE

Twenty-first century American television viewers are known to be a highly skeptical lot. They are cynical about their politicians, and wary of staged events and behind-the-scenes machinations. In short they do not believe much of what they see on television, even when it is presented as non-fiction, reality programming. On the other hand, almost fifty percent of those same Americans think that the government is suppressing evidence that aliens have visited earth or keeping secret documentation that U.F.O.s are real. Just under a quarter of the public believes that aliens from other planets have already communicated with people here on earth.²

In today's complex media environment, it is difficult, indeed, to decide what to believe. But it is probably even more difficult for us as researchers to understand *how* people decide what to believe and what not to believe. Moreover, as researchers, we have no consensus on whether people believe far too much, or far too little of what they read in the papers or view on television (cf. Patterson 1994, Crossen 1996, Rivers 1996).

So how do viewers of news in the blurred comedy-news genre decide what to believe? As part of the process of building a theoretical framework for understanding this blurred genre, we consider three plausible models for how people decide what to believe and what not to believe. To the extent that empirical findings from this and subsequent studies matches the patterns suggested by these models, we hope to build a better understanding of how such programs affect viewers.

We outline three ideal types in Figure 1. On the y-axis we show hypothetical levels of belief in assertions made in the program. Across the x-axis we illustrate how viewers behaving according to each of these models should alter their beliefs relative to a control condition.

One possible prediction about how viewer beliefs might be altered is shown on the far left panel. Here, what we dub the *Skeptical Viewers* response is essentially the null hypothesis. It is far from a certainty that people's beliefs will be altered at all, even by the most serious, forthright, news broadcast. The American public is well known for its high degree of skepticism, at least as publicly expressed. And the research literature on how news effects public beliefs is similarly tentative in its conclusions about the power of news to directly alter people's beliefs. So it is possible that whether information is presented as news or as comedy makes little

difference because few people are likely to alter their beliefs based on what they hear on television anyway. To the extent that viewers in our study exhibit this pattern, we would expect no significant differences in beliefs between “control,” non-viewing, citizens and those who receive the same information through comedy or through a regular news programs.

[Figure 1 here]

Of course, to the extent that skeptical viewers predominate, the study of how information presented either as comedy or news affects beliefs would be of little interest. We find this possibility implausible as an across-the-board prediction, if only because of the extant literature demonstrating the effects of political news on mass beliefs, particularly when viewers view content in experimental settings. Two additional possibilities, drawn from political philosophy and social psychology, seem far more plausible as patterns of reaction to typical news and news embedded in comedy.

When viewers watch a comedy news program, many undoubtedly comprehend the content of these broadcasts, just as viewers of regular news programs do. According to Descartes, people first comprehend an assertion, and then subsequently decide whether to accept or reject it (see e.g., Descartes 1644/1984, 1641/1984). This model forms the basis for allowing all ideas, both true and false, to be aired openly in a marketplace as championed by John Stewart Mill following Descartes’ logic (e.g., Mill 1859/1975). Implicit in Descartes’ writing is the assumption that people can control their beliefs. They can entertain an idea or morsel of information, and fully comprehend it, and then subsequently choose to accept or reject it. According to Descartes, the act of understanding a proposition and of accepting or rejecting it, were sequential operations.

Assuming, for the moment, that Descartes was correct, what does this suggest about viewers’ reactions to information they encounter in a comedy program? Viewers of comedy news could therefore understand an assertion, and then subsequently decide whether the information was worthy of their belief. Undoubtedly, what would explain a good part of deciding whether or not to believe is the plausibility of the information, and how well it meshes with their previous knowledge. But all else being equal in terms of viewers and content, we would expect viewers to be less likely to accept the truth value of information presented in the context of a comedy program, than in the context of a respectable news program. One program involves an attempt to present correct information, and its staff has a professional responsibility to do so. Comedy writers, on the other

hand, have no such responsibility, despite the fact that they draw on real world events, nor do they even suggest a pretext of accuracy.

Cartesian viewers' reactions would reflect this two-step process that Descartes outlined. First, viewers take in all of the information presented. Second, they reflect upon the information and the context in which it is presented, and then decide whether to accept or reject the information therein. In the case of a comedy program, viewers should be more likely to discount the content in evaluating their beliefs. Thus the viewers in the middle panel of Figure 1 appear quite savvy about what they are watching. As shown in the central panel, we would expect the Cartesian viewer to take in the same amount of information, but to discount it somewhat if it comes from a comedy program. According to this theoretical model, comedy program viewers should either have beliefs that have not been altered relative to a control condition, or at least beliefs that have been altered significantly less than those viewing the same information in the context of a news program. All else being equal, if the same content came from a news program, then there should be a higher probability that the Cartesian viewer would believe it, and thus adjust his or her beliefs accordingly.

The Skeptical Viewer and The Cartesian Viewer would be expected to react differently to information presented as comedy versus news. But there is still a third possibility, best characterized by Spinoza's ideas on what makes people believe certain things but not others. Spinoza suggested that Descartes essentially had things wrong in one critical respect: People could *not* consider information without accepting it as true at the same time. Spinoza argued that deciding to reject information was an effortful, subsequent second step that must follow first accepting and believing (see Spinoza 1677/1982).

Initially, the Spinozan model of deciding what to believe may seem unlikely. After all, people clearly do not believe everything they hear or see on television. But a great deal of accumulated evidence in cognitive psychology suggests that Spinoza was probably correct: Comprehension appears to include an initial belief in the information comprehended (see Gilbert 1993 for a review). Understanding an assertion and accepting that assertion as true, appear to occur as a single, initial step in the processing of information. Rejecting the idea, or "unbelieving" it, occurs subsequent to understanding/accepting, and requires greater mental effort. As Gilbert (1991: 107) put it, "People believe in the ideas they comprehend as quickly and automatically as they believe in the objects they see."

Take, for example, an assertion such as, “The sky is green.” In order to decide whether to believe this assertion or not, we first mentally represent it as true, and then only subsequently decide to reject the assertion. Acceptance is part of the comprehension process, and disbelief follows effortful thought. This theory is also consistent with the obvious gullibility of young children. If belief and disbelief/doubt were equally easy to learn, then one would not expect children to so readily accept assertions, and only later development the capacity for doubt and disbelief (see Gilbert 1991). Even when something is clearly stated as a negative (e.g. “Armadillos are not herbivorous.”), it seems to require us to mentally picture it as true before we can consciously negate it.

To be clear, Spinoza did not claim that people believe everything they understand, only that there should be a tendency to do so if people are not given the opportunity to reflect upon and subsequently reject ideas: “Doubt, suspense of judgment and disbelief all seem later and more complex than a wholly unreflecting assent” (Russell 249). As shown in Figure 1, a *Reflective* Spinozan Viewer would produce belief outcomes identical to that of a Cartesian Viewer. After reflecting on the information, he or she would discount it, so we would see either no difference between non-viewers and viewers of comedy, or at least a significantly smaller difference in beliefs than between non-viewing and the news condition.

Distracted Spinozan Viewers, on the other hand, would look quite different, as shown in the far right panel of Figure 1. According to Spinoza, a person at least momentarily believes an assertion while comprehending it, even if he or she immediately thereafter rejects it. There is no such thing as “mere” comprehension.

Of course, if a Spinozan viewer understands an idea, and then subsequently rejects it, his or her beliefs will look just like those of a Cartesian viewer. So how can one tell the difference? The many experimental studies validating this claim have done so primarily by interrupt the process of unbelieving that occurs after comprehension/acceptance. This has been done either by putting subjects under some kind of time pressure, or by distracting them from the effortful process of unbelieving. In still other studies, subjects are told in advance that they will be receiving invalid information – an apt analogy to watching political news on a comedy program—and yet they demonstrate the same bias toward acceptance of even those assertions (see Gilbert 1991).

What Spinoza’s assertion suggests is a third plausible pattern of reactions to the assertions made in a comedy news program. When

viewing comedy, viewers may be distracted from the effortful business of unbelieving the assertions made therein. They are being entertained, after all, and laughter may further distract from this more “serious” business.

As shown in Figure 1, we would expect The Distracted Spinozan Viewer to believe assertions made in the context of comedy to roughly the same extent as those made in the context of a news program. The Distracted Spinozan model shows the same size of effect as in the Cartesian model, but in this case beliefs are significantly altered by *both* news and comedy presentations, and to the same extent. While the news program may be believed because of its credibility as a source of news, the comedy program will be believed because viewers have not taken the time and trouble necessary to “unbelieve” its content. Viewers who are not processing content as news may be less likely to expend the mental effort necessary to reject a statement, and thus it is possible that information in comedy programs would be viewed as even more believable.

The three possibilities we have outlined in Figure 1 are obviously ideal types; we would not expect our results to precisely mirror any one pattern. But they are useful in suggesting the pattern of results one should look for in comparing information presented as news or comedy. To the extent that the information does not alter beliefs when presented as news or as comedy, we produce a measure of support for *Skeptical Viewers*. To the extent that information presented as news alters beliefs relative to a control condition, but the same information presented as comedy either does not change beliefs, or changes them to a significantly lesser extent, then our results endorse the *Cartesian Viewers* model. And finally, to the extent that information presented as news, and information presented as comedy, *both* influence viewer beliefs to similar degrees, our results will support a model of viewers as Distracted Spinozans.

STUDY DESIGN

In order to assess what difference it makes if viewers approach television content thinking of it as news or comedy, we designed a simple three-group experimental study. All 62 participants filled out both pre-test and post-test questionnaires, and all but control group respondents watched a five-minute segment from *The Daily Show*.

Participants randomly assigned to one group viewed an interview segment from *The Daily Show* after being told they were about to watch a video excerpt from a recent comedy program (n=18). In this version of the

tape, laughter in the background further cued viewers that the program was intended to be experienced as comedy. This laughter was the same as what was present on the broadcast when the interview originally aired. Respondents assigned to the “News” condition were told before viewing that they would be watching an excerpt from a recent news program (n=24). They then viewed the same videotape with the background laughter omitted. Another 20 respondents were randomly assigned to the control condition.

In order to avoid having subjects potentially recognize the program, the particular segment we chose for this study did not include the host of *The Daily Show*, Jon Stewart, but featured a less well known reporter doing a story that was taped entirely outside of the program’s studio, so no studio audience was visible. In order to assess potential contamination, subjects who viewed the videotape (both news and comedy conditions) were also asked at the end of the experiment if this segment came from a program they thought they had viewed before.

The reporter featured in this video segment was Rob Corddry, a *Daily Show* regular. In this story, he investigates claims about anti-American sentiments in the movie, *Elf*. As part of the story entitled *Red Menace*, Corddry interviews the leader of a special interest group known as PABAHAH (Patriotic Americans Boycotting Anti-American Hollywood), which is currently charging *Elf* with promoting anti-American views. The leader of the public interest group has put the movie *Elf* on its list of un-American films, primarily because Ed Asner, who plays Santa Claus in the movie, is a “communist sympathizer”. Asner is interviewed by the reporter from a different location and vehemently denies that he has been, is or will be a communist sympathizer. An excerpt from the film *Elf* is included in the story, as well as a brief interview outside of a movie theater with some children who have just seen the movie.

Was this particular story forthright and accurate? In one sense, we as researchers are in the same position as are *The Daily Show* viewers; it is often ambiguous how seriously one should take their stories, where reality leaves off and comedy begins. The interest group known as PABAHAH does, in fact, exist according to a web site that goes by this name, and it was apparently sincere in its objections to the film. And Ed Asner was apparently similarly sincere in his rejection of the claim that he is a Communist. The reporter, on the other hand, approached the story with a mock seriousness that may or may not have been clear to a casual viewer.

After viewing (or not in the case of the control condition), the experimental subjects filled out a post-test questionnaire that measured a variety of beliefs potentially influenced by the stimulus. There is obviously a wide range of potential effects one might study in this context, but in this study we focus specifically on beliefs about the well-known actor Ed Asner, the main target of this story. Our control subjects were shown a still picture of Asner, and all had knowledge or impressions of him from previous exposure, thus providing a more realistic context for studying belief change.

RESULTS:

We analyzed our results based on closely correlated indicators centering on six different dependent variables addressing six research questions. In each of these cases, our results have the potential to mirror any of the three belief models we have discussed.

The first, most obvious question is whether viewers were more likely to think that Asner was a communist sympathizer as a result of viewing this broadcast. As shown in Figure 2, viewers clearly believed Asner's on-camera denial of being a Communist sympathizer. Relative to the control condition baseline, viewers of both the comedy and news versions were both far less likely to think Asner was or had been a Communist. Given that Asner directly denies this particular assertion in the video, this is perhaps not surprising. As indicated by the patterns used in Figure 4, both news and comedy conditions were different from the control, but they were not different from each other. In other words, people were no more or less likely to believe when told it was comedy versus news.

[Figure 2 here]

Figure 3 evaluates a more moderate claim made in the broadcast, one that was not directly refuted by Asner. As shown in the figure, viewers of both versions of the interview believed that Asner was more unpatriotic and anti-American as a result of viewing. The contrast between the News condition and Control condition was clearly significant, while the contrast between the Control and Comedy conditions was only marginally so. Nonetheless, the pattern in this figure suggests that even a somewhat related belief was affected, regardless of context. Moreover, there was no significant difference between means in the News and Comedy conditions, thus suggesting that people are not significantly "discounting" information if it is comedy.

[Figure 3 here]

Did viewers also come away with the impression that Asner was more liberal than they previously thought, even if the interview was just for the sake of comedy? In Figure 4, the same pattern of results in Figure 3 becomes even clearer. Here, again, we see that viewers of the interview came away believing that Asner's politics were more liberal and more toward the Democratic end of the spectrum than those in the control condition thought. Both News and Comedy versions were clearly significantly different from the control condition, indicating that viewing caused them to believe Asner was significantly more liberal. And interestingly, there is no difference in beliefs between the comedy and news versions.

[Figure 4 here]

Moving further away from the initial claim about Asner's politics, we also looked at whether his participation in the interview had repercussions for perceptions of his personal qualities. We asked participants to evaluate him as a rude versus polite person, a poorly informed or well-informed person, and as a hostile or friendly person. Given that our Comedy condition subjects thought he was being wrongly accused of being a communist on a comedy program, one might expect them to discount his vehement rejection of this claim on the air. But again, as shown in Figure 5, he was viewed as having significantly more of these negative personal qualities in *both* the comedy and news versions. But those in the News condition were particularly likely to think ill of Asner's behavior relative to those in the Comedy condition, though this contrast was only marginally significant ($p < .10$).

[Figure 5 here]

Finally, in Figure 6, we utilize a series of four questions asking whether the claims made by PABA AH about the movie Elf were convincing to viewers. Because Control condition subjects did not know what PABA AH's claims were, they were excluded from this analysis. As shown in Figure 6, when asked to directly evaluate and reflect upon these specific claims, the News and Comedy subjects were equally unlikely to believe them.

[Figure 6 here]

DISCUSSION: A GRAIN OF TRUTH?

A quick glance across Figures 2 through 6 tells us that of these three models, the Distracted Spinozan has the most empirical support as a model of how viewers of comedy news process the information that reaches them through this genre. If beliefs are altered by program content, they are altered roughly equally regardless of whether the information is presented as news or comedy. The pattern of results in Figures 2, 3, and 4 is supportive of this model and *only* this model. Significant differences occurred between control condition and each of the other groups, but not between the news and comedy conditions as one might expect.

The results in Figure 5 could be interpreted as supportive of both the Distracted Spinozan (given the significant differences relative to the control mean), and possibly the Cartesian Viewer as well given the lesser influence of comedy relative to news. On the whole, viewers clearly did not systematically “unbelieve” or even “believe less” the content of the program as a result of being told it was a comedy program. They did not discount the information differentially based on its source.

For Ed Asner, this had both good and bad ramifications. On the positive side, it meant that viewers who witnessed this interview came away believing his direct denial of ever having been a member of the communist party. In fact, those who viewed it were less likely to see him as having communist sympathies than those who did not. But notably, these same viewers also believed there must have been some grain of truth to the broadcast. As a result, they believed that Asner was more liberal, more unpatriotic, and more of a hothead than they would have before viewing. They successfully “unbelieved” the claims that were directly addressed and disputed in the story, but the other claims that were stated but not directly disputed continued to be believed.

Aside from the process suggested by the Distracted Spinozan, are there other possible interpretations of these findings? One possibility is that viewers were familiar enough with this program that they had some degree of confidence in its claims based on a track record from previous viewing. Some of our subjects said they thought they had seen the program before, or at least thought that they might have. However, taking this difference into account did not change the overall pattern of findings, thus making this an unlikely rival explanation.

Another possibility is that comedy was as influential as news because despite the lesser credibility of the comedy source, viewers were distracted from counter-arguing with the content of the message by the laughter and entertainment it provided. This pattern of findings would look just like the Distracted Spinozan. In one condition news would affect beliefs because of its credibility, and in the other case comedy would affect beliefs in spite of its credibility.

The generalizability of our findings is quite limited given that we used only one except from one program as a stimulus. Of course, any conclusions about belief influence from comedy news will need to rest on a broad selection of content from such programs, each of which differs from the next to some degree in its format and content. But our results nonetheless raise important questions about how viewers will decide what to believe as news and comedy merge.

Will the same information presented in the same form, have less influence if it is presented as comedy as opposed to news? Our results suggest probably not. The normative implications of these findings are complex given the growing variety of programming of this kind. Note that we have thus far carefully sidestepped altogether the question of whether comedy programs (or news programs for that matter) convey substantively “correct” information, and thus *warrant* belief change. Such an evaluation would take a different type of study altogether, and would require much greater resources to carry out. But the thought experiment involved in constructing this study is instructive in and of itself. What baseline would one use for the extent of “truth value” in standard news programs as well as comedy news shows? And given valid information, how might researchers decide when belief change is normatively warranted among viewers and when it is not?

Given the difference in standards for accuracy and the difference in motivations to inform between news and comedy programs, it is easy to argue that people should be more skeptical about what they learn on late night comedy. But are these differences large enough that viewers would be better off if they discounted this information altogether?

Appendix A: Item Wording and Scale Construction

Believe that Asner has Communist sympathies:

Combined index of three 5-point agree-disagree scales: 1) Ed Asner is probably a Communist or a Communist sympathizer. 2) At some point in time, Ed Asner has probably been a Communist. 3) I believed Ed Asner's denial of being a communist sympathizer. Coded so high scores=more likely to be a Communist. Alpha=.87

Believe that Asner's politics are liberal/Democrat:

What is your impression of **Ed Asner**? Using the word pairs below, please circle the dot that best describes him: (9 point scale with both sides anchored with word pairs). 1) liberal vs. conservative; 2) Republican vs. Democrat; 3) Ed Asner is probably a liberal (agree-disagree). Coded so that high = liberal/Democrat. Alpha=.61

Believe that Asner is un-American/unpatriotic:

What is your impression of **Ed Asner**? Using the word pairs below, please circle the dot that best describes him: (9 point scale with both sides anchored with word pairs). 1) pro-American vs. anti-American; 2) unpatriotic vs. patriotic. Coded so that high = unpatriotic/anti-America. Alpha=.72

Believe Asner has undesirable personal qualities:

What is your impression of **Ed Asner**? Using the word pairs below, please circle the dot that best describes him: (9 point scale with both sides anchored with word pairs). 1) rude vs. polite; 2) hostile vs. friendly; 3) poorly informed vs. well-informed. Coded so that high = more negative qualities. Alpha=.69

Believe Claims made by PABAAH:

Combined index of four 5-point agree-disagree scales: 1) PABAAH's claims about the movie, *Elf*, were convincing; 2) PABAAH's claims about Hollywood movies in general were convincing; I believed PABAAH's claims about Ed Asner; People should take PABAAH's arguments seriously. Coded so that high = believe claims. Alpha= .81

¹ Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, Jan. 11, 2004.
Cable and Internet Loom Large in Fragmented Political News Universe.

² According to Time/CNN/Yankelovich Clancy Shulman poll in 1991, 24 percent answered “yes” in response to “Do you think there are aliens from other planets who have communicated with people here on earth?” In 1996 PSRA/Newsweek Poll found that 28 percent said yes in response to, “Do you think there has ever been contact between human beings and aliens or not?” In that same 1996 poll, PSRA/Newsweek also reported that 49 percent of the public answered yes to a question asking, “Do you think the government is keeping information from the public that shows U.F.O.s are real or that aliens have visited the earth?”

Figure 1. Three Models of Potential Belief Change From Viewing News versus Comedy Programming.

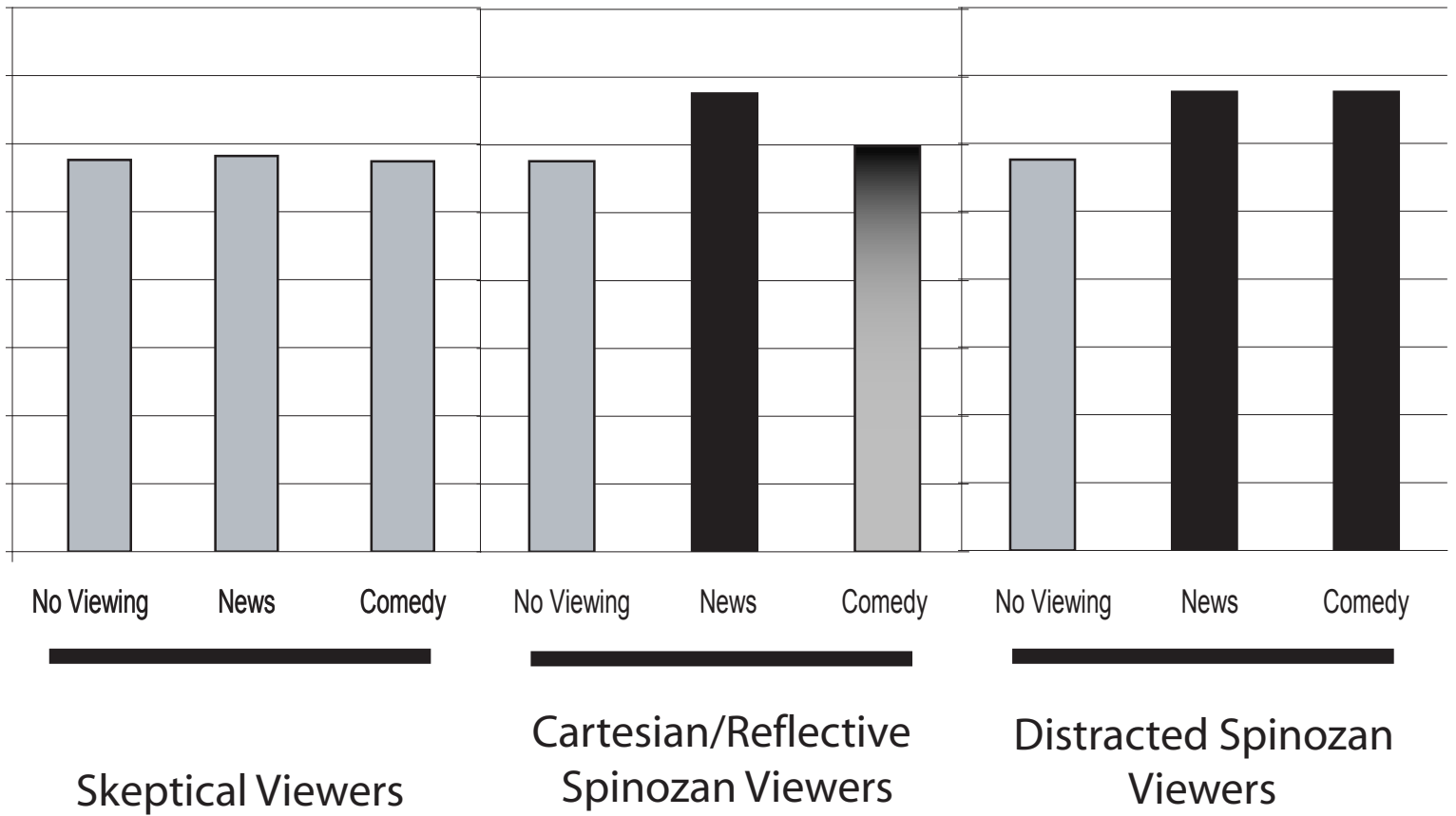
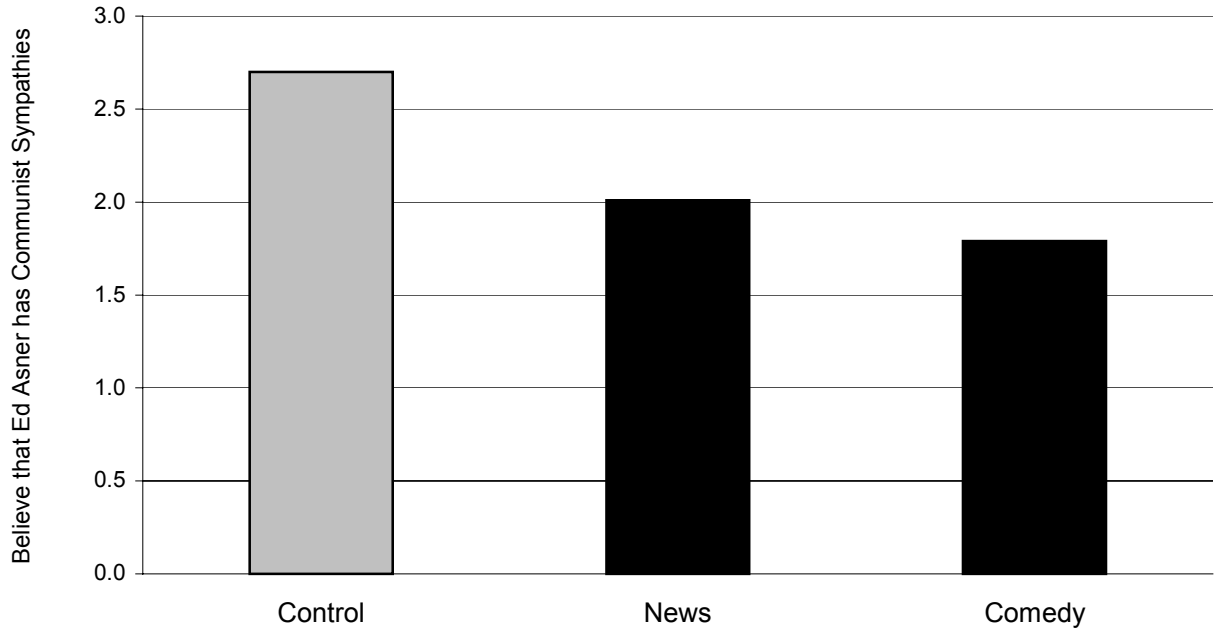
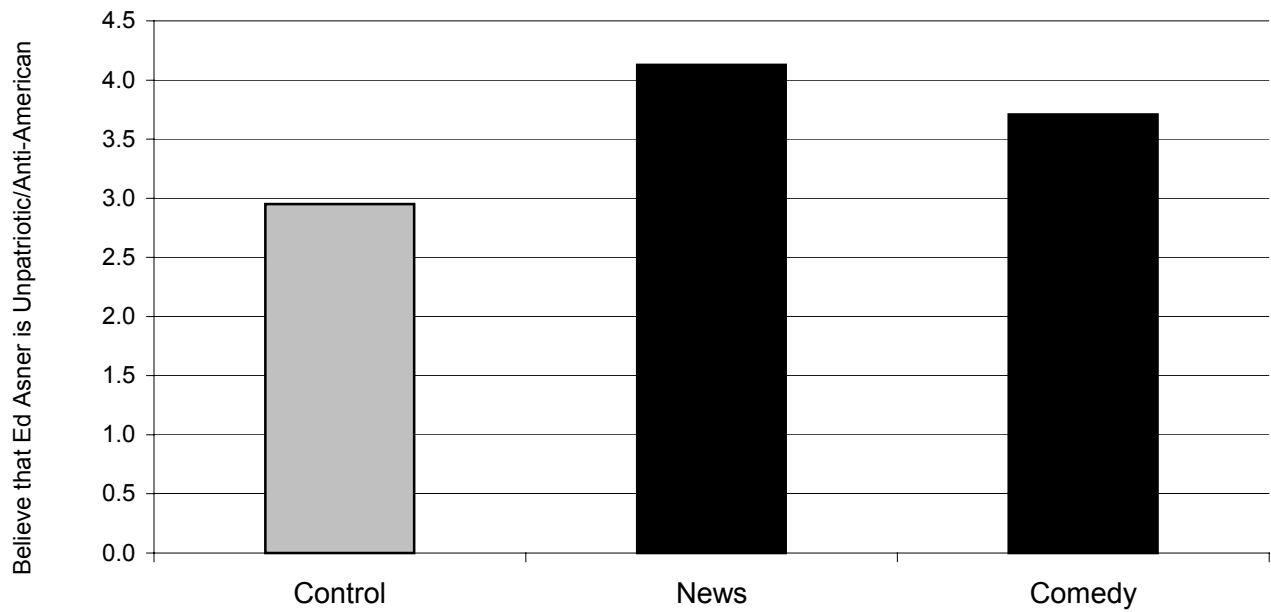


Figure 2. Effects of Comedy and News Contexts on Belief that Ed Asner has Communist Sympathies.



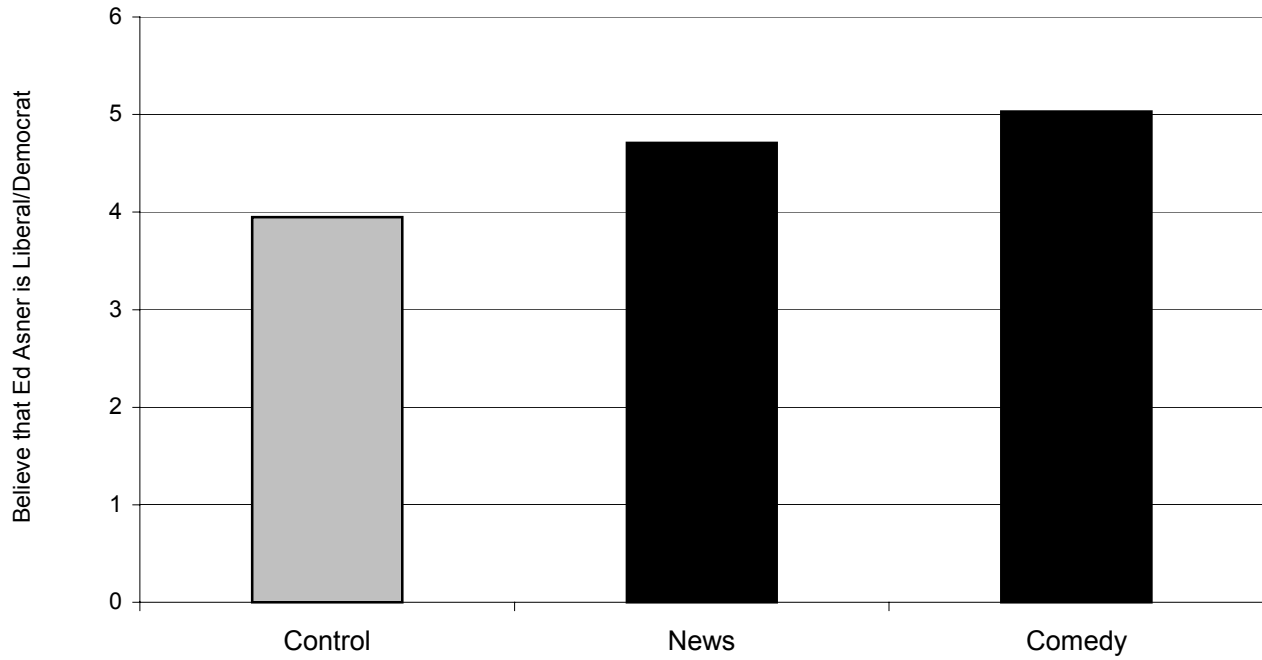
Note: Omnibus $F=6.77$, $p<.01$. Contrast indicate that News condition is significantly over than the Control mean ($p<.01$), and that Comedy is also significantly lower than the Control mean ($p<.01$).

Figure 3. Effects of Comedy and News Contexts on Belief that Ed Asner is Unpatriotic/Anti-American.



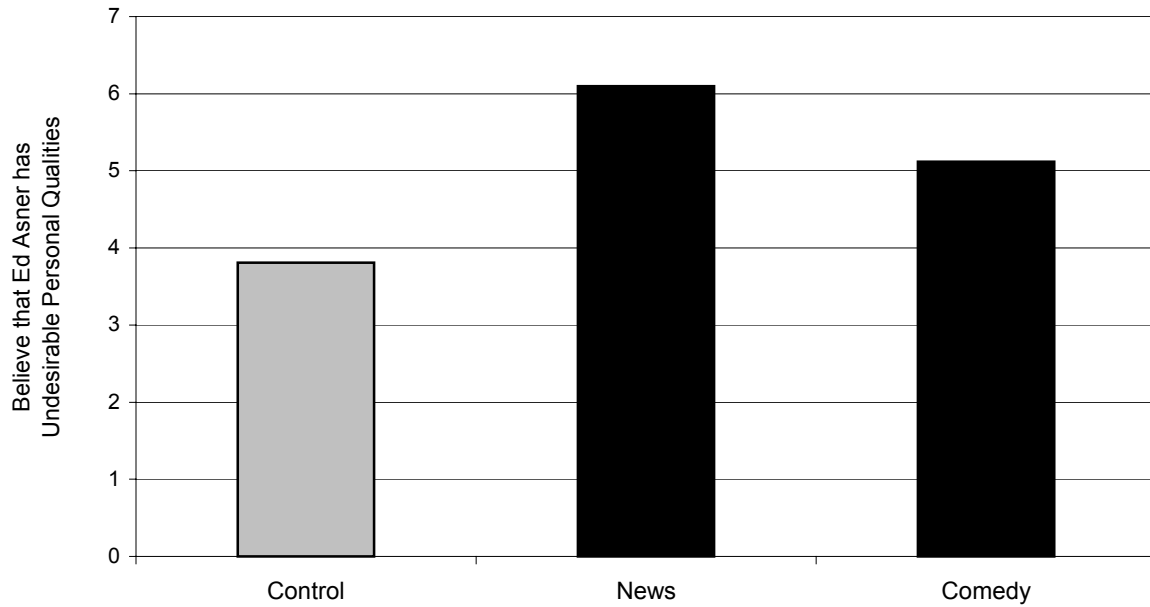
Note: Omnibus $F=3.09$, $p=.05$. Contrast indicate that News condition is significantly higher than the Control mean ($p<.05$), and that Comedy is also marginally higher than the Control mean ($p=.10$).

Figure 4. Effects of Comedy and News Contexts on Belief that Ed Asner has Liberal/Democratic Political Leanings.



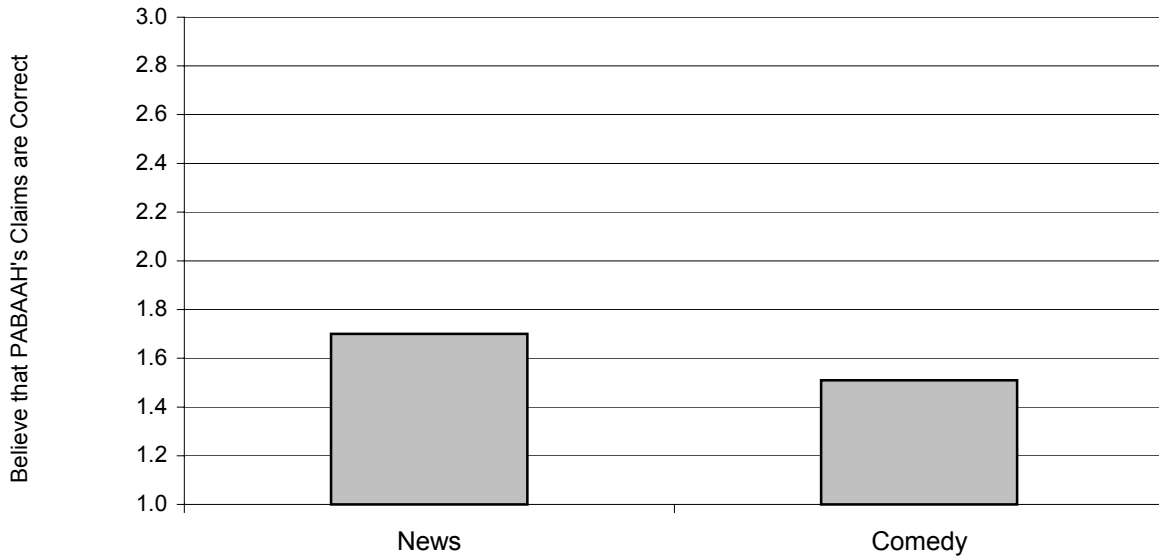
Note: Omnibus $F=3.87$, $p<.05$. Contrast indicate that News condition is significantly higher than the Control mean ($p<.05$), and that Comedy is also significantly higher than the Control mean ($p<.01$).

Figure 5. Effects of Comedy and News Contexts on Belief that Ed Asner has Undesirable Personal Qualities.



Note: Omnibus $F=11.42$, $p<.001$. Contrast indicate that News condition is significantly higher than the Control mean ($p<.001$), and that Comedy is also significantly higher than the Control mean ($p<.05$).

Figure 6. Effects of Comedy and News Context on Belief in Claims Made by PABA AH on Program



Note: Omnibus $F=.75$, $p>.10$. No significant differences were observed in the extent of belief in PABA AH's claims by comedy versus news context.