Opinion Science Podcast

Hosted by Andy Luttrell

Episode #19: Political Humor as Persuasion with Danna Young

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Andy Luttrell:
Jon Stewart became host of The Daily Show on Comedy Central in 1999. The show became a hit, lampooning the news and producing some of the best political satire this country's ever seen. And young people were ditching typical news programming and tuning instead into The Daily Show, but some people in the media scoffed. Jon Stewart, he's a comedian! Do these kids realize this isn't actually the news? Richard Morin wrote for the Washington Post in 2006, "This is not funny. Jon Stewart and his hit Comedy Central cable show may be poisoning democracy." All this fuss and fear about a comedy show. Jon Stewart himself tried to make it clear when he appeared on CNN's Crossfire with Tucker Carlson in 2004. Carlson criticized The Daily Show for being bad journalism and Stewart famously replied:

Jon Stewart:
You're on CNN. The show that leads into me is puppets making crank phone calls. What is wrong with you?

Tucker Carlson:
Well, I'm just saying. There's no…

Andy Luttrell:
He was defending the show as obvious comedy programming, saying instead that the buttoned up media titans like CNN bear more responsibility. It's hard to escape political humor these days, and joking about politicians and political parties goes way back, but are we really just joking around? Is it really just comedy? Or can political humor actually shape the public's political views? A big national poll in 2004 asked thousands of Americans what kind of media they consumed and gave them a short quiz to test their knowledge of that year's presidential race. The results showed that viewers of The Daily Show were more knowledgeable than people who regularly read newspapers or watched network news, and other polls have come to similar conclusions.

You're listening to Opinion Science, the show about our opinions and how we talk about them. I'm Andy Luttrell and today I'm delighted to have Danna Young on the podcast. She's an associate professor of communication and political science at the University of Delaware and she studies the effects of political humor. She also has a great new book that came out earlier this year and it's called Irony and Outrage: The Polarized Landscape of Rage, Fear, and Laughter in the United

States. We talk about the book, her research on political satire and persuasion, and why humor is able to lower people's defenses.

So, I guess one place to just jump in is that it's pretty clear that the research that you do is tied up in the kinds of things that you also are interested in outside of academia, so I'm kind of curious what came first. Was it an interest in this academically that then blossomed into something that you do on your own time? Or vice versa? Or some other version of that story?

Danna Young:
Well, it's way more cliché in that we tend to study the things that we're kind of interested in in our normal lives, so… If you call it normal. But I had done improv comedy through four years of undergrad at the University of New Hampshire. I was never the funniest person, but I was always the person who used humor strategically to create family harmony, friend harmony, and to get attention and that kind of stuff. So, doing improv was a natural fit for me, and then I… It's interesting. As an undergrad, I had studied political theory, really. I had never studied communication. I took a course in media and politics my second semester of senior year and was fascinated by it because political theory had always left me frustrated because there were no answers. I felt like, "Okay, so is human nature fundamentally good or bad? Can't we land somewhere?"

And the answer was, "No, we don't ever land on anything." And so, the idea of social science and hypothesis testing was really the first time I had encountered for that. So, I felt like I wanted to apply those methods to these fundamental questions and then I started looking into where that was done, and then that was at the Annenberg school at Penn, which is where I ended up. But yeah, I remember my statement, my personal statement for grad school was about wanting to apply some new methods to understand the impact of humor and satire because I had read Aristophanes and Machiavelli, and we hear about the significance of these individuals on society, and I'm like, "But do we really know?" And okay, we can't go back in time, but we can actually explore the same mechanisms now.

So, I really have not moved that far from where I started, which is why I think I just love what I do so much, because it's just an extension of my interests in general.

Andy Luttrell:
Were there people doing that kind of work at the time? So, it seems like you probably came on the scene at a perfect moment to study those kinds of questions, where it was pretty ripe for the picking.

Danna Young:
So, late night comics at the time were Leno and Letterman, and they were really just doing the standard niche, like the punchline-oriented jokes about headlines and personality traits of candidates, but Jon Stewart started at The Daily Show the same year I started at Annenberg. He changed the direction of that show in a way that very quickly became… It became clear that there was something significant going on there, and then my second year of grad school the attacks on 9/11 happened, and The Daily Show took a very critical stance on both the media and on the U.S. response in Afghanistan and Iraq. So, I was early on in this process learning all kinds of amazing things and figuring out what I wanted to apply it to, and to answer your question there were not a

lot of people who were looking at this. There were a handful of studies. There was an early study that Patricia Moy and Mike Xenos had done where they looked at exposure to late night comedy programming I think as a predictor of various attitudinal outcomes. I think Michael Pfau had done a bit. There really was no organized effort to conceptualize theoretically how and why this unique kind of discourse should contribute to your attitudes or behaviors.

So, I took that to Joe Cappella, who's my advisor. So, he bridges, he's interpersonal and media, and he's a theorist, right? I took a course in theory construction with him. And when I told him what I wanted to study he knew I was an improviser and he was like, "Here's my fear is that you kind of want to study humor because it's funny." He said, "I will only let you do this if you really take it seriously, like it's not a joke. It's serious." And I was like, "I am in." And he stuck with me through the whole thing and he and I are still in touch a lot because his interests still relate to mine with regards to humor and using messaging that is humorous in the context of health, for example.

Andy Luttrell:
So, one of the things that I really like about the work that you've done is that it… Stemming kind of from what you were saying before about your early interest in humor is that it's about the utility of humor. It's not about trying to understand what is funny and what is not, because I always kind of have… There's that research out there, and as someone who also has always been interested in humor and comedy myself, I always find that literature so unsatisfying, because it's like why are we trying? Why bother? But what we can do is say like, "Okay, this is a thing that exists. We know it's important to social life. What else is it doing? How is it… Is it involved in communication?"

So, maybe to scoot even further back to put into context what you've done, people have been interested in humor just in general for a long time in communication, but my sense is that we never really figured much out in that discipline. So, could you sort of give a sense of like what do we know generally about does funny stuff make a message more persuasive or not?

Danna Young:
Right. So, there was a push I'd say in the '70s to in the context of sort of consumer attitudes and understanding in the context of marketing, what does humor do? If you make a funny ad, will it sell your tchotchke? And that's kind of where early on there was an understanding that humor needs to be used the right way, because if you use it the wrong way it can actually distract from your message. So, if you use humor and it's kind of distracting and you have a really good argument as to why your tchotchke is the best tchotchke, well, no one's gonna really come away understanding your argument because they've been so distracted by the joke.

So, I think early on people understood that. There was a psychologist named Schmidt who had looked at humor and recall, which I thought was quite interesting. Early on, I thought this is important stuff. He did this maybe 20-plus years ago looking at humor as something that enhances our message encoding process, which he explained through the enhanced attention that we have to pay and that we want to pay to something that we know is gonna have a payoff. There's gonna be a reward. So, I thought that was really interesting. The idea of processing motivation, being enhanced through humor just because we've been told it's humor.

So, that had been sort of figured out, but people also understood that there are times when humor can work against you, either if people understand it in the wrong way, or again, if it detracts from your message arguments, that's problematic. By and large, it was still this open question, so my sense was first I had to understand what psychologically is going on when someone encounters a humorous text, because my sense was that it's so different from what happens when you encounter a serious text, whether it be informational or persuasive. Humor is its own thing. So, that was the first thing to figure out.

And then once you figure out, "Okay, so how does it work? What makes humor?" Then to understand what are the possible implications of that process for anything that's related to persuasion at all. So, that was the next step.

Andy Luttrell:
So, one of the things also that makes it slippery is that humor can be lots of different things. So, you've been able to sort of look at different kinds of humor, so my hard-hitting question for you to kick off the work that you do is just what's a joke?

Danna Young:
What's a joke? Yeah.

Andy Luttrell:
And so, I bring this up mostly because I listened to you, you did an interview with Ezra Klein a little bit ago, and there was a point at which you sort of off-handedly said, "A joke is blah-blah-blah-blah-blah-blah-blah." And he was like, "What?" And so, it's like a very technical version of how we define jokes, and the juxtaposition of that I always think is funny. So, from your perspective, the way that you approach this, what do you think a joke is?

Danna Young:
So, the way that I define humor, it's very broad. It is generally speaking, I find it very hard to find examples that do not fit this, okay? It is two intersecting frames of reference, or schemas, or mental models, that when they come together, either through a visual or a text, in order to make sense of those two things, a leap has to be made to reconcile those things, and that leap has to be made on the part of the audience. So, in so doing, you're activating something, usually from long-term memory, something that maybe you don't have right there. And if it's super easy to get, you're not gonna get a huge laugh. If it's too hard to get, you're not gonna get a big laugh. But there's a sweet spot in the middle where it takes you a second and then you get it, and then it makes sense, and then there's a chuckle.

Now, where this works very easily in terms of mapping it, which I have my students do in class with Venn diagrams, you map it in the context of a punchline-oriented late night joke, or a knock-knock joke, where there's a read in, there's the lead up, usually it's like, "Well, today Donald Trump went to such and such a place." And then there's the second piece of the text, which doesn't necessarily make complete sense, and then in order for you to get the chuckle, you contribute something.

Andy Luttrell:
Hello, this is me. When I listened back through our conversation, I realized that an example of this might clarify what we're talking about, so I just went on YouTube and looked for examples of late night political jokes that might fit the format that we're talking about here, so here's Stephen Colbert on his late night show delivering one of his monologue jokes from earlier this year on Martin Luther King Day.

Stephen Colbert:
Both the president and the first lady noted the day on Twitter. Melania's tweet was short and sweet. "Together, we honor Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. #MLKDay." She really relates to Dr. King's message, especially the part about wanting to be free at last. Oh, my goodness.

Andy Luttrell:
Okay, so maybe not a gut buster, but here's a case where the audience would have to bring their own knowledge to bear on the joke. Why would Melania resonate with the free at last message? Well, you'd have to bring in prior knowledge that people have surmised that Melania feels trapped in an unhappy marriage to Donald Trump. So, all together, this simple little joke presents a juxtaposition between our understanding of Melania Trump and our understanding of Martin Luther King Jr.'s famous speech, and we as the audience have to see the connection ourselves. And that's the joke. It also has another element that Danna has written about, which is that the juxtaposition also implies a judgment or an opinion. It invites the audience to see Donald Trump as a bad husband, or just remember associations that have been made in the past about Donald Trump being a bad husband. All of which would fit with Colbert's typical negative characterization of Trump.

Okay, so that's a lot of analysis for a quick little joke, but I think it highlights more specifically what it is that we're talking about. Got it? Okay. All right. Back to the conversation.

Danna Young:
Now, that's easy to sort of map out. Where it's a little harder is in the context of irony. Because in irony, like all the stuff that Stephen Colbert always did on The Colbert Report, his entire character was done in sort of this ironic persona. He said the opposite of what he meant. So, the incongruity there, the juxtaposition between those competing schemas, it's not as obvious as it is in a late night joke, because what he does is he gives you only one of the schemas. You then have to in your own mind juxtapose it with what you know he actually believes, and then the leap is sort of exposing why it is that the things that he's saying in character of a conservative pundit are preposterous, or hypocritical, or it invites us to ask why can't things be different? Or what should be versus what is?

That's very different, right? But it's still, at its heart, there is this juxtaposition of these two competing frameworks. Now, when you're talking about another kind of humor, which we've had to deal with more… Well, I have had to deal with more in my own writing of late, insult humor. Trump makes a lot of insulting comic comments. Now, not everyone finds them funny, but a lot of people do, so then the question is okay, is my definition of humor so all-encompassing that it actually can account for insult humor? And I'd say the answer is yes, because the ask with an insult joke, when he uses like Sleepy-Eyed Joe, or Little Marco for Marco Rubio, it is not hugely, it is

not as hard as reconciling two things that are completely at odds with each other, but there is a leap to make. Because when he says Little Marco, you do need to be like, "Little? Why is he calling them little? Oh, okay. He's short." There is something missing and the juxtaposition is it's a hyperbolic juxtaposition, so there is the reality that he's stating, which is that Marco Rubio is short, and then there's what he's actually saying, which is this huge overstatement of it, and you then need to kind of bring that together to understand the argument he's making. It's not complicated. In fact, my favorite research of late looks at the different sort of cognitive activity that's required by those kinds of jokes and it's not a lot. But I'd still say at its heart, there's still something shared across those kinds of texts.

Andy Luttrell:
Yeah, and it seems like by this definition of the joke, you can't, it doesn't wash over you, right? You have to show up. As an audience member, you have to show up and be a participant. It's not a joke unless the audience is there, which is sort of like a very philosophical approach, right? Is a joke a joke if there's no audience there?

Danna Young:
And you know what? A really tangible sort of expression of this is that comedy does not work in the heat, okay? Comedy club, and people are kind of like laid back, and they're like, "Oh, I'm so hot," comedy literally does not work in the heat. So, Dave Letterman, I think there's a rumor that he used to keep his studio at 54 degrees or some… We have the same issue in our theater at Comedy Sports, where it's like you gotta make sure that if it's a summer night, you make sure that that air conditioning is cranking, because you want people laid back. You want them physically leaning forward, ready to be in with you, to be able to participate. Not like get up on stage, although they do with improv, but to be able to mentally participate, to engage in the jokes that are being made.

I bet if you ask any stand-up comic, they feel the same.

Andy Luttrell:
And it makes me a little worried about how we're going to respond to COVID-related restrictions. I mean, that's something that's demolished live entertainment, and I know comedians. If you've ever done a show outside, too, it's the same sort of thing, where it's just like you're not present. There's so many other things to do, the sound doesn't carry, you're hot, you're uncomfortable, but those are the kinds of things that we're having to do these days.

Danna Young:
Yeah. That's exactly right. You know, as soon as I was thinking about the difficulty in a hot room, I also thought about how the stand-up comics always say that the White House Correspondents' Dinner is the worst gig to play. Part of that is because the room is just so big, and so echoey, and people are distracted, but there's also this sort of status seeking and posturing that goes on with that crowd, and I'll tell you what, a crowd that is status seeking and posturing is not going to play vulnerable enough to allow themselves to be moved by humor.

All of these things to me are fascinating, and they're all lines of research in and of themselves.

Andy Luttrell:
That status thing also makes me think it's distracting, too, where it's if I'm paying attention to how I look to others when the camera's on me, I can't bring my head to the joke in front of me and make sense of it. So, sort of along those lines, that sort of transitions nicely into some of the early work that you did on this, which is what is it about these features of what makes a joke a joke, the requirement that people actively engage with that information, that shapes its use in persuasion?

Danna Young:
Great. So, the idea that… The early work I mentioned by Schmidt, looking at how humor required enhanced attention, and actually resulted in enhanced recall of those things that were communicated humorously, I found that to be so confusing because it felt at odds with some of the work that was coming out of marketing and consumer research that showed that humor could be distracting. So, you mentioned the Elaboration Likelihood Model. In traditional persuasive context, when someone is paying attention and someone is gonna be higher in recall, they're also going to be really engaged in your message arguments, generally speaking. Assuming that your message arguments are at the heart of your persuasive message. I'm talking about serious persuasion, like not funny humorous texts.

What I started thinking was that it feels as though in the context of humor, there's two different layers of processing that we should be thinking about, because they're not one and the same. There is the processing toward with the goal of getting the joke, understanding the humor, and appreciating the humor on the one hand. And then, for those humorous texts that are advancing some kind of an argument, there's another layer of processing that's going on, as well, which is scrutinizing the argument strength. And those are not necessarily working hand in hand. In fact, it felt as though these two things should probably work against each other. Because the more invested you are in getting the joke, and you're motivated to process, to have fun, experience some positive affect, some mirth, you should by definition have fewer cognitive resources at the same time left over to then say, "Is the argument that's being made fair? Is it right? Does it match the things I already know to be true? Is it bias?" Those things take a lot of cognitive energy.

So, my thought was the processing of humor by definition reduces the processing capacity that one would have leftover to do those other argument-oriented processing tasks.

Andy Luttrell:
Yeah. I like that way that you put it, too. In the book you talk about suspending critical thinking, right? If I'm spending all this attention on getting the joke and working out that juxtaposition, I don't have anything leftover to go, "Wait a minute. Does this argument actually have merit?" And what's interesting to me, though, is that… Have you done studies where you manipulate whether the message makes good or bad arguments?

Danna Young:
Yeah. Great, great question. I haven't. I haven't done a manipulation on argument strength to assess how that pans out. No. Yeah, but what I did do, my early work on this did try to just look at how cognitive elaboration on the message arguments was affected by the presence of humor. And what I found was that sure enough, the more that people are reflexively responding to the humorous

component of the joke, the less they are responding to the sort of argument quality aspects of that statement.

Andy Luttrell:
Yeah. The implication I was just thinking is that classically these persuasion studies, the interesting thing is if I can get you to not engage in critical thinking, you can sort of be lured in by weak arguments. And so, the implication is that maybe some of these satirical pieces could be composed of relatively weak arguments for whatever point they're making. But because humor's being used, people might be lulled in, nevertheless.

Danna Young:
One of the things that I find complicated about this, because my assumption was, "Okay, so that means that humor is going to play a privilege role in terms of persuasion. But when you look at attitude change as the dependent variable, humor has a very checkered past in terms of how much it predicts persuasion. It doesn't really do a great job. And so, some of my sense of what's going on has been informed by work by Robin Nabi, who… She had a similar hypothesis, but hers was a discounting cue hypothesis that said that it's not about the cognitive activity required of humor that reduces elaboration on message arguments, it's a motivational thing, where people are just like, "It's a joke. It's not context appropriate. Why would I scrutinize a joke? What a wet blanket."

So, some of what I found interesting about what she was looking at was it kind of gets us thinking about whether or not… If someone has reduced motivation to process in that way, period, well then why would we expect persuasion to be enhanced necessarily? Because if it's just a joke, then yeah, they won't counterargue, but they're also not gonna take it with them, because they're going to at the moment of message encoding put it in a different place, so to speak. They're like, "Oh no, this is happy town fun time. Yeah." Now, I don't know that I totally buy that, because my sense is that people create political meaning and understanding from everything around them all the time. And I don't know how good we are at putting things in the right boxes, like, "Oh, this is happy town fun time, I don't use this to update what I think of Donald Trump. Okay." I don't think we're great at that. But that is one explanation for why those persuasion effects are not as strong as we might anticipate.

Andy Luttrell:
It's interesting, that reminds me that one of the things that you've defined, jokes generally, and irony specifically, is that they're evaluative. That to make a joke is to sort of convey some judgment. And so-

Danna Young:
Oh, no, no. To make a joke is to invite the audience to convey the judgment.

Andy Luttrell:
But indirectly.

Danna Young:
Plausible deniability at all times. Yeah.

Andy Luttrell:
Yeah. And so, it's sort of just like it's still coming at me, right? It's not just a joke. At some level, I'm processing it and you'd think unless I'm actively counterarguing it, it would stick around. Which is also, I was curious, one of the things is a different between jokes that are themselves part of the argument, versus jokes that are tangential to the argument. So, I love John Oliver, big fan of that show, but I often find that a lot of times the humor is just like a side diversion from the exposition. So, it's like exposition, exposition, joke, back to the exposition, and the jokes aren't actually advancing the point themselves.

Danna Young:
You know what, Andy? I love that you said this, because John Oliver is so confusing to me, because what he does is so smart, and some of my quantitative work with my colleagues at the Center for Political Communication at Delaware, we have really found that exposure to John Oliver is often one of the strongest predictors of public opinion on issues that he's dealt with directly. Like net neutrality, or super PACs, right? The question I always have is how does that happen? Because one of the jokes that I describe in the book is when he's talking about the family separation policy under the Trump Administration that was headed up by Jeff Sessions, and he starts describing it, and he says, "You know, this was put forth by Jeff Sessions." And then he says, "A man who is literally so small, he can wear a raspberry for a hat." And then he continues and I'm like, "Everything that I know about the psychology of humor says that now he has just undermined the effectiveness of everything that's coming next. Yet it still works, and I think part of that is because… Here's what I think. At the risk of creating a tautology where every outcome confirms my hypothesis, I'll just say this. He does two things. One is he uses these giant sort of governing metaphors to actually advance the argument, right?

One of my favorite ones that I've written about is where he talks about debates over the size of the gender gap in pay. The wage gap. And he's like, "There are all these debates that like no, women earn 80 cents on the dollar. No, it's 90 cents on the dollar. No, it's 70 cents on the dollar. No, it's…" You know. And he says, "Do we really care? If somebody takes a dump on your desk, does it matter how big the dump is?" And he does this sort of extended metaphor and it really gets you thinking like, "Yeah. If someone takes a dump on my desk, the act of the dump is the crime. It doesn't matter how big it is." And then you start thinking, "Well, if that's the case, then okay, so then the size of the gap doesn't matter." Those are where I think the persuasive power is, because the argument is the joke. The joke is the argument. And I think that what he does with those other little ones, the side ones, the he's so tiny he can wear a raspberry for a hat, my sense is that is really just keeping the audience in. Keeping them in. Because otherwise, what enhances the attention and recall throughout that show is the motivation on the part of the audience to like, "Oh, I don't want to miss another good one." That keeps them on the edge of their seat.

So, I think that he's done this sort of… I mean, who knows what he's done? He's a genius. But that cost-benefit analysis, like okay, it's worth it to have them always ready to get the little joke so that they'll be in it to win it when my big metaphor points come.

Andy Luttrell:
Yeah. I find too that I will watch any episode, right? Other things, I'll pick and choose. I used to think this about certain late night hosts, too, where it's like if it's Letterman, I'm only gonna stick

around if I like the guests. But if it's Conan, I'll watch. I don't care who's on, because I just like to show up for it. And it was reminding me, I talked to Shannon Odell for this podcast a little while ago. She's a stand-up comedian in New York and she also is a neuroscientist and does a bunch of science communication. They have this cool… She calls it Drunk Science. It's sort of this big, fun science communication event that they do in New York. And I was asking like is it… Do you think that the humor, the comedy actually helps people learn about science? And it seems like more what it is is humor gets people to listen to scientists. Because people wouldn't ordinarily just go, "Hey, let's go look at a science talk today." So, that sounds like some of this too, is that it's sort of an affectively favorable thing that lures people into a message.

Danna Young:
Yeah. I think about it in terms of… This is terrible and I forget her name, but Jerry Seinfeld's wife. And I know you're not supposed to describe a woman by who her husband is, but let's be fair, he's wicked famous.

Andy Luttrell:
Yeah.

Danna Young:
His wife wrote a cookbook of how to get children to eat vegetables, but by pureeing vegetables and putting them in desserts. So, it's the same idea.

Andy Luttrell:
Right, right. Making it more palatable.

Danna Young:
Yes.

Andy Luttrell:
One last question I had on the argument scrutiny stuff is that… Do we have a sense that the kinds of attitudes that then get formed after listening to messages with humor are weaker? So, the classic persuasion stuff would say that if I form my opinion based on not very critically analyzing a message, but just sort of kind of coming away with a general taste of what this person's message is, I'm pretty easily persuadable the next time around. Or I don't really turn that opinion into action. And so, I'm curious if you've done any work looking at that, sort of the consequences of humor-based attitudes.

Danna Young:
Yeah. I have not, but you're absolutely right that if someone is persuaded just through humor, it should not stick around based on how it's done. But I would say because the evidence of straight persuasion through humor is so murky, there are some things that I would just introduce as caveats. One is I see exposure to political satire in particular as something that is part of a larger diet of attitude-reinforcing content, so those, in terms of the utility of that content, the utility of that content is to be able to remember jokes, maybe share the jokes, discuss the jokes, and then you're probably getting other political information that is also likeminded from other sources. So, that's kind of how I see it, is like part of this diet.

In terms of where I see political satire as most effective in terms of attitudes is definitely in salience, in priming, in agenda setting, where the things that are talked about through jokes are resonant. They're gonna come to your mind more frequently. They're going to be the things that you may then want to talk about, want to vote on. That is, I think, where the real strength lies. And especially in the context of issues or people that may not be super well known. That's where John Oliver's impact is. He does not cover headlines. He covers stories that have been under covered by the press, and he brings those stories to light and he does a deep dive, and it's long, and you come away feeling very informed on that issue, and thinking, "Why hasn't this been on the top of my mind for the past few months?" And that, I think, is where the sort of efficacy of that content really is.

Andy Luttrell:
And also, there's part of this that makes me wonder if humor is best served for a preaching to the choir type approach, versus reaching across the aisle. Because one of the things in terms of how you defined jokes, where I as the audience have to apply my knowledge in order to get it, if I already have that knowledge to get the joke, then I'm not tuning in to get new knowledge, necessarily. I'm probably already kind of primed and ready for what you're gonna say. So, I don't know. I was actually curious if you'd looked at things like whether a message was already favorable to me, versus I'm motivated to disregard this message initially, in terms of whether humor works better for a pro attitudinal versus counter attitudinal.

Danna Young:
Oh, interesting. No, so I have seen… So, a lot of the stuff, so I did some experimental work, but a lot of the stuff that I'm doing more of late is survey based. What you're talking about would require a really cool experimental design, right? Which would be awesome. To figure out, okay, from the jump, based on where someone's attitude is at baseline, then they're assigned to receive a certain kind of message. Is that what you're saying?

Andy Luttrell:
Yeah, or even just the easiest way to do this would just be to know in advance, are you liberal or conservative?

Danna Young:
Oh, I see. Okay.

Andy Luttrell:
And then I give you a message that I know that half of you are gonna be on board with and half of you are not gonna be.

Danna Young:
I gotcha. I gotcha.

Andy Luttrell:
Whatever. But the same basic premise.

Danna Young:
So, where I've seen that work… I haven't seen huge indications that it is good at convincing people on the other side of the aisle to convert. What I have seen is some indication that for those folks who are kind of more in the middle, or a little ambivalent, you can give them a language to talk about things that they didn't have before, which… I see as really significant. Especially when you're talking about issues that are so inherently polarizing. I mean, politics are so inherently polarizing. To even get someone who's kind of in the middle and not that politically interested to have something on their agenda, that in and of itself is interesting.

Andy Luttrell:
Can we talk about your book? Do you mind?

Danna Young:
Sure.

Andy Luttrell:
So, just to open, I loved the book. I thought it was such a good example of an academic social scientist writing for a general audience that wasn't just like a watered-down version of their research in hokey language.

Danna Young:
Thank you!

Andy Luttrell:
But it was like it was making a new, integrative point in a way that doesn't talk down to the audience, and that draws from lots of different areas. So, like history analysis, psychological analysis, political science analysis, et cetera. So, the premise, maybe you could just give people an overview of like what's the general premise of the book?

Danna Young:
Well, first of all, I want to thank you so much, because this is my first book, so I have done a lot of peer reviewed journal articles, and book chapters, and I was like, "You know, I have this idea, and the only way that I think I can really do it justice is by doing a book, because I also feel like it would be fun, because it would allow me to speak in my own voice, and I can talk about these historical components." So, I so appreciate that.

So, the book itself is an attempt to answer… It started out as an attempt to answer the question why are there no conservative satirists? Which is something that chased me around for years and I had answers, but I didn't really like them. Especially as we face… We were in like year eight of the Obama Administration, and it's like we have been on this somewhat steady march towards progressivism in all these different areas, and so if it is true that the reason that people have posited, the reason that satire tends to lead to the left is because satire is critical of the status quo. It's critical of the way things are, and so that's fundamentally liberal. And I'm like, "Yeah, but the way things are seems pretty marching towards the left in a lot of different domains." So, conservatives are criticizing that, but they're not doing it through jokes. They're not doing it through satire. I just was like nothing is making sense.

So, when I started researching political psychology, I was like, "This, there's something happening here. There's something going on here." So, the book makes the argument that at least part of what explains that discrepancy, why you have so little conservative political satire, and why it is that conservatives dominate the landscape of political opinion talk and talk radio stems from the underlying psychological profiles of liberals and conservatives. Which, while they're not fixed, they're not fully determined, we do find that liberals tend to be more open, more tolerant of ambiguity and uncertainty. They tend to be higher in what's called need for cognition, which means they enjoy thinking for the sake of thinking in solving riddles, in problems that are layered and complex. Whereas conservatives, who tend to be more threat oriented, they operate based on efficiency in many ways. So, they are more likely to be making decisions based on intuition and emotion. They have higher need for closure. They're less tolerant of ambiguity and uncertainty.

And while a lack of need for cognition sounds like such an insult, instead I think about it that no, yeah, liberals have higher need for cognition. Conservatives are better at these sort of intuitive heuristic responses. That's how I think about it.

Andy Luttrell:
Well, a need for cognition is about how much you enjoy thinking. It doesn't mean you can't think, right? So, it just means-

Danna Young:
Oh, exactly. Exactly.

Andy Luttrell:
It's about do I get pleasure from it. You don't have to get pleasure from it.

Danna Young:
Yeah. Is this something that I really enjoy? And what's funny is when I talk to liberal hosts, liberal show hosts about this, and they're like, "Oh, so okay, so conservatives are stupid." I'm like, "Actually, no, because in many of the political knowledge quizzes that we've given over the years, conservatives will often score higher on some of the civics knowledge batteries." This is not about knowledge. This is about how motivated you are to think for the sake of thinking. Which you could actually think of as not necessarily desirable characteristic possibly, depending upon your circumstances. So, these traits do account for at least some of the uniquely sort of liberal appreciation for especially ironic satire.

And in the book I look at both on the part of message creators, in terms of their lifestyle, the lifestyle of a comic is not the lifestyle of someone who has high need for closure and who is threat oriented, right? That's just… You don't know where you're… You're not gonna have health insurance. You don't know when your next gig is coming. You don't go to bed until like 5:00 in the morning. It's a very unpredictable lifestyle. Even that in and of itself, I was like, "Something's going on here." And then the other piece that I thought was really fun was when I started looking back in time. Because I thought maybe what I think is a broader phenomenon is just an artifact of the moment that we're in right now. Maybe it's not always been this way. So, I decided to look

back at sort of when political satire became this iconic thing that is in the United States, and it brought me to the 1950s, right? With Lenny Bruce, and Dick Gregory, and Mort Sahl, and then I started looking backwards in the land of conservative opinion talk and I realized that at the very same time that Lenny Bruce and Mort Sahl were telling jokes in strip clubs and coffee shops in San Francisco and Vegas, you had these conservative radio hosts who were fire and brimstone, railing against the United States being involved in the United Nations, railing against different aspects of… they didn't call it globalism at the time, but foreign involvement. They wanted America first. They were strict nationalists and isolationists.

And I thought, "This is so bonkers, because you have the same exact bifurcated information landscape." It looks a little different, because they're in strip clubs telling jokes and the other side is on these limited broadcasts on the radio waves in the heartland of America. But they're using these rhetorical forms that we still now associate with these political ideologies. So, that I use as sort of the entry point for like, "Yeah. Why is this?"

Andy Luttrell:
So, the origins of the satire side make sense to me, so like you said, the lifestyle of a comic, the kind of person who's willing to say anything, to do anything, to push the boundaries. It's just a different kind of person. But on the other side, I hadn't thought about this until now. Is there a similar disposition that would draw people to radio and like local market radio that would be sort of compatible with that sort of, "There's one way to see the world and this is how everyone should."

Danna Young:
I don't know if it's about the platform as much as it's about the sort of rhetorical form that it takes. One person, with their world view, and their ability to just sort of wax on, like just go off, and what keeps it going is this sense of a lot of times rage, and a lot of time inducing fear in the audience about, "Here are all the things out there that you should be afraid of." And in the '50s, it was very much tied to Christianity, as well. It had that same kind of sermon quality, which in some ways, if you watch the Fox News hosts, there is a bit of that still, I would say. So, that's interesting. I don't know if it would necessarily be about radio per se, but for years people have wondered why is it that we can't seem to get to the place where we see a Rush Limbaugh on the left? And I think the left has tried and it's just not their aesthetic form.

Andy Luttrell:
Maybe it would also help just to clarify the difference between irony and outrage, to map them onto those things. So, how are those… We kind of touched on the irony side already, but what is the outrage part and what makes it different?

Danna Young:
So, I am a scholar of humor, and so the other half of this, I couldn't tell this story without exploring that other half, because it's so fascinating in and of itself. But thank gosh, I didn't have to come up with the terms or these concepts on my own, because Jeff Berry and Sarah Sobieraj from Tufts have written a book called The Outrage Industry, and they had quantified and conceptualized these elements that constitute outrage programming. And according to their definition, it is yes, a solo host at the helm of a program who uses their program to identify threats and enemies in the

environment. They use hyperbolic language, slippery slope forms of argumentation, a lot of insult and name calling. What's important about this is that in their book, they describe outrage programming across ideologies, right? So, they look at Rachel Maddow, or formerly Keith Olbermann on the left, and they also look at your Bill O'Reilly and Sean Hannity on the right. However, when you look at how they content analyze these shows to try to understand the presence of these outrageous elements in those programs, it becomes very clear that these are apples and oranges.

What they call outrage programming on the left is not nearly as outrageous in content as what we see on the right. So, between that and the fact that in terms of market success, the success of those programs on the right is incomparable. That got me thinking there has to be something going on here. And then when I started looking at some of the research on exposure to those shows on the right, on public opinion, on agenda setting and priming, I was like, "We're seeing very similar outcomes." For liberals, they are primed and have their agenda set by late night comedy and satire shows. For conservatives, they're having their agendas set and they're being primed by exposure to Fox News and Rush Limbaugh. Same way when you look at specialized knowledge. The consumers of those shows on both sides come away really knowledgeable about the things that the hosts talk about.

So, that to me sort of started filling in those blanks.

Andy Luttrell:
So, both are serving as effective vehicles for their targeted audience.

Danna Young:
Correct.

Andy Luttrell:
Yeah. You know, one of the things that I think is interesting about it too is that it connects to this research on matching effects in persuasion, so there are all of these examples of cases where messages are more compelling to audiences when they adopt a linguistic style, adopt a set of values, adopt a persona that resonates with the audience and it doesn't work so well the other way. And one of the things I think is interesting about the way you've written about it is you pay some attention to the mismatch side, as well, which I think the persuasion literature doesn't do as much. But it's like a liberal audience watching outrage programming is kind of like, "This is trash." And a conservative audience watching this satirical programming goes, "I don't understand. This is too hard."

Danna Young:
You know what, Andy? It's so crazy. So, I'm working on a piece right now where I'm sort of deconstructing the rhetoric of The Lincoln Project, and it's fascinating to me because they are all these former GOP strategists, they're very conservative, and the aesthetics of their ads speak to exactly what you would imagine that they would do, right? They're very threat oriented. They're dark. They're ominous. Or they're mocking, and derisive, and mean. So, one of the things that I have been really fascinated by is how as much as liberals like the idea of these former Republicans now being anti-Trump and putting money against Trump, they don't love the tactics. And so, you'll

have people online saying, “This seemed mean-spirited to me. I don’t think you should be talking about Trumps weight. I think that this particular ad is ableist. Or I think it’s kind of misogynistic. Or sexist. Or these insults are so wedded to gender, why don’t you…” And I’m like it’s so fascinating, because it is just that. It’s a discrepancy in the preferred aesthetic. They love the goal; they just don’t like the means.

Andy Luttrell:
And it seems so potent, too. The matching literature always feels like it, like I said, shines a light on the matching side, where it’s like, “Of course it makes sense that I’d be drawn to the stuff written in my language.” But it’s like when does the mismatch go so awry that people go, “Yuck. I can’t believe you would do that.”

Danna Young:
I just don’t like it. Yeah. You know what? My students really enjoy when we talk, especially in the sensation seeking literature and the health communication work, where it’s like, “Why would you ever create an anti-drug ad designed to resonate with high sensation seeking…” You know… to experiment with drugs. Why would you ever create an ad that was coming from a doctor in front of a screen? Well, here are the reasons why you should not take prescription drugs. So, and the students always are like, “Yeah! Just it just makes sense.” Once you unpack the psychology of an audience, you have the ticket. It’s just whether or not you decide to use it.

Andy Luttrell:
Your book pays special attention to American politics, which makes plenty of sense. The history of it. I actually, I really loved the history of how the media landscape got to where it is. But we can pause on that for another time. But what I wondered is whether this seems universal. Do we see the same, these same kinds of what we’re calling liberal-conservative dynamics in satire outrage anywhere else in the world?

Danna Young:
Well, what I love is that I have lots of friends who are scholars in other places, and I am an Americanist. I do not know much about other places. What I have put forward would suggest that it is universal, right? And the pre-existing literature from political psychology, these propensities among the cultural and social left versus the cultural and social right, those propensities exist across study, across country. So, those propensities seem to be there, these sort of psychological predispositions that relate to cultural and social ideology.

Just through anecdote, I have gotten so many messages from folks from different countries, Israel, and Europe, and South America, saying, “This is the same thing that happens here. The most successful satire shows are the ones that are on the left. And this is the most popular kind of programming on the right.” Well, I mean who knows? I would love it if what I’ve put forward could really spark some comparative work in this area. It would be wonderful.

Andy Luttrell:
The other thing I wanted to just, my last thing, is the political ideology stuff is tendencies, like you’ve said. It’s not guarantees that yes, the more conservative you are, the more you tend to have a need for closure. What’s interesting is that those on average tend to be fairly subtle relationships,

but the media landscape is very clear and divided. And so, I'm curious. It's almost surprising that there's not more of a mix, that it's not muddier, but it seems so clear cut in the media. I'm curious whether you thought about why that would be?

Danna Young:
Yeah. So, I'm actually, it's funny that you say that, I'm working on a TED Talk right now about this very issue, because I think that the economics incentives of our media environment are so geared towards giving people what the system thinks we want that it exacerbates these differences not just in terms of ideological content, but in terms of aesthetic form. And it invites us to become this crystallized version of our pre-existing self. And I don't know that that's popular. As a media person, I think it's interesting that… You know, George Gerbner wrote a lot about the dangers of mainstreaming through exposure to television. That television would cultivate a shared worldview and it would erode important differences between groups of people. And he was writing this in the '70s, when there were three major networks and they were all rather homogenous in terms of least common denominator programming that wouldn't offend anyone.

So, his concern was the erosion of differences. We're in a completely different context now. In the economics of the media system, not just on television but largely in social media platforms through microtargeting, et cetera, it really is fueling this splintering of individuals and getting them to tap into these most primal aspects of themselves that maybe if left to ones own devices would be far more moderated. It would just be like, "Yeah, this inclination, but whatever." Instead it's like if the media environment feeds into that every single day, where are we going to end up and how are we going to be able to interact with one another?

So, this is kind of where I'm heading now with my work and writing.

Andy Luttrell:
It reminds me if, I enjoy gardening, so when you look at like seed catalogs, you're like, "There are 300 types of peppers that I could grow." But when I go to the grocery store, there are three colors of one type of pepper. And that's all I have to choose from. Which kind of sounds like this. It's like there's an orchestrating system that is taking what is very varied and heterogenous and making it sort of, "Well, there's this one, and there's this one, and that's kind of what you have to pick from."

Danna Young:
Yeah. I was thinking about it in terms of… So, let's say I have two different people who have the psychological profiles of like one is very open and tolerant of ambiguity, and playful, and experimental. And the other one is more vigilant, and serious, and if left their own they could do fine and be friends, et cetera, but I feel like if put through the meat grinder of our media environment, it is very possible that they will come away thinking that the other one is like death to America. You know? And that is what I'm finding most dangerous.

Andy Luttrell:
Well, that is not the most hope… I was gonna wrap up there. That's not the most rosy picture. But what's kind of next on the horizon? Just to get us to end here. You mentioned The Lincoln Project stuff. What's sort of the new questions that you're looking at?

Danna Young:
So, my big new questions are those that integrate sort of first-person narratives. I really enjoy writing for popular audience. First-person narratives with information about political psychology and the media environment to try to make normative arguments about where we need to go based on the possibilities, because at the end of the day, I am an optimist, and I do think that there are things that we can do as individuals to sort of thwart the agency of these constraining forces. So, that's kind of where I'm working. I also, I have a colleague, Amy Blakely, who's in health communication, and she and I have been working on studying the political ideology of the COVID response. Through the lens of political psychology, but also media economics. The same underlying argument that I'm making to you here, which is that the media system itself may be exacerbating some of these differences.

But there are ways that we can disrupt those differences to actually do as a society what is best for public health.

Andy Luttrell:
There's the optimistic concluding note I was looking for. Well, thank you so much for taking the time to be here and talk about your work. This was super fun.

Danna Young:
Thank you, Andy. This was great!

Andy Luttrell:
All right, that's all for this week. Thank you to Danna Young for being on the show. You can find a link to her website in the show notes for more about the work that she does, and you can find her new book wherever books are. Again, it's called Irony and Outrage. If you like the show, the guests, the topics, I don't know, me? Leave a nice review of the show on Apple Podcasts. It helps people find the show and it helps me feel whole. As always, you can learn more about the show at OpinionSciencePodcast.com, where you can also get transcripts for most of the episodes and find links to the research we talk about. Follow us, like us, retweet us, Pinterest us. I still don't really know what Pinterest is for, but social media the show on Facebook or Twitter @OpinionSciPod. Okay, I have no more things to say, so have a great day everyone and I'll see you next week for more Opinion Science. Bye-bye!