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Employing satire and humor in facing a pandemic

<https://doi.org/10.1515/humor-2021-0001>

Received July 11, 2020; accepted March 2, 2021;

published online March 24, 2021

Abstract: This research employs the Theory of Planned Behavior and the Focus Theory of Normative Conduct to convey how *The Late Show with Stephen Colbert* employs humor and satire with the aim of providing information, proffering injunctive norms, and modifying attitudes and subjective norms in its public audience, while exposing the inefficacy of behavioral controls and urging public authorities to adopt effective ones instead. In the earlier stages of the pandemic in the US, the *Show* primarily appealed to people to change their behavior through providing information, invoking injunctive norms and affiliations, foregrounding appropriate attitudes and subjective norms; at the same time, its repertoire included social and political satire drawing on organizational and institutional mechanisms of behavioral control. As the health crisis became increasingly politicized, the *Show* redirected its satire to policies and political figures and sought to change the behavior of policymakers in setting proper role models and adopting wiser behavioral controls to lead the nation through the crisis. Meanwhile, individual responsibility was never spared in satiric attempts to change behavior as the *Show* continued to provide its audience with new scientific information and encouraged them to follow scientific recommendations.

Keywords: focus theory of normative conduct; SARS-CoV-2; satire; *The Late Show with Stephen Colbert*; theory of planned behavior

1 Introduction

The outbreak of SARS-CoV-2 pandemic in 2020 disrupted normal life in many parts of the world. Besides being a major health crisis, the pandemic also posed many societal, economic and political challenges. Leadership seems to have defined the responses of different countries in these uncertain times. A lack of leadership was particularly evident in the US, despite the fact that the country has striven to pose as

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a global leader on several occasions. It took a while for the virus to spread from its initial outbreak in Wuhan, China, to reach the US. Although the US Administration¹ had a few months to plan and prepare, its initial response was that SARS-CoV-2 was nothing more than a simple flu; it would magically disappear soon; and the number of cases would miraculously diminish from the initial 15 to zero within a couple of days. This response proved less persuasive to the virus. Subsequently, an already complex situation became more complicated for a nation divided by contemporaneous issues including primary elections, record-high unemployment, and public insurgence against systemic racism and police violence.

In the absence of strong leadership, many took it upon themselves to ‘be their own Presidents’ and take action to mitigate the raging crises. *The Late Show with Stephen Colbert (TLS)*, for one, attempted to reprimand the government’s response and at the same time appeal to its audiences to behave responsibly at the time of crisis. *TLS* uses satire and humor² to call for a change in behavior in its audience and public authorities. Employing the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) and the Focus Theory of Normative Conduct (FTNC), I will survey the *Show*’s satiric response to the SARS-CoV-2 health crisis unfolding in time and try to explain the reasons behind its evolution.

A sub-genre of the talk show, late-night shows usually feature monologues about the news, interviews, comic sketches and music performances. Playing the character of conservative pundit, Stephen Colbert launched his own show as a spin-off of *The Daily Show* on Comedy Central. *TLS* was premiered in 2015 on CBS. A combination of the serious and the non-serious has rendered this show “infotainment,” i.e. soft news that simultaneously provides entertainment and information.

2 Methodology

While many studies have looked at humor and satire in leadership and communications, their persuasive functions remain contentious (Adam 2020; Higgie 2017; Holmes and Marra 2006; Lewis et al. 2008; Lynch 2002; Meyer 1997, 2000, 2015; Pariera 2017; Scheel and Gockel 2017; Shifman 2014; Skurka et al. 2018, 2019;

¹ Administration generally refers to the executive branch of the US Government.

² For the purpose of this article, I take humor to be “*a broad, multifaceted term that represents anything that people say or do that others perceive as funny and tends to make them laugh, as well as the mental processes that go into both creating and perceiving such an amusing stimulus, and also the emotional response of mirth involved in the enjoyment of it*” (Martin and Ford 2018: 16; original italics). This is while satire is usually associated with “diminishing or derogating a subject by making it ridiculous and evoking toward it attitudes of amusement, contempt, scorn, or indignation” (Abrams and Harpham 2012: 353).

Young 2008, 2012, 2016, 2020; Young and Coutinho 2013). Colbert's satirical work has also been studied in this context (Amarasingam 2011; Baumgartner and Morris 2008; Baym and Jones 2013; Baym 2007, 2010, 2013; Benacka 2016; Brewer et al. 2013; Colletta 2009; Combe 2015; Faina 2013; Howell 2014; Hardy et al. 2014; Hutchison 2018; LaMarre et al. 2009; LaMarre 2013; McClennen 2011a, 2011b; Paroske 2016; Rogak 2011; Schiller 2009; Schulzke 2012; Stewart 2016). However, this study employs a new theoretical approach using FTNC and TPB to explicate *TLS*'s multifaceted humor and satire during the 2020 global health crisis as it strove to make an intervention in both the public and political spheres. I employ these theories to come up with a hypothesis and an analytical model before analyzing the content. The hypothesis as derived from the principles of TPB and FTNC assumes that *TLS* employs humor and satire to provide information, proffer injunctive norms, and modify attitudes and subjective norms in his public audience, while exposing the inefficacy of behavioral controls and urging public authorities to adopt more effective ones instead. I do not intend to claim that script writers consciously adhere to any theory of psychology, nor does this study claim to evaluate any actual behavioral change.

FTNC assumes that norms determine behavior. According to the theory, there are two types of norms. Descriptive norms "describe what is the typical or usual thing to do." Injunctive norms, on the other hand, signify "what ought to be done within a certain social group." In other words, injunctive norms function according to the expectations of group members and influence behavior because "humans are generally motivated to affiliate with others" (Stok and Ridder 2019: 97). Injunctive norms, therefore, are most useful for changing behavior.

FTNC postulates that alongside self-regulatory resources, the relationship of individual with her social group determines "normative focus," i.e. whether a norm becomes focal or not. Subjects are allotted different social roles and social identities. One way to validate one's affiliation with a community and consolidate one's sense of identity is to perform the behaviors that are associated with that social group. Normative behaviors and peer expectations, therefore, can partly determine behavior (Stok and Ridder 2019: 102). Satire and humor can function as both informative and social sources. They are sources of information provision, while, at the same time, they can set and reinforce social sanctions through their disparaging and shaming functions (Boukes 2019; Feldman et al. 2011; LaMarre et al. 2014; Meyer 2000; Young 2008, 2020). They can therefore be used to advocate a change in behavior when employed wisely and directed at the right audience.

Besides identity, affect can also be regulated by satire and humor in order to persuade and change behavior. One quality that distinguishes cultural productions is the preeminence of affect. Mirth is considered to be the reward of the cognitive processing of (the incongruity of) humor, but the affective aspect of

humor is not limited to mirth. Disparaging humor and satire are also associated with ridicule and shaming. Alongside guilt, shame is an affect that regulates social behavior (Dodds 1997); therefore, ridicule is yet another means of social control. As Martin and Ford (2018: 261–2) observe, “Through ridicule, members of a group can communicate implicit expectations and rules about acceptable behavior and intimidate group members into conforming to those rules. Ridicule thus functions as a means of establishing or maintaining control over others through embarrassment or humiliation ... laughter (ridicule) in intragroup settings functions to ‘humiliate, and consequently to correct’ those who violate the rules of the group by behaving in some deviant manner ...” Shaming and ridiculing can be employed to advocate behavioral change at individual and collective levels.

Besides norms, TPB considers other pertinent determinants of behavior as well. According to TPB, one’s intentions determine one’s behavior, while intentions are determined by beliefs (Figure 1). TPB identifies attitude, subjective norm and perceived behavioral control as three sets of beliefs (Ajzen 1991, 2006, 2011; de Groot and Thøgersen 2013; de Leeuw et al. 2015; Steg and Nordlund 2013).

Humor and satire can challenge our attitudes and perceptions of behavioral controls; they can create social pressure to instigate behavior. Poking fun at them, satire and humor tend to defamiliarize and revisit the norms we endorse (see Condren 2002). Potentially, they can also push to modify behavioral controls in two ways. First, they can challenge and amend our wrong perceptions that actually hinder us from adopting an alternative behavior. Second, they can foreground actual behavioral controls and encourage changing them. Humor and satire can also (re)direct subjective norms toward endorsing certain behaviors. “Subjective norms refer to the perceived social pressure to engage in a specific behaviour” (Abrahamse 2019: 12), and disparaging humor and satire are especially effective in bringing about such social pressure. Disparagement can be directed against citizens and/or policymakers. Psychological research supports the assumption that a

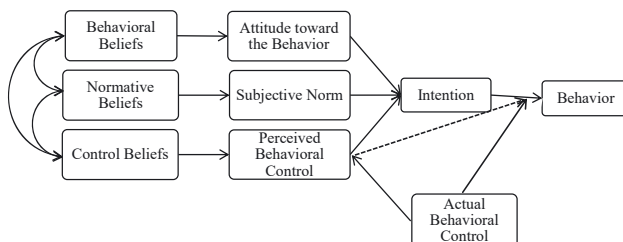


Figure 1: Determinants of behavior according to TPB (Ajzen 2015: 126).

“potential social function of laughter is to motivate others to behave in particular ways ... laughter can be a method of positively reinforcing others for desirable behavior (‘laughing with’), as well as a potent form of punishment directed at undesirable behaviors (‘laughing at’)” (Martin and Ford 2018: 8).

Nonetheless, there is a note of caution in using humor for changing behavior. Some studies have conveyed that humor can both increase and reduce persuasion depending on the type of the message argument. When the message contains a strong argument, the use of humor decreases the number of pro-arguments that the recipient comes up with, hence reduces persuasion. On the contrary, when the argument is not particularly strong, humor can decrease critical counter-arguments and consequently increase persuasion (Martin and Ford 2018: 251). There are different explanations for this. First, processing humor is cognitively demanding; as the result, less resources will be allocated to the scrutiny of the argument when humor is involved. Second, anticipation of positive affect on the part of the recipient also negatively influences their scrutiny of the argument (Martin and Ford 2018: 252–4; Nabi et al. 2007; Young 2008, 2012, 2020). This implies that humor can be employed to change behavior if wisely combined with the right type of argument and directed at the right type of audience. As Martin and Ford (2018: 252) observe, “Because humor encourages peripheral route processing, it could be particularly effective in persuading people who are motivated to avoid thinking too much about an issue, for instance, people who are high in the personality trait of masculinity.” Moreover, when an audience is in a good mood, they tend to agree with a persuasive message, and humor frequently puts the audience in a good mood. Also, “By encouraging affectively consistent pro-arguments, humor leads the recipient to evaluate a message more favorably, and thus increase persuasion” (Martin and Ford 2018: 253). At a communal level, “it appears that political humor can function as a powerful tool of persuasion, effectively discrediting politicians and negatively affecting people’s attitudes toward them” (Martin and Ford 2018: 255).

Pariera (2017) observes this ambivalence in a study conducted within the framework of TPB. Building upon the ambivalent potentials of humor for persuasion and influencing behavior, she investigates whether the use of humor can facilitate conversations about sex between mothers and their children. She concludes, “humor and amusement are distinct concepts with different persuasive influence. ... humor does not have a direct impact on mothers’ beliefs and intentions about talking to their child about sex, but amusement is found to have a positive association. Humor is only successful at increasing norms, attitudes, and communication intentions when participants are highly amused” (339).

In this article, I will explicate how *TLS* tries to advocate behavioral change during the pandemic by using FTNC and TPB. I will survey the monologues starting from the spread of SARS-CoV-2 in the US extending to the episode that was aired on June 25, before the show took a break on the occasion of the Independence Day and summer holidays. This covers the first wave of the pandemic in the US. TPB and FTNC do not prove to be always strongly predicative of behavior, but this article does not employ them to predict a change in attitude, intention or behavior. Nor does it intend to study the impact of watching the show on its audience or its indirect impact through its reverberations on social media and in the news. Rather, I use these two theories to facilitate qualitative content analysis for the purpose of shedding new light on the rhetorical strategies of the show for utilizing the potentials of humor and satire in persuasion.

3 Discussion

3.1 The first phase

TLS's reaction can be roughly divided into three phases: first, extending from the confirmation of the first cases in the US up until the end of the lockdown. The second phase started with moving the production to Colbert's house and witnessed an increasing politicization of the health crisis. However, with the resurfacing of other socio-political issues, including systemic racism and police violence, the attention to health crisis subsided and was diverted to other topics during the third phase.

The show was still mainly concerned with the Democratic presidential campaign and primaries in early March. The new segment "Goin' Viral" primarily focused on subjective norms and behavioral control, while satirizing Trump's response to the pandemic. Besides criticizing the President's lies, ignorance and disregard for science, *TLS* focused on encouraging its audience to observe the World Health Organization (WHO) recommendations. Therefore, it provided information and set up injunctive normative conduct expecting individuals to responsibly take all required measures to secure not only their own safety but also that of others. Besides subjective norms, it also attempted to reveal the inefficacy of existing behavioral controls to respond to the scale of the crisis and called for adopting more effective ones.

As the situation worsened in the US, the segment expanded over the whole monologue on March 9. Appealing to injunctive and subjective norms, Colbert said, "The Corona virus is still on everyone's mind. So don't forget to wash your minds" and continued to chant "Avoid crowds." In other words, *TLS* made utmost use of the conventions of infotainment genre to provide information to its

audience. But it is not only citizens who are responsible for their health and safety; *TLS* also targeted the President who failed to respond to the pandemic and dismantled the White House Pandemic Response Team.³ Likewise, it criticized the government's response to ensuing economic difficulties on March 10. Impersonating Trump at his press conference, Colbert created situational irony by saying, "I'm here with Mitch McConnell, and others, with everybody, to announce some hastily-thrown-together measures that I feel like I'm throwing handfuls of dry dogfood at a charging tiger, but here's a tax cut, 'n maybe some loans, substantial reliefs for everybody, small companies, fat companies, sexy companies, ugly companies. Tell me when one of these works."⁴ If the government expects people to comply with lockdown regulations, it must provide adequate indemnity for citizens. Yet the government's economic decisions were not adequately reassuring as behavioral controls, so Colbert attempted to draw attention to this deficiency and called for a clearer targeted plan.

Things changed rapidly when WHO declared SARS-CoV-2 a pandemic. *TLS* was recorded in an empty studio on March 12 to set a role model for its audience in complying with health and safety regulations. Thereby, it clearly set attitudes and norms for its audience to follow. At the same time, Colbert chastised the Administration for lagging behind and not fulfilling its duties and contrasted *TLS*'s responsible behavior with that of the President.⁵

3.2 The second phase

Shortly afterwards, *TLS* was no longer filmed in Ed Sullivan Theater, its usual broadcast and taping location. Starting in the following week, Colbert shot in his yard, bathroom, and garage before setting up his study as his new studio and drafting his family as his crew. At this point, he directly appeals to injunctive and subjective norms and invokes correct attitudes to encourage people to change their behavior and comply with health and safety standards: "The big story tonight is all of you people, people all over America have hunkered down in their own houses to ride out the corona virus." Besides repeatedly asking his audience to regularly wash their hands, he tried to inspire hope and raise their spirit despite the difficult circumstances everyone was experiencing. Starting from provision of information, he moved on to stir empathy and ensure identification and affiliation by saying, "this is not the first time humanity had to sequester itself to prevent the spread of

3 <https://youtu.be/H4e7A60DBPo>.

4 <https://youtu.be/YgkNuoozmis>.

5 https://youtu.be/aKhPbVN_Rbw.

infection,” before recommending the injunctive norm that can save the country: “It is a freaky, freaky time. I give you that. And I’m sure a lot of you are worried. But if you are watching this from home right now, know that you are doing the right thing.” He explained the concept of flattening the curve to save the health system from becoming overwhelmed in simple terms and insisted on public attempts to do so. *TLS* did a very good job in explaining what epidemiologists recommended to its audience in digestible language. In the absence of leadership, therefore, *TLS* tried to step in and do its share in rescuing the health system from crashing due to admissions that outnumber its handling capacity. This is while “In an ideal world, our elected leaders will urge us to follow the advice of experts.” Then, the monologue continued to censure the public authorities who had let the nation down. In an interview, California Representative Devin Nunes, who downplayed the health risks of the virus to salvage the economy, had urged people to go to restaurants and pubs and enjoy themselves. Here Colbert warned against setting wrong injunctive and subjective norms by saying, “It’s one thing to give bad advice, but some leaders went so far as to boldly set bad examples.”⁶

The show revisited this lack of leadership in another episode when it contrasted Trump and thoughtful leadership: “Amidst all of this, Americans are desperately looking for thoughtful leadership—or Donald Trump.” It chastised Trump’s use of “Chinese virus” to refer to SARS-CoV-2 for being racist, before reminding its audience of administrative mismanagement of the pandemic.⁷ While highlighting the significance of providing the public with scientifically sound information, Colbert further reprimanded public authorities for their frivolous and petty quarrels when the nation was struggling with a far-reaching crisis in remarking, “Mayor de Blasio, Governor Cuomo! The nation is in crisis. This is no time for a pissing match. You should be saving your urine in jars, just like the rest of us. We are supposed to do that, right? I read that on Facebook.” He summoned a sense of affiliation and belonging to encourage people to follow injunctive norms. Keeping political persuasions at bay, he appealed to national and humanitarian values to advocate the behavior that can salvage the nation.⁸ This humanist turn might contradict the cynical heritage of *Daily Show* satire. In other words, Colbert, assuming the position of a wise leader, discerned the effective strategy that the times demanded to goad the nation through this crisis despite his own personal political persuasion.

Elsewhere, *TLS* criticized the decisions of Governors of Alabama and Florida after mentioning Trump’s refusal to shut down the country.⁹ Its main, though

6 <https://youtu.be/BvJ1BuEtZEo>.

7 <https://youtu.be/eWPKrGJ7ksI>.

8 <https://youtu.be/wPTTbTRxBsg>.

9 <https://youtu.be/FiXgBBAOwTO>.

provisional, solution to encounter such incompetence in leadership was almost always to plead with people to make the right decisions and to take appropriate actions on their own: "... it's so important right now to stay safe and stay focused and stay inside. And I know you the American people get it. But some of our elected officials are slow on the uptake. Republican Governors in eleven states still refuse to issue stay-at-home orders."¹⁰

While reprimanding public authorities for failing to respond appropriately to the crisis, *TLS* never forgot to address its audience to do as much as they can to save themselves and their loved ones. In fact, it managed to strike a fine balance in attributing responsibility to both public authorities and people. In achieving this, it resorted to any means that might have assisted in persuading its audience to change their behavior. It did not even hesitate to invoke faith as a subjective norm to reach out to a larger number of people and plead for behavioral change. After referring to Trump's false promise of a restart before Easter, for instance, Colbert announced that even Jesus himself had said, "Let the children come to me. But in about six to eight weeks. In fact, I think I'm going to stay in the tomb a few more days. I'm immunocompromised. I'm just getting over a bad case of being dead. Matthew 19:14."¹¹ Meanwhile, *TLS* never stopped providing information, like disinfecting groceries, as a basic function of humor and satire that could lead to behavioral change.¹²

3.3 The third phase

The Administration and many governors were eager to open the economy as early as April despite the advice of the scientific community. At the same time, Trump and his team overtly politicized scientific recommendations for public health and safety including the wearing of face masks. Further contemporaneous political turmoil widened the gulf between the poised, cautious and rational response that many scientists advocated and the unfolding of the actual response.

On April 6, *TLS* again mentioned Trump's refusal to issue a national stay-at-home order, before criticizing the Georgia Governor for opening all the state's beaches. It again invoked religion to appeal to subjective norms and at the same time criticized irresponsible church pastors through reminding them that they could set behavioral controls for people. Besides providing information, *TLS*'s criticism of Trump's unfounded promotion of hydroxychloroquine as the treatment

¹⁰ <https://youtu.be/7RBo9rVhZqI>.

¹¹ <https://youtu.be/r8sW-B-YKUw>.

¹² <https://youtu.be/K9j0jHWEHLH8>.

for SARS-CoV-2 and his politicized stance on wearing face masks advocated injunctive norms and set behavioral controls compatible with scientific recommendations.¹³ The Administration, nonetheless, insisted on its behavior and policies; it even veered toward less constructive attitudes. Following the lead of Trump, Vice-President Mike Pence also refused to wear a mask, behavior that was by then fully evolved into a partisan symbol.

Instead of adopting more effective policies, the Administration started attacking the press and blaming several scapegoats for the aggravating problems. *TLS* lambasted Trump's projecting blame onto the WHO in mismanaging the crisis.¹⁴ Later, when the Federal Government announced that it would stop federal support for SARS-CoV-2 testing sites, Colbert alluded to the President's uneasy paternal relationships with his father and his sons—particularly Eric—by saying, “Why is Trump opposed to the testing? Someone tell him they are corona virus tests not paternity tests.” *TLS* exposed this policy as another strategy to shirk responsibility. It also brought to the fore the inefficiency of employment registration systems at a time when unemployment was soaring in the US. These are actually further instances of behavioral controls that the show addressed. Meanwhile, injunctive norms were again invoked in the form of Jewish and Christian religious affiliations which culminated in a zoom call with the Almighty where the message was to adhere to social distancing during Easter holidays.¹⁵

After Easter, Colbert drew on religion again when he said, “Jesus wasn't even allowed to leave the tomb under the order of Andrew Cuomo.” But the monologue quickly moved on to focus on Trump's mismanagement of the crisis and his rash decision to reopen the country. Colbert cited Dr. Fauci's testimony that an earlier shutdown would have saved lives, before concluding “Some people say that Trump values the economy over human life just to help his reelection, but I'm sure he is not thinking about himself here. Remember all of his buildings are branded ‘Other People’.”¹⁶ This can be interpreted as revisiting attitudes, injunctive and subjective norms. It also calls for adopting wiser behavioral controls to respond to the pandemic.¹⁷

From mid-April, *TLS* discerned that the President was preempting news briefings to politicize the health crisis and further his reelection campaign. It chastised Trump's constant attempts to shift the blame for his failure to someone else when he again targeted WHO for his mismanagement of the crisis.¹⁸ As the

¹³ https://youtu.be/LAW3qHG4_ZY.

¹⁴ <https://youtu.be/ovYafcQcHY>.

¹⁵ <https://youtu.be/9RQ4f4nuiT4>.

¹⁶ As a businessman, Donald J. Trump has invested in real estate, and his buildings are named after him.

¹⁷ https://youtu.be/DVIZb_dgxVY.

¹⁸ <https://youtu.be/WSIuBzKUPDw>.

briefings did more harm than any good, and in the absence of sound leadership and reliable information, *TLS* again took it upon itself to provide information to the public and plead with them to behave wisely. After complaining about the scarcity of testing, Colbert continued to reinforce the Governor's mandate to wear masks in public in New York, and reminded people of the importance of staying at home. In this, he poses strong injunctive and subjective norms to support a behavior control. At the same time, he disparaged those who protested against lockdowns.¹⁹

On April 20, Colbert provided information about WHO instructions on alcohol consumption as related to SARS-CoV-2. He also chastised people who had protested against social distancing, "Cause I get that this is the land of liberty, but these protestors aren't just putting themselves at risk. The whole reason we are socially distancing in the first place is to prevent the spread of the virus, especially to our older relatives." In other words, he again appeals to a sense of identity and affiliation at the national level to clarify the appropriate attitude and set expectations for injunctive norms. *TLS* also criticized Trump and his adviser Stephen Moore for encouraging these protests, and made fun of Trump's ignorance about testing and his self-congratulatory remarks. In doing these, it attempts to redirect current policies toward behavioral controls that follow expert opinions in responding to the crisis.²⁰

As the unconventional briefings went on, *TLS* also continued to criticize the irresponsibility at the time of crisis. Having encouraged its audience to stay at home, it rebuked Trump's decision to suspend immigration to the US, but agreed that this was probably the safest decision for the immigrants "because right now America [*sic*] is basically a petri dish on the floor of a bus station men's room." Colbert observed that this ban did not stop the spread of SARS-CoV-2 nor did it help address record-high unemployment in the country. In fact, Trump was only using it as an excuse to advance his xenophobic policies.²¹

Political satire on the inefficacy of behavioral controls continued to be the focus of the show as the pandemic was increasingly politicized. As the tensions between the US and Iran, for instance, escalated, *TLS* attributed Trump's reaction to his attempt to change the subject and distract people from his plummeting approval ratings. Colbert pushed "stay inside or you might die" as the desirable dominant discourse as opposed to Trump's numerous distractive, though feeble, narratives, and associated his reckless response to the political scandals he had been involved in.²²

19 https://youtu.be/z0hrMg1j_d4.

20 <https://youtu.be/hlv7YJ0UrlM>.

21 <https://youtu.be/PxDK95Q5qN0>.

22 https://youtu.be/c_KeluilBcs.

As political uncertainty continued, *TLS* increasingly shifted its attention from individual responsibility to political satire. In other words, the initial attempt to persuade people to follow health and safety guidelines through employing injunctive norms, provision of information, revising attitudes and amplifying subjective norms was replaced by a focus on the inefficacy of the behavioral controls set by public authorities to deal with the crisis. At this point, even when *TLS* appealed to individuals, it was primarily to chastise political measures. It was implying that the people had done their share, but it was the failure of policy-makers that was letting everyone down. Colbert opened his show on April 27 by discussing people's impatience under lockdown and this creating a sense of empathy with his audience, he moved to argue that the lack of a consistent message from the government made it even more frustrating to go through the crisis. The White House explained that Trump did not attend that day's briefings because it was Melania's birthday. "Yes," Colbert commented, "they celebrated by spending a quiet evening in separate rooms. They were social distancing years before it was cool."²³ The fact that Trump did not attend the briefing provided the show with a renewed opportunity to provide information in an attempt to change behavior by lashing Trump's previous suggestions for treating the disease that included injecting disinfectants.²⁴

When it was publicly revealed that the intelligence briefing book had repeatedly warned the President about SARS-CoV-2 as early as January, *TLS* reacted by stigmatizing the Federal Government's continuing attempts to shirk responsibility and putting its burden on the states. The Administration neither adopted effective and timely policies, nor was able to set a good example for people to follow. When Pence visited the Mayo Clinic, for instance, he was the only person who was not wearing a face mask. *TLS* also flayed the Florida Governor as an "ass-kisser" for his complacent remarks about the President's son-in-law Jared Kushner. Despite his tendency not to intervene in handling the health crisis, the President rather promptly reacted in ordering the meat industry to continue with production. Colbert observed, "Wow he [i.e. Trump] really acted quickly to save the meats. Maybe they should have put that in the initial intelligence briefing."²⁵

Among constant attacks on Trump's ignorance and irresponsibility,²⁶ and that of his "Vice President Disease Vector," *TLS* did not miss opportunities to encourage the correct behavior in individuals. It insisted, for instance, that "The reason we

²³ The supposed cold marital relationship between the President and his third wife has been subject to many jokes.

²⁴ <https://youtu.be/RFvNLP8li10>.

²⁵ <https://youtu.be/wz9M8bSKVDE>.

²⁶ <https://youtu.be/OI3rOt20QT0>.

have to wear a mask is the virus is still out there, and we have to be wary of it when gathering in public spaces" Colbert agreed with NY Governor Cuomo that people should take it upon themselves to do all they could to defeat the virus in the absence of leadership: "At today's COVID-19 briefing, Cuomo stressed that it is ordinary Americans like you [pointing to his audience] who are leading the way on the coronavirus response."²⁷

After the national lockdown was lifted on May 1, *TLS* took precautions and returned to Ed Sullivan theater only in an animated format. In this way, it reinforced injunctive and subjective norms and foregrounded the right attitude during the health crisis.²⁸ When many people ignored social distancing during the weekend, *TLS* made a mild reprimand. It was not, however, nearly as caustic as its political satires. It admonished people to gently remind them of constructive attitudes and subjective norms to safely go through the crisis. This was while the President did not show any concerns despite the caveats voiced by public health experts. *TLS* specifically foregrounded the hasty reopening of economy that risked returning the country to its critical situation in mid-March. "Trump believes that getting the economy moving is, at this point, the only way he can be reelected. So he's going to try to do it no matter what the risk is to Americans." Thus, the show provides information to its audience and again underscores the inefficacy of behavioral controls.²⁹

The White House insisted on its stance in ignoring scientists (after a backlash, they changed some of their decisions, though). Colbert reacted by saying, "Oh! Big news from the endangered world of listening to scientists. Because we learned today that the White House plans to wind down the coronavirus task force. ... When Trump said as the weather warms up it will miraculously go away, I didn't know he meant our response." *TLS* exposed several political attempts to co-opt patriotic claims to persuade people of reopening the economy. After criticizing Chris Christie's claim that we have a patriotic duty to get the economy going again, Colbert exposed the sophism hidden in his analogy of responding to the pandemic as fighting a war by poking fun at the fact that shopping at malls during a pandemic was in no way on a par with confronting fascism. He called for the choice of wise behavioral controls to manage the crisis. *TLS* balanced its political satire with drawing upon individual responsibility, as well: "Oh, and there is good news for people who have always wanted to suffer at sea, because Carnival Cruise Lines plans to sail again starting in August. That is insane." Further, it referred to religion

27 <https://youtu.be/RDjHwhoegY>.

28 <https://youtu.be/yc1Y9yIKxOw>.

29 https://youtu.be/K_8Cms364Sg.

and the Ten Commandments to create a sense of affiliation and call upon injunctive and subjective norms.³⁰

While the controversy over reopening was unfolding, Trump refused to wear a face mask at a mask factory. Colbert complained, “You are supposed to be setting an example, do the right thing.” He actually lamented the opportunity lost by the President for setting injunctive and subjective norms for people to follow.³¹ Colbert wondered how the US had got to a situation where “Facemasks make a political statement in the coronavirus era.” Obviously, this turn of events hardly helped curb the crisis. Colbert discerned the frivolity inherent in such circumstances and said, “Oh, come on guys! Safety isn’t a political issue. If it makes you feel better, politicize your mask. Use it to tell the world what your politics are.” Therefore, the show tried to persuade people of different political persuasions to observe health and safety regulations by insisting that these can still be used as affiliative symbols. Meanwhile, the Administration kept ignoring and actively muffling scientific recommendations. When the Administration shelved CDC’s (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention) detailed instructions on how to reopen, the show attempted to persuade politicians to follow scientific advice at least for their vested interests, if not for the wellbeing of people: “Look, I’m no political scientist, but I’m guessing killing voters in an election year is going to be awkward at best.”³²

Although political satire and advocacy for behavioral controls were dominant in this phase, *TLS* never ignored the significance of individual responsibility in responding to the pandemic. On May 11, for instance, Colbert opened the episode by saying, “Like you, I’m getting tired of quarantine.” Once again, he created empathy and a sense of affiliation in order to persuade his audience to keep up with good practice although they might be finding it difficult to sustain. He also commented on the news that Biden held a 10-point advantage over Trump among voters who were 65 or older, maintaining, “Ha! So I guess old people aren’t inspired by Trump’s message of ‘To appease the wrathful gods of Wall Street, I will build a pyramid of your ancient bones’.” In saying this, he not only congratulated people on their discernment but also warned Trump against the political repercussions of his reckless mismanagement of the crisis.³³

On May 13, Colbert underlined communal suffering by talking about quarantine and saying all people were in that situation together. Talking about quarantine, he said, “Nobody likes that we have to do this, but we have to do this.” In other words, he strongly appealed to injunctive and subjective norms to encourage people to

³⁰ <https://youtu.be/l-tyYcfP8p0>.

³¹ https://youtu.be/AcC01svBx_Q.

³² <https://youtu.be/Hu7esCRXPGg>.

³³ <https://youtu.be/gyoQ6rrEetI>.

stick to restrictions. *TLS* also blamed capitalism and the laissez-faire economic system that put profit ahead of human lives for the rush in reopening the economy: “Republicans are desperate to reopen the economy because if they don’t, they have to do the unthinkable: give money to someone other than rich people.” While politicians insisted on the safety of reopening the economy at this point, scientists were hesitant to recommend the move. “With all the mixed messages out there,” Colbert concluded, “the public is getting confused about how safe it is to reopen. That’s led to more people going out.” In other words, he criticized how inadequate behavioral controls had failed to regulate public behavior.³⁴

TLS constantly returned to warning about the consequences of hastily removing lockdowns. Invoking expert scientific opinion as a behavioral control, on May 14, Colbert opened by saying, “You know, it’s no secret I got a little thing for science. I’m into the lifestyle by which I mean continuing to live. Cause right now our country is in the middle of a fierce debate about listening to medical experts or diving like a drunken frat boy into the gullet of a crocodile ...” He criticized the Administration for endangering the lives of citizens with its rash political decision to reopen the economy. Impersonating Trump, Colbert said, “Yes, the number of deaths is actually unthinkable but, to be fair, how about a little gratitude? I didn’t kill all of you. And that was definitely an option.”³⁵

When Trump claimed he had been taking hydroxychloroquine,³⁶ another front was opened for *TLS* to attack, although his incompetence, blame shifting and disregard for good scientific practice still predominated. Colbert asserted “he is the world’s leading authority on wasting time. This one time there was a huge deadly global pandemic, and he didn’t do anything about it for like two months. It was a personal best in being just the worst.” He also disparaged Trump’s numerous attempts to exonerate himself through blaming others by saying, “Trump is still trying to find someone he can blame his poor response to the pandemic on. So far he has narrowed it down to China, Obama, and anyone not named Donald Trump.”³⁷ Trump’s active disregard of basic hygiene practice displayed the wrong subjective norm that was adopted by some of his political supporters. He again refused to wear a face mask when visiting a Ford factory in Michigan that was manufacturing ventilators. Trump said he did not want to give the press the pleasure of seeing him wearing a mask, to which Colbert responds, “He’s right. There would be enormous pleasure in seeing less of his face.”³⁸

34 <https://youtu.be/xjCElooEE3o>.

35 <https://youtu.be/Wie-JIZW-Ew>.

36 <https://youtu.be/dw2wXfjZGUQ>.

37 <https://youtu.be/pWPKPRC3B7g>.

38 <https://youtu.be/6n7HtMKjFGA>.

On June 1, the show resumed broadcasting on a grimmer note after 10 days off. Police violence and the sad death of George Floyd had shifted attentions from the health crisis.³⁹ It took several days for SARS-CoV-2 to briefly resurface on June 10, and that was only motivated by politics when Republicans accused Biden of remaining in his basement.⁴⁰ On June 11, the show questioned the Trump campaign's wisdom in scheduling more rallies and poked lighthearted humor at NYC guidelines for safer sex during the pandemic.⁴¹

Henceforth SARS-CoV-2 lost its central status and was only occasionally invoked in association with other, primarily political, emerging issues. When Trump claimed that if testing were stopped, there would be very few cases if any, Colbert, impersonating him, retorted, "Maybe no cases. Just a lot of magically dead people. Who knows why? And if you never check their pulse, maybe they're just sleeping."⁴² Similarly, when Trump said his campaign rally "loses a lot of flavor" if his supporters were to practice social distancing, Colbert, impersonating him, said, "And you gotta keep in the flavor cause I see my supporters like veal. I liked them packed in tight, unable to move, or else the muscles will get all straining. And before anyone accuses me of being a cannibal, keep in mind, I do not consider other people human."⁴³ At this stage, therefore, satire primarily targets political decisions and actions, sometimes touching on behavioral norms.

After (the media coverage of) anti-racist and Black Lives Matter protests subsided and there was a safe distance from the sensitive issue of systemic racism, *TLS* refocused on SARS-CoV-2 on June 17. It started with creating a sense of affiliation and empathy before contrasting how individual attempts might be cancelled out by unwise governmental decisions. Colbert again drew upon a first-person plural pronoun to say, "We have all been quarantined for months and I've been going a little stir-crazy, but that's completely normal according to my therapist, Dr. Kah-lua⁴⁴." Despite the sacrifices and patient responsible behavior of many during the crisis, the Administration did not seem to be particularly aware of the havoc brewing due to its mismanagement and haste. As Colbert satirically remarked, "Corona virus is surging, or as Trump put it 'the great American comeback.' Every epidemiologist warned us not to open up too soon. This is the most predictable health outcome since the CDC published its landmark study 'Health Projections and Inflammation Results of Stikin' your Penis in that Hornet's Nest:'⁴⁵ A Medical

³⁹ <https://youtu.be/RuU-SHQIjDQ>.

⁴⁰ https://youtu.be/r_D9AUV5XD8.

⁴¹ <https://youtu.be/vf2J2rDAzJw>.

⁴² <https://youtu.be/HEGC2MjaWAM>.

⁴³ <https://youtu.be/sxTavjEu8Yc>.

⁴⁴ A liqueur.

⁴⁵ The appearance of murder hornets in the Pacific northwest stirred concern in 2020.

Study’.” While alluding to “Make America Great Again” as Trump’s 2016 campaign slogan, Colbert is berating what he and Pence called “the Great American Come-back” to refer to recovering economic indicators after the lockdowns were lifted. Instead of amending its policy that led to a spike in infection cases, the Administration denied the possibility of a second wave, and “On Monday, on a call with governors, Pence tried to blame the rising infection numbers on an increase in testing, because for Pence the real disease is knowledge.” Colbert also cited Dr. Fauci’s opinion on Trump rallies not only to discourage his campaign from holding them but also in order to plead with supporters not to attend large crowd gatherings.⁴⁶

The show never lost sight of information provision as one of its primary resources for behavioral change. *TLS*, for instance, humorously mentioned a study that provides sanitary instructions for using toilets to avoid the spread of SARS-CoV-2.⁴⁷ It also warned people about the possible results of less than responsible behavior. Observing that there was a surge of infections in half of US states, Colbert explained it by revealing that cases among young people were on the rise. Several cases were in fact related to fraternity rush parties in Oxford, Mississippi. Once again, *TLS* foregrounded injunctive and subjective norms again in the hope of persuading people to change their behavior.⁴⁸

This call for individual responsibility occurred in parallel with failing behavioral norms in hastily reopening the country that caused record number of infections in Arizona, Florida and Texas.⁴⁹ As the number of cases was once again on the rise, Colbert warned both individuals and policymakers against the relapse: “Hey remember when the Coronavirus was gonna magically disappear in April? Well, it’s June 25 and yesterday new coronavirus cases in the US soar[ed] to highest single-day total. [Pleading:] No! No! We can’t go backwards people. It’s been too long of a journey.” Having foregrounded attitudes, injunctive and subjective norms, he moved on to advocate for behavioral controls through satirizing Pence’s focus on encouraging signs despite indisputable statistics, “Yeah, 2.4 million infected Americans. Don’t look at the glass as half empty. Look at your lungs as half full.” He again returned to the politicization of hygiene guidelines by reminding that wearing masks is an effective way of hindering the spread of the virus, “But unfortunately putting a piece of cloth on your face has become a cultural war thanks almost entirely to our President. ... So now you are a liberal snowflake if you don’t wanna die.” *TLS* also mentioned those who are protesting against wearing masks across

46 <https://youtu.be/Dl3GGCwHeSM>.

47 <https://youtu.be/lpPYCsljjc8>.

48 https://youtu.be/_AjjNpmyyEY.

49 <https://youtu.be/P72KGROeZp8>.

the country by showing footage of several protestors in Palm Beach, Florida, and exposing their faulty reasoning. This individual appeal was again balanced by behavioral norms in lambasting the Freedom to Breathe Agency for issuing mask exemption cards, and for their misleading and politicized language.⁵⁰

4 Conclusion

The response of *TLS* evolved as the pandemic unfolded, but it invariably involved satire and humor to disparage wrong decisions and behaviors and advocate behavioral change at both public and policymaker levels. In the earlier stages of the pandemic in the US, the show primarily appealed to people to change their behavior through providing information, invoking injunctive norms and affiliation, foregrounding appropriate attitudes and subjective norms, although its repertoire also included social and political humor and satire that drew on organizational and institutional mechanisms of behavioral control. Later on, the health crisis became increasingly politicized and several other socio-political issues emerged on parallel grounds that included the uprisings against systemic racism, the Black Lives Matter movement and the ongoing US presidential campaigns. Subsequently, the show redirected the main target of its satire to political figures and decisions and strove to influence the behavior of policymakers, rather than the public, to set good examples and come up with wise behavioral controls to lead the nation through the crisis. Nonetheless, individual responsibility never totally receded from satiric attempts to change behavior as *TLS* continued to provide new scientific information to its audience and encouraged them to follow sane advice in order to save themselves and their loved ones at the time of crisis.

Behavioral change interventions can be broadly categorized into structural or informational attempts. Structural interventions aim to change the context in which people make decisions for their behavior. Policymakers can most effectively pursue these interventions through legislation, regulations, incentives and penalties. Informational approaches, on the other hand, hope to change the determinants of behavior by providing information. The assumption is that when people learn about its consequences, they will change their behavior. While pushing for structural interventions, *TLS* also resorted to information provision in hopes of advocating behavioral change in its public audience. Humor and satire have the potential to cause informational behavioral change through providing information, creating positive emotions, entertaining and engaging their audience. Moreover, the disciplinary function of humor is comparable to how norms

⁵⁰ <https://youtu.be/srg3-FLAjh8>.

determine human behavior according to behavioral and social psychology. This social function of humor was recognized as early as Bergson (1999 [1900]) who “put the disciplinary functions of ridicule at the heart of humour and, as such, [his] *Laughter* represents the first real social theory of laughter” (Billig 2005: 111).

Research literature, however, is inconclusive regarding the actual impact of satire and humor in political persuasion and changing behavior. This is partly because most studies do not fully account for the numerous contingencies involved in the production, perception and reception of humor and satire in different contexts and among different communities. In this study, I have attempted to start exploring how satire and humor can be employed for advocating behavioral change. More quantitative studies are needed to measure the contingent impacts of satire and humor in determining and changing behavior among various audiences.

Acknowledgement: I am obliged to the anonymous reviewers and editor for their constructive and helpful remarks. This research would have not been possible without the generous support of Alexander von Humboldt Stiftung/Foundation.

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