

How Soft News Affects Attitudes and Behavior
In 18-24 Year Olds

By

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ABSTRACT

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In today's media environment there are two different forms of news programs: hard news—news in the traditional sense of a newscast presenting the facts of an event—and soft news. The phenomenon of soft news is a hybrid of shows that mix politics with entertainment encompassing sensationalism and human-interest components when reporting on select high-profile political issues. An early form of this news type includes daytime talk shows such as *Oprah* to the now popular comedic faux news programs such as *The Daily Show*.

The age bloc of 18-24 year olds has been considered the primary viewership of some soft news sources. These same young Americans are seen as an apathetic group in terms of political interest and involvement compared generations of the recent past. Thus it was of interest for this thesis to explore whether exposure to soft news influences levels of cynicism towards the electoral system, voting behavior, knowledge levels, ideologies, and political discourse among this age group. Although my sample did not consume large amounts of soft news, there seemed to be a correlation between those who consumed some level of soft news and civic engagement through voting, registering to vote, or partaking in political discourse among peers. *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report* were soft news sources that were specifically highlighted by this research.

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Chapter One: Soft News in American Society

Media, specifically the advent of the television and the internet, has become, over the years, an increasingly important aspect of American society. Television in fact has become so significant that many scholars have likened it to the fourth branch of the government with its seeming ability to check the other branches (Morris and Baumgartner 2008).

Markus Prior (2007) discusses the beginning of this phenomenon of the growing magnitude of media described above. He is able to link this change in the media environment to how it affects the public in terms of political knowledge and involvement. The original advent of broadcast news did little for those who often read newspapers, but had a large effect on the segments of society less educated who due to this innovation were able to be exposed to the political world. Prior (2007) argues that in a low-choice media environment, such as fifty years ago when only broadcast TV and print media existed, TV had the ability to increase the knowledge levels of the general public through exposure.

Prior (2007) also posits that the advent of television in the then low-choice media environment increased voter turnout. The turnout, specifically of less educated voters, should be greater since they become more politically knowledgeable from watching broadcast news for entertainment since in this low-choice media environment often the news was the only thing on, rather than would be the case in a high-choice media

environment where other non-political news programs would be available for entertainment value.

The reason why television out of all the other forms of media garners individual attention in this subject matter is because television as a medium has the most potential to increase political knowledge. This occurrence is mainly due to the fact that at television's advent people watched TV for hours every night, regardless of the program, as noted above, for entertainment value, while the secondary function that stemmed from this action was a gaining of political knowledge (Prior 2007). In the 1950's the whole family would sit around the television at night, and with few viewing choices of only broadcast news stations, they would watch the news for fun and through sheer osmosis receive and take in political information. David Weaver (1996) would agree with Prior that television, at its arrival, permitted for political learning because of the simple awareness of issues allowed by this form of media and the content available at the time. People "pick up politically relevant cues by accident" (Prior 2007, 97). These cues are the media's emphasis on certain issues, which happened to heavily consist of political content at the onset of the television, which can subconsciously become very important to people's voting behavior (Weaver 1996).

Television has become society's main source of information about politics and current events. With the initial rise of broadcast news in the mid-twentieth century, audiences were very high and many people used this form as a supplementary source to gain knowledge. However recently scholars have begun to notice a decline in television hard news audiences, which leads many to believe that people have turned away from any form of television news entirely and towards entertainment programs on the

television instead. This trend is especially noticeable among 18-24 year olds (Baym 2005; Jones 2010; Morris and Baumgartner 2008). Morris and Baumgartner (2008) make the claim that the public does not think very highly of the television news media—over half of the American public does not trust what news organizations are saying and the percentage of those displaying cynicism toward the institution has increased. This could be an explanation as to why news audiences have declined. Perhaps noticing this decline candidates in the 1992 elections began to turn away from traditional media of hard news and toward the “new” (i.e., soft news) media in their quest to communicate with voters (Rottinghaus, Bird, Ridout, and Self 2008).

Prior (2007) states that the advent of a high-choice media environment creates many more entertainment options for audiences. The result of such a shift in the media environment is that many people are choosing to tune out of politics when given the choice to watch a newscast or another type of show. There is however among this high-choice media environment a new hybrid of shows that mix politics and entertainment, commonly referred to as soft news (Baumgartner and Morris 2006; Baym 2005; Cassino and Besen-Cassino 2009; Day 2009; Jones 2007; Jones 2010; Young 2008). This format allows people to be entertained as well as be exposed to some political information. This umbrella term of soft news encompasses a broad range of programs that are popular culture oriented. This can be found in talk shows, morning TV, and faux news programs. It focuses on more sensationalized topics that have human-interest value (Patterson 2000). Soft news has become more popular over the years gaining larger audiences, thus challenging the importance of the role that broadcast news had at the advent of the television. It seems that soft news programs, in the case of some demographics, have

replaced the informational function once held by broadcast news programs fifty years ago.

With the important influence that media exerts on American society as outlined above; this chapter will explore soft news and why this genre is important. Furthermore the demographics of who watches these shows, why they choose to do so, and what effects soft news has on viewers will be explored. It has been noted that a major component of the audience of these programs is 18-24 year olds, and they usually watch soft news for its entertainment value. From these shows this group is able to learn political information, which can have an effect on overall democracy. A case study of *The Daily Show* is conducted to illustrate how a specific genre of soft news (i.e. faux news) relates to the other general themes discussed throughout the chapter.

The main objective however will be to try to answer the question of how any exposure to soft news affects citizen's attitudes and behaviors compared to hard news exposure. One such topic that will be explored is the decline of young people using television hard news media and what media they instead are turning towards as a news source. Specifically the concept of cynicism that is displayed in some soft news programs, such as *The Daily Show*, in particular, will be looked at in detail (Cassino and Besen-Cassino 2009). Other attitudes and behaviors in correlation with the viewing of soft news include; the level of cynicism in the electoral system, the government, and politicians to political ideologies, party identification, and vote choice as well as voting behavior, various forms of political discourse and levels of political knowledge.

Soft News

The term soft news can be used to describe a wide array of television programs and scholars use many different classifications and definitions for this genre of television shows. When discussing soft news scholars tend to make the distinction in defining soft news in terms of a particular outlet (such as *Oprah*, *The Daily Show*, etc.) versus soft news content, which can appear on any news outlet, even evening broadcast news. Patterson (2000, 4) uses the latter by defining soft news as “typically more sensational, more personality-centered, less time-bound, more practical, and more incident-based than other news.” Patterson (2000) argues that news is increasingly based on what will interest the audience rather than important information. He has found that on hard news outlets there has been a significant increase of this soft news, with a growth of news stories since 1980 having no connection to policy issues and simply reporting on human-interest pieces.

Xiaoxia Cao (2008) agrees with Patterson that soft news is based on content, which encompasses the components of sensationalism and human interests. Patterson (2000) goes further to suggest that in soft news there is an absence of public policy information. Perhaps the content may mention politics but not in the useful sense of discussing the issues at any length. Rachel Caulfield (2008) stems off of Cao’s and Patterson’s premise that soft news is more drama-driven than fact-driven and reports less on public affairs information.

Prior (2003) conversely classifies soft news based on a particular outlet. Specifically he refers to talk shows and “infotainment” programs that report on Hollywood starlets and the more captivating politicians as soft news programs. He in

particular cites *Entertainment Tonight* and *Oprah* as examples of soft news programs.

This is compared to hard news, which Prior (2003) considers as the evening news broadcasts on the major networks, as well as cable hard news networks such as MSNBC, CNN, and FoxNews.

Baumgartner and Morris (2006), like Prior, classify soft news programs by outlet type, as daytime talk shows that use a more human interest approach to entertainment, however they also include humor-oriented programs as a subcategory within this broader umbrella. Late-night talk shows such as *The Late Show with David Letterman* or faux news programs like *The Daily Show* are examples of this subcategory. Matthew Baum (2003b) unlike his counterpart Prior, does not merely brush soft news off based on content that solely concentrates on entertainment and glamorous politicians, but indicates, as the scholars above, that it is format and outlets that differentiate the two forms of news. Examples of programs considered soft news by Baum (2003b) include talk shows and faux news shows. Soft news outlets, ranging from *Oprah* to *Live With Regis and Kelly* to *The Colbert Report*, do in fact report on “select high-profile political issues” which suggests that soft news may have meaningful implications for public opinion concerning politics, including foreign policy (Baum 2003b, 18). This form of news also differs from hard news based on the reliance on episodic rather than thematic frames and concentrating on a singular story rather than numerous stories like many newscasts.

The Audience of Soft News

One main audience group of soft news programs, specifically faux news shows, is young people ranging from the ages of 18 to 24 (Baym 2005; Cassino and Besen-Cassino

2009; Compton 2008; Jones 2007; Rottinghaus et al 2008; Shouse and Fraley 2008).

Many young Americans say that they get more of their news about politics and current events from faux news shows than they do from hard news media (Jones 2007). “Young people are turning to late night comedy for political information, supplementing what they learn from traditional news” (Compton 2008, 42). Baym (2005) cites studies that show that the majority of the audience of soft news is 18 to 29 and that this particular demographic of soft news audiences, those that watch faux news programs, tend to be more knowledgeable than the general population, which directly conflicts with a common belief among many scholars that the opposite is true.

An explanation for this phenomenon of the young soft news audience demographic being knowledgeable about political events is that many people in this age group are students and watch humor-oriented faux news programs, like *The Daily Show*, that require some form of background knowledge to understand to the full impact of the joke (Rottinghaus et al 2008). Studies have shown that 78 percent of *The Daily Show* viewers are more likely than the average American to have four or more years of a college education (Cassino and Besen-Cassino 2009).

Baum (2003b) makes the distinction that the fact that many Americans watch soft news can only show the potential of these shows to affect public views on politics, not that it actually does so. Even if many people do not use soft news and late-night comedy as their only news source, many people still view it as a supplemental news source, which they take truths away from, especially about presidential campaigns when the candidates make appearances (Brewer and Cao 2008).

Two main demographics are the two largest categories of soft news audiences. The group described above, which tends to be youthful, have a high level of education, and have a viewing preference for faux news shows, and a group of viewers who are older, less educated, have low-awareness, and are less politically interested. This group above has the viewing preference to watch daytime talk shows. Baum (2003a) discusses how soft news, particularly daytime talk-shows such as *Oprah* or *The View*, are more likely to matter and draw in a certain demographic of people who are not intrinsically interested in following politics. Cao (2008) follows up on this notion using examples from interviews with “inattentive” people. She found that these respondents chose to consume soft news rather than hard news and that they are more receptive to political information on the soft news outlets of talk shows because they are more likely to understand the information being presented due to the soft news format. There have been many links made between those who are less educated and a propensity to watch the soft news outlets of talk shows (Baum 2003a).

Another theory about the audience of soft news is that it is composed of those who are interested in political news and derive pleasure from watching these shows with a critical eye (Day 2009). These people most likely watch hard news as well as soft news and are interested in the diversity of the presentation and the different emphasis on a variety of issues. “Much of the audience’s pleasure is derived from watching real, serious news material ironically transcontextualized and stripped down in front of their eyes” (Day 2009, 95). Thus these viewers are most likely to enjoy soft news in a faux newscast rather than daytime talk due to its intellectually stimulating format, which is what this type of viewer looks for in a program.

Why People Watch Soft News

A primary reason why people turn to soft news, especially talk shows, rather than hard news is that it is very accessible (Baum 2003a; Cao 2008). People who are not inclined to be interested in politics are better off to watch soft news because it is less complicated and sticks with a singular storyline that is easier to follow (Baum 2003a). Even singular stories on talk shows compared to those on hard news are presented in a less complex way by just presenting the facts (Baum 2003a; Cao 2008). Cao (2008) confirms this through a series of interviews. Her respondents said that when they watch hard news there was too much complicated detail incorporated into the news report, causing viewers difficulty in understanding the facts.

Baum and Jamison (2006) present the idea that watching hard news for those that have no interest or understanding of politics can be costly. By this they mean that the effort needed to comprehend the information provided on hard news outlets is costly as well as the time lost in doing so when one could be doing something more enjoyable. People do not feel that it is worth the effort to watch hard news when they could get similar information much easier through a soft news outlet.

The entertainment value is another draw for people to watch soft news whether they fall in the inattentive demographic or the age group of 18-24 years old. Young people, for example, would rather be entertained. They concentrate more on doing things that are enjoyable (Shouse and Fraley 2008). For inattentive people, Cao (2008) found respondents who said that even if they do watch hard news they do not pay close attention, but when it came to watching daytime talk shows they paid more attention. Entertainment is an important factor when deciding whether or not to watch a program,

thus it is not surprising that soft news programs are watched by people who have a high preference for entertainment (Prior 2003). Many simply turn on soft news during their leisure time because it is enjoyable. People watch *The Daily Show* because “it’s funny” just like how they read *The Onion* because “it’s hilarious” (Cao 2008, 172). However, it is important to note, as Markus Prior (2003, 156) did, that having a “high entertainment preference does not imply low news preference or low political interest.” People may watch soft news programs simply as a form of entertainment, while they may genuinely be interested in politics and prefer to watch hard news programs as a source for political information. Soft news has also been seen as a time saver for people. It is easier to get the headlines or main gist of events from these sources rather than have the time consuming and arduous task of sitting through a newscast. Many people are busy and do not have a lot of time and this is a faster and easier way to stay informed (Cao 2008).

Yet another explanation to why people turn to soft news is that many are finding the old news not credible and are turning to sources they believe and trust such as *The Daily Show*. Jon Stewart even stated that he believes that it is his credibility that is the main reason why people watch his show (Jones 2010). The public has lost trust in the mainstream media due to the “relationship that exists between news media and power politics” (Jones 2010, 78). Many people are aware that politicians play on the media biases. Politicians understand what the hard news media will highlight and will frame their appearances and press releases with the information they want the hard news to report on.

Viewers of soft news use these programs as a legitimate news source as well. For many Americans, soft news is their only news source (Baum 2003b; Baumgartner and

Morris 2006). The youth especially have begun to rely less on the mainstream political news sources such as network news broadcasts, newspapers, and news magazines (Baumgartner and Morris 2006). Baumgartner and Morris (2006) found, specifically with *The Daily Show*, that although these programs are not meant to be legitimate forms of news, over half of young adults state that they got some of their news about presidential campaigns and elections from these sources. An important point to note is that although soft news, and in particular faux news programs, are only meant to be just that, fake news, they are increasingly being legitimized by society. An example of a soft news programs being legitimized is seen with *The Daily Show*. This faux new program has won a Peabody Award, has been nominated as television's best newscast by the TV Critics Association, and Jon Stewart (by *Newsday*) was named the single most important newscaster in the country (Baumgartner and Morris 2006).

Effects on Viewers

Soft news is able to get inattentive people to pay attention. "By reaching voters via entertainment, political information is conveyed to voters who otherwise would be completely uninformed, therefore enhancing the democratic process" (Caufield 2008, 13). Soft news in general has positive effects because soft news allows people to form opinions (Caufield 2008). People, who would normally not be talking about politics, discuss these issues because of the exposure from these shows and this can help solidify their beliefs. Often a conversation could start because a viewer would be able to say "I saw it on Oprah" or some other similar soft news show that their acquaintances also most likely watch (Baum and Jamison 2006; Cassino and Besen-Cassino 2009). Soft news is able to reach a group of people who would not normally be exposed to political issues.

Exposing these people gives them some of the tools necessary to have meaningful participation.

The Piggyback Effect

A concept that many scholars have used to describe one effect of soft news on viewers is that audiences are able to “piggyback” useful information. By watching soft news viewers are able to incidentally gain political knowledge from the entertainment premise of the program. Baum and Jamison (2006) describe this phenomenon as being “cost-effective”: if political information is presented in an entertaining form it can be consumed at the same time with no cost to the viewer. This goes back to Baum and Jamison’s (2006) earlier argument that watching hard news can be very costly for some viewers (inattentive people in general), thus this is why some types of people are more inclined to watch soft news. “People’s appreciation of entertainment is one of the factors determining news exposure and, by extension, attention to politics” (Prior 2003, 150). Thus through “piggybacking” of political information on entertainment there is the potential for this information to reach people who previously avoided news and cause them to become politically more knowledgeable.

Indirect persuasion also falls under the umbrella of “piggybacking” information. Indirect persuasion is similar to a version of product placement. This is often done on soft news programs by having a candidate on or talking about a candidate on a show like *Oprah* or late-night talk shows. This puts political information out about who the candidate is for the audience, yet is done so in an entertaining way such as talking about candidate childhoods or easy topics (Cassino and Besen-Cassino 2009). This is indirect persuasion because the candidates are not talking about their campaigns but rather are

able to get face time and put their name out to a section of the public that they normally would not be exposed to. Candidates presented in this way is similar to the analogy of product placement used above since it will cause people to subconsciously start thinking about politics and potentially forming an opinion on a candidate. As a consequence, soft news allows candidates to communicate with segments of the population that have traditionally tuned out politics (Baum 2003b).

Cao (2008) found that through “piggybacking” soft news has the propensity to affect and shape the political opinions of people with low interest and low education. Baum (2003a) interestingly found that although the demographic of older and less-educated audience members can take political information from soft news, college-educated people pulled less political information out than the less-educated people, yet this does not mean college-educated people’s opinions are not also affected by soft news consumption.

What People Learn From Soft News

Soft news’ positive aspects are keeping the formerly unaware informed. Thus, viewers of soft news self-report that they are better informed than non-viewers (Caufield 2008). However there is much speculation among scholars about these aspects. Many are skeptical that audiences actually learn something from these soft news shows (Brewer and Cao 2008). “Viewers, especially ones with less political knowledge, pick up on politicians’ traits that are ridiculed by late night comics. There is even evidence that they might be learning something, or at least *think* they are learning something” (Compton 2008b, 172). Likewise, 20 percent of respondents in a self-report study conducted by Jones (2007) said that they learned something from these shows. From this Jones

suggests that scholars need to look at what people actually mean when they state they “learned” something. This could vary widely from just the name of a candidate to their stance on certain issues. Thus when looking at studies about soft news that report an increase for knowledge for audience members, it is important to differentiate whether the study measures this increase through factual questions or self-reports. Often viewers of soft news are those who have been exposed to politics when they otherwise would not have been. Therefore they did learn something, such as who are the candidates in an election. However, this does not necessarily mean that these viewers will be better at answering factual knowledge questions than those who watch hard news.

There is however research from self-reports that basic political knowledge was stronger among respondents who watched soft news rather than those who did not use any news form, especially among younger respondents. People said in self-reports of knowledge that they had learned something about a candidate or a campaign that they had not heard before (Brewer and Cao 2008). “Late-night comedy shows might inform viewers by giving them opportunities to hear candidates speak at length rather than in brief sound bites” (Brewer and Cao 2008, 274). Baum (2003a) also argues that people do actually gain some factual knowledge in the short run of more high profile issues. They for example may become aware of an international conflict they might otherwise have been oblivious to.

Markus Prior (2003) counters these other scholars by making the argument that although soft news gets people to follow topics they would otherwise ignore, these people know less about the same topics than their counterparts who watch hard news. Thus Prior is taking political learning from soft news to mean factual knowledge that one retains and

not as new exposure to information like many of the other scholars above. Baum (2003a, 187) is able to counter Prior's argument because there are many different types of learning than the definition he sees as being used by Prior, which is the growing "one's long-term store of factual knowledge." Baum (2003a, 187) generalizes learning as being as broad as encompassing an increase in "one's store of factual knowledge about an object"—there is nothing about long-term storage of knowledge in this definition. Baum (2003a, 174) responds to Prior's earlier statements that people do not gain enough factual knowledge for soft news to be worthwhile by stating: "citizens do not need a great deal of factual knowledge about politics in order to fulfill their basic responsibility as citizens." Baum (2003b) also puts forth the argument that once people are exposed to an issue via soft news, often these people will turn to hard news sources for more information. So in a sense soft news facilitates learning even if there is not a huge amount of factual information in the particular program.

The Creation of Cynicism Among Viewers

Some soft news shows, such as those that use satire as their primary means of entertainment (i.e., faux news programs or late-night talk, which consistently make jokes at the expense of politicians or the electoral system), emphasize the negative aspects of politics. This tends to outweigh the positive information also being presented (Baum 2003a). Hosts of these programs heavily use satire, a form of expression, which by nature is critical and often used to attack the perceived wrongs or ills within society (Caufield 2008). If people who are consistent audiences of these shows are constantly exposed to negative comments about politics then these people may only perceive the topics discussed in a negative light. Gray, Jones, and Thompson (2009) use the analogy of the

“naked emperor” since satire allows the public to see what is really happening in government and politics. The government and politicians would like people to see that they are “clothed” but satire allows you to see the realities that have been obscured.

Many scholars have made assumptions as the effects of the content of these programs, but have not tested these effects. Jones (2009) uses SNL parodies as an example of the content that he assumes will cause cynicism, but does not have a study on this effect. Jones (2009) discusses this idea of seeing the skewed truth through satire with the example of the SNL parodies of the 2000 presidential election debates. SNL was able to poke fun at the election and show the ridiculousness of the candidates by the one-liners at the end of the debate—with the Al Gore impersonator’s final statement of “lockbox” and George W. Bush’s “strategery.” Soft news hosts (especially Stewart) use undermining humor to challenge the legitimacy of leadership. They use satire to hold leadership accountable and thus Baym (2005) speculates that they are able to achieve a critical judgment that mainstream media will not pursue. Even if the hosts are making jokes, they can still have a negative tone that many scholars feel will resonate with viewers who are inattentive or have low political knowledge (Compton 2008a). People may not remember the facts as much as they remember the feelings and emotions of the piece. For example people may not remember a particular fact about why the host was cynical of the government but they will remember the emotional appeal of the distrust in the government.

Baum (2003a) found through his studies that soft news does affect people’s attitudes. He found that people who watched soft news programs were more “suspicious of proactive or multilateral U.S. foreign policy initiatives” (Baum 2003a, 185). This is

most likely due to the fact that soft news, such as daytime talk shows, late-night talk, and faux news shows, emphasizes the negative such as concentrating on the dangers and risks and likelihood of failure of overseas engagements. Thus this type of soft news can cause cynicism in viewers, especially if this is the only news source that people are exposed to.

Soft News' Effect on Political Involvement

Soft news potentially affects those who would not necessarily be politically involved to become more interested and increase the chances of their participation in political events. This category of media allows usually inattentive Americans to feel like they have a say in elections. By default soft news programs cause the inattentive to become more attentive citizens because just being exposed to political topics via these shows is a way for these people to become more civically engaged (Baum 2003b). Parodies, such as on SNL, also have the added benefit of making understanding politics easier for the American electorate (Voth 2008). They help separate the necessary elements of campaigns from the political jargon. In a sense soft news and parodies are the proverbial “spoonful of sugar” that helps the political medicine go down.

In this way these programs help the public vote consistently because they do not have to decipher the message or issue being discussed, so there is less confusion. Even a relatively small increase in information may enhance ability of low-awareness audiences to figure out whom they want to vote for (Baum and Jamison 2006). Cao (2008) argues along this same premise that soft news keeps the youth informed when they otherwise

would not be and helps them choose political candidates that best represent their preferences.

Soft news programs create an avenue for citizens to more easily engage in politics and form their own opinions on matters. This allows for meaningful participation with politics because people, through the simplicity and accessibility of soft news, are able to make sense of the issues (Jones 2010). Cogan (2008) supplements this fact with the argument that viewers of *The Daily Show* are more likely to know issue positions and backgrounds of presidential candidates than people who do not watch. The satirical format of these shows “encourages critical debate, sheds light on perceived wrongs within society and government, points out hypocrisy, and makes political criticism accessible to the average person” (Caufield 2008, 4). Compton (2008a) found that there was a positive correlation between late-night audiences and political involvement—these viewers were much more likely to vote than non-viewers as well as engage in political discussions. Being exposed to politics and politicians in this manner aids democracy because it gets the public thinking about these issues, helps them form opinions, and gives them incentive to participate in the political process.

However other scholars have made the argument that soft news has a negative effect on viewers, potentially harming the democratic process “by overemphasizing trivial events, downplaying significant public affairs issues, and oversimplifying the complete reality of these issues” (Baumgartner and Morris 2006, 342). Thus although there is the potential for negative effects of soft news, these effects seem to be more positive than negative based on the examples outlined above.

Case Study: *The Daily Show*

The Daily Show is one type of soft news show: it uses not only satire as a main component of the program, but also takes on the format of a newscast for part of the airing. The show offers “a version of news that entertains” (Baym 2005, 273). This show distinctively uses two levels of discourse in its format by blending the elements of authoritative news with that of late-night talk. It is configured as a newscast by its introduction, reporting style, and use of correspondents for the first half of the show until the host, Jon Stewart, has sit-down interviews that are reminiscent of late-night talk shows (Baym 2005). These interviews like the rest of the program are a hybrid with chitchat as well as hard-hitting questions on difficult issues. Stewart not only interrogates interviewees but also asks questions in order to gain an understanding of national problems—perhaps allowing the audience to learn more in-depth information (Baym 2005). As Day (2009, 91) puts it, “Stewart generally approaches the exchanges not as a self-satisfied comic but as a citizen seeking answers to the questions that confound him, again ensuring that the interviews remain very much part of the wider political debate.” Through this format, the show offers more in-depth views of political figures in government than traditional hard news outlets (Cassino and Besen-Cassino 2009).

Baym (2005, 264) suggests that *The Daily Show* does differ from the news it is impersonating by straying from the “now this model.” The show spends a considerable amount of time on a single topic, putting the issue into wider context to draw links that can’t be done on the traditional news.

The faux journalistic style allows the show's writers and host to question, dispel, and critique the manipulative language that come from presidential campaigns while simultaneously opening up deeper truths about politics than that offered by 'objective' reporting of the mainstream journalism (Jones 2010, 168).

This is what Stewart does on *The Daily Show*. He engages in undermining humor by challenging the legitimacy of people's statements and also "the wider authority upon which it relies" (Baym 2005, 267). Routinely on the show he shows the contradictory nature of what candidates and politicians are saying in the sound bites to what their actual stance on an issue is (Jones 2007). Stewart likes to unmask the "language and symbols [that politicians use] to create the pseudo-reality that helps them maintain power" (Young 2008, 243).

The Daily Show also engages in an investigative journalism that is often missing from the mainstream hard news shows (Morreale 2009). Stewart often accomplishes this by parodying the hard news' aversion to factual detail and their creation of unnecessary complex arguments. Through this format he is able to highlight hard news' reliance of the frames and narratives given to them by politicians (Baym 2005). Stewart repeatedly tries to take the viewer out of the framed event and show the truth about what is really happening and how, when not in the frame, the statements made are ridiculous (Jones 2007).

The Daily Show is a powerful form of public information, which uses comedy to engage in serious political criticism (Baym 2005). The show has a positive impact on viewers since it focuses on a different kind of news that is more relevant to the particular audience of this show (Cassino and Besen-Cassino 2009). "The audience does not seem to tune out these serious discussions, but instead seems to revel in them" (Cogan 2008,

89). Its fusion between entertainment and politics makes it more likely that viewers will use the information because it will increase the propensity that viewers will actually discuss politics. Discussing politics allows people to decide their stance on certain issues and solidify beliefs (Cassino and Besen-Cassino 2009).

The audience of *The Daily Show* differs in their interest in politics and motivations to watch the program from those of other particular soft news programs. Cassino and Besen-Cassino (2009) argue that the concept of branding could explain these differing motivations. People often care more about branding and the perception people have of a certain kind of media source than the ideologies of that source. “It doesn’t seem to matter if they agree with the viewpoint that a particular media source is associated with: [*sic*] only if that media source is a cool brand” (Cassino and Besen-Cassino 2009, 140). Young people want to be associated with *The Daily Show* since it is considered cool due to its branding. This can be compared to carrying a trendy Starbucks cup or wearing a certain brand of clothing.

Violation of Journalistic Norms

A unique element of *The Daily Show* as a faux newscast compared to hard news is its routine violations of journalistic norms. One noticeable violation is the show’s ability to be subjective rather than objective in its reporting style (Baym 2005; Day 2009; Young 2008). *The Daily Show* lacks the “dispassionate observation” of that of the mainstream hard news and “instead engages in subjective interrogation” (Baym 2005, 265). By this Stewart is able to hold not only the government but also the media accountable. Day (2009, 89) agrees “*The Daily Show* is free to satirically compare and contrast, interrogate

and mock, sometimes developing a deeper analysis of the story in question than the straight programs.” An example of this are the sound bites that the show chooses to use:

The unwritten rules of journalism define a good quote as a coherent statement of policy or attitude, ideally containing emotion or character and completed neatly in about 8 to 12 seconds. Professional journalists are trained to ignore long, rambling verbal presentations...*The Daily Show*, however, mines those outtakes [the footage not used] for a wealth of informative content (Baym 2005, 264).

By choosing longer sound bites (that have repetition, long pauses, and many “umms”) than found on other hard news sources, Stewart is still able to present an accurate sound bite, yet for a completely different effect (Baym 2005). Often during these sound bites Stewart will offer mock incredulity and question the speaker’s logic or authenticity (Day 2009). This allows the show to achieve a critical distance, which cannot be said of hard news.

The Daily Show also violates journalistic norms by making conclusions rather than just reporting the facts. Jones (2007) argues that Stewart is able to convey the same information as CNN, yet after offering the facts Stewart strings specific events together to form a conclusion about those facts. Stewart does so by putting a satirical spin on the events presented and actively questioning what is happening as he reports the story, “by juxtaposing conflicting comments made at different points in time” (Morreale 2009, 110). Through this presentation the show does not merely show a different side to events but also helps the audience draw conclusions about certain issues.

Negative Effects of The Daily Show

An effect of *The Daily Show* that many scholars have agreed on is that it breeds cynicism among its viewers (Baumgartner and Morris 2006; Baym 2005; Jones 2010;

Morreale 2009; Morris 2008). One such cause of cynicism is the constant discussion of the flaws of the electoral system. This can cause disenchantment among audience members when they hear about what is wrong with the system and cause them to feel powerless to change these flaws since participating within the system would seem to be a fruitless effort (Baumgartner and Morris 2006). Another source of the cynicism is the negative light in which *The Daily Show* presents many candidates and politicians. Most campaign coverage is about candidates' shortcomings and *The Daily Show* does so with sarcasm and humor, which often have a negative tone since sarcasm is a form of attack (Baumgartner and Morris 2006).

There is the assumption by scholars that *The Daily Show* also has the potential to cause viewers to lose trust in the hard news. This is done through repeatedly highlighting the faults and biases that the hard news plays into. Stewart illustrates, through satire and irony, the harm posed by modern news norms, such as the norms of being slaves to objectivity, not pursuing investigative journalism, and simply reiterating the frame politicians give (Young 2008). *The Daily Show* "interrogates the content of the news media, the 'real' news that arguably is failing its democratic function" (Baym 2005, 268). Stewart continuously critiques the media's resistance to take part in any kind of critical inquiry (Baym 2005). The show illustrates the discrepancy between the "official" version of events that hard news reports and the truths of what is actually happening (Morreale 2009). The host points out "the media's obsession with dramatic sensationalized stories about people instead of issues" (Young 2008, 251). The constant reminder of the faults of the mainstream media can cause much more cynicism of the media's ability to accurately report politics. However, Baumgartner and Morris (2006)

argue that this cynicism may not necessarily be a negative thing but in fact something healthy for democracy. It allows for people to hold the government accountable and breeds debate, which helps people form opinions and vote properly.

Conclusion

The media environment has become an important aspect of American society and a main source of political knowledge for the public (Morris and Baumgartner 2008; Prior 2007). This literature review encompassed a number of themes related to the importance of soft news. Most significantly there has been a noted trend of television news audiences declining (Baym 2005; Jones 2010; Morris and Baumgartner 2008) and a growth of people turning to soft news sources. Other themes highlighted include the types of people who make up the viewership of these programs, and the effects this genre of television has on its audience.

A main conclusion reached at this point by many scholars is that soft news is often watched by young Americans or people who can be categorized as low-education and low-political interest. There has been a lot of research exploring why these demographics watch soft news programs as well as trying to answer the question of what effects soft news has on the low-education and low-political interest demographic. However, there were only two sources in this literature review that dealt specifically with the demographic of ages 18-24, while another source merely mentioned this group in passing. These sources again only answered *why* this group watches these shows, not *what* the effect of watching these shows has on this particular age group. The goal of my research would be to fill this gap in the literature. I will attempt to answer the question of how any level of soft news exposure, in particular faux news shows, affects political

attitudes, ideologies, voting behavior, discourse, and factual political knowledge in this demographic.

In an attempt to answer this question a survey will be used. I created a questionnaire that was distributed to the students of Union College, a body of students who fit the demographic I will be studying (18-24 year olds). In this I posited questions about their television habits (e.g. what shows they watch, what they use for a news source, etc.), voting behavior (if they vote and reasons for doing so or not doing so), ideologies, as well as a wide array of other types of questions that could help me fully answer the question of how soft news affects attitudes and behavior of 18- 24 year olds.

The following chapters attempt to answer the question posed by this literature review and explain the results. Chapter two will review my research methodology as well as present and justify my hypotheses and review the general media viewing habits of the sample. Chapter three will concentrate on soft news' effect on cynicism and voting behavior, while chapter four will encompass the effect of faux news programs on viewers' ideology, party identification, vote choice, political discourse, and knowledge levels.

Chapter Two: Hypotheses, Methodology, And General Media Viewing Habits

In the recent past there has been an influx of interest and research towards the relatively new phenomenon of soft news. From this research scholars have noticed that the demographic of 18-24 year olds make up a large portion of the soft news audience, which is mainly due to this group's penchant to use soft news as their main source for information about politics and elections (Baum 2003a; Baym 2005; Cassino and Besen-Cassino 2009; Compton 2008a; Jones 2007; Rottinghaus et al 2008; Shouse and Fraley 2008). However not much other research has been done about this particular demographic and its connection to soft news.

Due to the United States' young adult population's large consumption of soft news programs, further research must be done to learn if and/or to what extent soft news affects this group. This thesis intends to discover if there is a link between the viewing of soft news programs and particular attitudes held by the highlighted demographic. Thus all hypotheses, research, and discussion apply to the group of 18-24 year old viewers. Such attitudes that will be measured in the research include viewer cynicism toward the electoral system, distrust in the government, and confidence in politicians. Another aspect of the research will try to link soft news with certain effects on the behavior of viewers. The different facets of behavior of interest to this research include voting behavior (i.e. if this group votes, reasons for voting or not voting, and candidate choice among voters) as well as other forms of political involvement such as political discourse, partisan or ideological opinions, and participation in political campaigns.

This research will fill a gap in the existing literature on soft news. Very few scholars have concentrated on studying the consequences of soft news for this viewership. Those who have done so have only focused on *why* this group consumes a large amount of soft news programs, not *what* effects viewing this form of media has on this audience demographic.

Hypotheses

Based on the already existing research about soft news and its effects on other audience demographics, some hypotheses can be postulated about what will be found from this study. Thus far studies have shown that when people watch soft news programs (specifically faux news shows), there is a greater propensity for this group to view the government and politicians in a more negative light (Baum 2003a, 2003b; Baumgartner and Morris 2006; Baym 2005). Baum (2003b) found that regular viewers of soft news programs were more likely to become suspicious and have greater distrust in the government regarding proactive internationalist policies. He posits that this increase in cynicism is due to the nature of how soft news programs present stories about the government and its efforts. Often soft news programs will only concentrate on the negative outcomes of certain government initiatives and sensationalize these events.

Baumgartner and Morris (2006) concluded that characteristics of soft news programming have the effect of making viewers more cynical towards political institutions. They state that faux news shows often only offer campaign coverage about candidates' shortcomings or information about government mishaps. *The Daily Show* reports on these issues in a satirical format using sarcasm and humor. At the same time it is also common for late-night talk shows to barrage viewers with jokes based on negative

caricatures of candidates. This type of satire seen in soft news programs can have an effect on the psyche of viewers. This is because satire highlights the perceived wrong in government and is a form of attack that causes people to be wary of politicians and political institutions (Gray, Jones, and Thompson 2009). If viewers are constantly bombarded with stories and reports about all the negative aspects of the electoral system, government, and politicians without the added benefit of also being exposed to objective less negative reporting via hard news outlets, then there is bound to be a high level of cynicism among this group. Therefore I expect that soft news exposure will cause an increase of negative feelings towards political institutions.

Hypothesis 1: Viewers who primarily watch soft news will be more cynical towards political institutions (politicians, government, and the electoral system) than those who watch a mixture of soft news and hard news or exclusively hard news

Little research has been conducted about the ideological leanings and political party preference of viewers of soft news. However Cassino and Besen-Cassino (2009), from their studies of *The Daily Show*, feel that the satirical format of *The Daily Show* program lends itself to a liberal bias and therefore appeals to a more liberal and Democratic audience base. “It is difficult to argue that *The Daily Show* doesn’t have a relatively strong liberal bias...not necessarily an ideological bias, but rather a comedic one. Satire works largely by deflating those in power” (Cassino and Besen-Cassino 2009, 142). These scholars go on to note that for the majority of the time that Stewart has been at the helm of the show “Republicans have been in the best position to be satirized. As such, we expect that support for, and positive images of, Stewart’s program would be correlated with partisanship” (Cassino and Besen-Cassino 2009, 142). While the

president today is a Democrat, this still can be held true with the House majority and Speaker of the House being Republican. I therefore expect, just as the scholars above, that the primary audience of *The Daily Show* and other faux news to be ideologically liberal and vote Democratic since Stewart's or other host's sarcasm does not most likely endear itself to conservative or Republican viewers.

Hypothesis 2: Viewers of faux news will ideologically lean towards the liberal end of the spectrum and vote for Democratic candidates rather than be conservative and vote for Republican candidates

Cassino and Besen-Cassino (2009) also have pondered about the voting behavior of soft news viewers, specifically that often this group does not vote at all. An explanation they have found among respondents from their studies is that many people have the perception of being powerless. Respondents commonly said that they felt that their one vote would not change or affect the electoral system. Shouse and Fraley (2008) have noted another possible reason why the young viewers of soft news do not vote. A simple explanation is that this particular demographic is not interested in politics and therefore do not feel voting is important. Thus many people's reasons for not voting are not influenced by their viewing of soft news programs but rather other independent reasons.

Hypothesis 3: Any level of soft news consumption versus consuming other types of news does not effect a viewers' decision to go out and vote in elections

Soft news allows its viewers to become more aware of political events and information and therefore allows for people to become more politically engaged (Baum 2003b). Since soft news exposes viewers to politics when they otherwise might not be, these people become more likely to become politically involved since they are able to

know issue positions and construct their own opinions (Cogan 2008; Jones 2010).

Caufield (2008) states that it is the specific format of soft news programs with its use of satire that encourages critical debate among audience members. Thus I expect to see a correlation between the viewing of soft news and an increase of political involvement in the form of political discourse among viewers.

Hypothesis 4: Viewers of faux news will have a higher level of political discourse among peers than non-viewers (i.e. those who watch hard news and/or other forms of soft news but not faux news)

Reasons why I expect political knowledge to be high in 18-24 year olds who watch faux news is partially due to the format of these programs. For example during the interview section of *The Daily Show*, Jon Stewart seeks to gain deeper understanding about political candidates or events, which in turn translates to a more in-depth presentation of important knowledge for viewers (Baym 2005). The format of *The Daily Show* also provides a simplified version of events compared to the presentation of the same events by hard news programs, making the information more accessible for viewers, thus increasing their factual knowledge. Rottinghaus, Bird, Ridout, and Self (2008) also make the valid point that the style of humor used by Stewart requires the viewers to have some form of background knowledge to understand the satire and find it amusing. Thus this would link a higher level of factual knowledge for viewers of *The Daily Show* and other faux news programs.

Hypothesis 5: Viewers of faux news will have a higher level of factual political knowledge than those who exclusively watch the other forms of soft news (i.e. daytime talk and late-night talk) or hard news

Methodology and Research Design

To examine whether soft news affects the attitudes and behavior of its youthful viewership, I have decided to conduct a survey. Participants were randomly chosen on a voluntary basis from courses from a variety of different majors at Union College. The reason for taking a sampling of students from many different majors is to ensure that I am able to achieve a sample as representative as possible of college students who have a variety of different knowledge levels, socio-economic and cultural backgrounds. A frequent critique of studies that use college students as participants is that this group of people is not representative of the main population (Baumgartner and Morris 2006). However, the demographic that I am interested in studying is 18-24 year olds, the primary age group found on college campuses. Using only college students from a does however pose problems to how representative the study is of the overall demographic since not all 18-24 year olds go to college. However I use this sampling because college students are the most accessible and are often willing to partake in survey research.

A total of 135 participants ranging in age from 17 years old to 24 years old completed the survey. Five classes at Union College were chosen for the distribution of the survey based on the desire to obtain responses from students with varied areas of study. The classes chosen include: Classics 186 Roman Law and Society, Biology 350 Evolutionary Biology, English 404 Senior Seminar: James Joyce, Political Science 111 Introduction to U.S. Politics, and Political Science 272 Environment, Energy, and U.S. Politics. Seventeen different majors were represented in the sampling, including: Art History, Biology, Classics, Economics, Engineering, English, Environmental Studies,

Geology, History, Math, Neuroscience, Philosophy, Physics, Political Science, Psychology, and Sociology. Some respondents had not yet decided upon a major.

First year students composed 24.8% of the respondents, while 18% were sophomores, 22.6% were juniors, and 34.6% were seniors. As for the ages of the respondents .8% were 17 years old, 13.6% were 18, 18.2% were 19, 24.2% were 20, 33.3% were 21, 7.6% were 22, 1.5% were 23, and .8% were 24 years old. Of the respondents, 45.9% were female and the other 54.1% were male. The racial diversity of participants was broken down to 87% of respondents considering themselves white, 4.6% as Black, 4.6% as Hispanic, and 3.8% as Asian. Of those who took the survey, 7.3% consider themselves working class, 67.7% middle class, and 25% upper class. The respondents varied on reporting what their families' annual income is with 1.8% making \$0-20,000, 1.8% making \$21-40,000, 5.5% making \$41-60,000, 11.8% making \$61-80,000, 25.5% making \$81-100,000, 16.4% making 101-120,000, and 37.3% making \$121,000+.

The survey, which was in the format of a pencil-and- paper questionnaire, was distributed to all students at the beginning of the chosen class period. The questionnaire contained a few open-ended questions as well as a number of close-ended questions in which the participants circled a number or checked a box that came closest to their opinion. I relied on questions from existing surveys from the Pew Research Center and well-tested questions found on respected academic questionnaires (for complete survey please refer to Appendix A). Survey responses were kept completely anonymous as an attempt to allow the participants to provide the most honest answers possible.

The survey covered a variety of topics. I included media viewing habits; attitudes towards the electoral system, government, and politicians; voting behavior; ideology and party affiliation; factual political knowledge questions; level of education; minority status, and socio-economic background. Questions about media viewing habits inquired about how often respondents watch television, what types of media they view/use (various television programs, newspapers, radio, internet, etc.) as well as reasons for using/viewing certain media. As a means to measure attitudes towards political institutions, a number of close-ended questions about feelings towards politicians and the government were included. Factual knowledge was gauged by asking participants to identify the job or political office of five political figures as well as a closed-ended question about the outcome of the recent (November 2010) mid-term congressional elections.

In an attempt to be able draw a conclusion about Hypothesis 2, I included a number of questions about respondents' ideological and political party preferences. These questions included inquiries about the political party of the congressional candidate respondents voted for in the recent elections (if they voted at all), which political party they identify themselves with, and where they view themselves on a conservative-liberal spectrum. In order to measure level of political involvement among participants, the main premise of Hypothesis 4, questions were included which asked how interested they were in politics, if/how often they discuss politics with peers, and if they have worked for a politician or been involved in a candidate campaign.

A survey is a useful tool to collect research of this matter since it allowed me to reach a variety of people who have different backgrounds and experiences. A survey also

allows people to be anonymous and therefore respondents are more compelled to answer the questions honestly. From this survey I then was able to analyze the respondents' answers to form conclusions about how soft news affects attitudes and behavior of 18-24 year olds.

General Media Viewing Habits

Participants in the study were asked to answer a number of questions about their media viewing habits ranging from how much television watched per week and what types of programs are watched most frequently. This information about general media viewing habits is important since it is background information about the sample that could prove useful in interpreting the results of tests on the hypotheses. Some of the results about general habits were expected while other outcomes were unexpected since they seemed to contradict previous research. Unsurprisingly there was a high frequency of participants watching television programs almost daily with 39.7% responding that they watch seven days a week. However, the majority (62.3%) replied that they only spend 1-4 hours watching television per day and another 30% responding that they watch 0-1 hour, meaning that 92.3% of respondents watch under 4 hours of television each day.

Table 2.1 reports on the media usage for various media sources. The sources were each placed in a category of hard news or soft news. Hard news is news in the traditional sense of a newscast presenting the facts of an event. Conversely, the phenomenon of soft news is a hybrid of shows that mix politics with entertainment encompassing sensationalism and human-interest components when reporting on select high-profile political issues. Hence it was important for this study to make a distinction between the

two since a viewer of soft news could possibly be affected by the opinions and discussions of others and have their own personal beliefs swayed more so than a viewer of hard news with having just solely the facts presented.

Table 2.1

	<i>% of Users</i>	<i>% of Users Everyday</i>	<i>% of Non-Users</i>
HARD NEWS SOURCES			
<i>Broadcast News</i>	57	5.2	43
<i>Cable News</i>	52.6	4.4	47.4
<i>Local TV News</i>	37.8	2.3	62.2
<i>Daily Newspaper</i>	44.4	6.7	55.6
<i>News Magazines</i>	23.7	1.5	76.3
<i>Talk Radio</i>	6.7	2.3	93.3
<i>Internet News</i>	75.6	37.3	24.4
<i>Newspaper Websites</i>	56.3	18.5	43.7
<i>TV News Websites</i>	42.2	11.1	57.8
SOFT NEWS SOURCES			
<i>Morning TV</i>	23	1.5	77
<i>Talk TV</i>	13.3	1.5	86.7
<i>Late-night Talk TV</i>	20.7	2.2	79.3
<i>Faux News</i>	36.3	3	63.7
<i>Commercial Radio</i>	17.8	1.5	82.2

Previous research from scholars pointed to 18-24 year olds as one of the primary contingents to view soft news programs along with an older, less educated and low-awareness demographic (Cassino and Besen-Cassino 2009). Therefore it was surprising to see the most noticeable trend from this sampling is that participants tend to watch and rely heavily on many more hard news than soft news sources. A staggering 75.6% of respondents said that they relied on internet news websites (Yahoo!News, GoogleNews, etc.)—a hard news source. This particular statistic in itself, that a large number of college students would use an internet based news site, is not necessarily surprising since students today use the internet everyday due to its ease and accessibility. Other hard news sources that were also heavily used and more unanticipated include broadcast news (CBS, ABC, or NBC nightly news casts) with a 57% usage rate, newspaper websites (e.g.

NewYorkTimes.com or USA Today.com) with a 56.3% usage rate, and news shows on cable networks (e.g. CNN, Fox, or MSNBC) with a 52.6% usage.

The percentages viewing soft news programs were much lower than hard news shows. Faux news (such as *The Daily Show* or *The Colbert Report*) was the soft news source used most often with 36.3% of participants citing that they watch these programs. I predicted that faux news shows would be the type of programs in the soft news category that would be the most used by consumers but I thought that there would have been a higher usage rate closer to that seen with broadcast news and newspaper websites. It could be that a portion of the broadcast news viewers or newspaper website users are in fact primarily soft news viewers who turn to these other sources as supplemental information for what has been presented in the soft news programs. After faux news, the next most used soft news source, which has a usage rate drastically lower than faux news with 23% of survey respondents as viewers, was morning talk shows (i.e. *Good Morning America* or *The Today Show*).

Table 2.1 also indicates the level of the everyday users of various sources. Once again it was a hard news source (internet news site) that had the highest percentage of everyday users with 37.3% of participants. As noted before this phenomenon of an internet hard news source being favored over soft news is not as unexpected from this age group as the use of other hard news sources would be. This particular hard news source is extremely easy and quick for someone to access since these sites often allow for one to see the headline and read a little blurb about the story or event that they want before clicking on the link to continue reading. Thus a user is able to know about an event

without having to do the extra work of reading the entirety of an article or sit through an entire news broadcast just to get to the story he or she wants to see.

This would also explain why newspaper websites—very similar to internet news sites—have the next highest percentage with 18.5% of everyday usage by respondents. The concept of convenience would provide an explanation why other hard news sources with an overall high rate of participant users do not have high rate everyday usage rates. This is of course in reference to broadcast news, which has a 57% total user rate but only a 5.2% everyday usage rate, as well as cable news, which has a 52.6% overall user rate yet only a 4.4% everyday usage rate.

Soft news sources had a significantly lower rate of everyday usage than most hard news sources. Only 3% of participants cited everyday use of faux news shows, making this type of soft news have the highest percentage of everyday usage. Late-night talk shows were next with a 2.2% everyday usage rate after being the third most used type of soft news overall at a 20.7% usage rate. All of the other soft news categories had a 1.5% everyday usage rate. It is important however, to take note in the discussion of everyday usage rates that not every source is available for everyday consumption. Hence once again the ease of internet usage linked with those hard news sources found online, there is a possible explanation for the extraordinary higher rates of everyday usage compared to all of the soft news categories.

Looking into the reasons why participants choose to watch various programs was also insightful. The survey presented various reasons for using each source, including perusing headlines, getting in-depth reporting, seeing views and opinions, or for sheer entertainment value. In Table 2.2 the most common use for each source is bolded as well

as the least common use for each source is underlined. Most hard news sources were used primarily to check headlines. Internet news sites for example were most commonly used for headline news with 67.4% of internet news consumers turning to this source for this reason. This is not a surprising statistic for a sector of society that has always grown up with the ability to use a computer and navigate the internet, often doing so multiple times per day. Internet news sites also make it extremely easy for one to get the headline news by having the headlines on their homepages with blurbs about the story before one has to click on the news section of the website. Often these political or current event stories will be side-by-side with an entertainment story. Thus even if one solely went on the website to read about a pop-culture event, they are still exposed to a headline political story by default.

Table 2.2
Respondent Reasons for Each Choice in Percentages

	<i>Headlines</i>	<i>In-depth Reporting</i>	<i>Views and Opinions</i>	<i>Entertainment</i>
HARD NEWS SOURCES				
<i>Broadcast News</i>	55.6%	11.1%	<u>8.1%</u>	15.6%
<i>Cable News</i>	43.7%	20%	23%	<u>10.6%</u>
<i>Local TV News</i>	42.2%	7.4%	<u>4.4%</u>	9.6%
<i>Daily News Paper</i>	55.6%	24.4%	9.6%	<u>7.4%</u>
<i>News Magazines</i>	26.7%	31.9%	13.3%	<u>8.1%</u>
<i>Talk Radio</i>	3.7%	6.7%	11.1%	8.1%
<i>Internet News</i>	67.4%	18.5%	<u>12.6%</u>	17.8%
<i>Newspaper Websites</i>	54.8%	30.4%	18.5%	<u>5.9%</u>
<i>TV News Websites</i>	48.1%	22.2%	8.9%	<u>3.7%</u>
SOFT NEWS SOURCES				
<i>Morning TV</i>	9.6%	<u>4.4%</u>	13.3%	31.1%
<i>Talk TV</i>	3.7%	<u>2.2%</u>	11.9%	26.7%
<i>Late-night Talk TV</i>	3%	<u>.7%</u>	8.9%	48.1%
<i>Faux News</i>	14.1%	<u>4.4%</u>	28.1%	57.8%
<i>Commercial Radio</i>	17%	8.9%	8.9%	<u>5.9%</u>

There were a few outliers in the hard news category of sources that were not primarily used for headline news. One such source was news magazines, which were primarily used for in-depth reporting, with 31.9% of these consumers citing that they turn to this source for this reason. Perhaps what could explain the discrepancy is that news magazines tend to go into much greater detail about events and issues more so than the television media sources due to their restrictions such as a limited amount of time. Knowing this about news magazines could explain why consumers choose it as a source for in-depth news stories. This could be said of all the other print or internet sources since most also have a higher consumer usage percent for this reason than television media sources. Another outlier source was talk radio with its most common reason being used by consumers is for views and opinions (11.1%). An explanation for this outlier is that the premise of most talk radio shows is political. For example, people tune into Rush Limbaugh's radio show to listen to his views and opinions about the government and political leaders. Another reason for this is that radio shows are not necessarily under certain constraints on what to concentrate on. Instead they can designate as much time as they want on a certain issue or event.

Table 2.2 shows that for the most part hard news sources seemed to be used least for the reason of entertainment. For example, TV news websites were only used by 3.7% of these consumers for entertainment reasons. A primary explanation for this is that the main purpose of hard news is not necessarily to entertain people but rather inform people about issues and events. The outliers to this trend were all instead used least for views and opinions. These exceptions include broadcast news with only 8.1%, local TV news

with 4.4%, and internet news with 12.6% of each of the respective consumers turning to these sources for views and opinions.

The majority of soft news sources were used most commonly for entertainment. This held true for four of the five soft news sources listed in Table 2.2. This was not a surprising revelation since the main goal of these programs is to entertain. Faux news programs such as *The Daily Show* or *The Colbert Report*, for instance, were most commonly used for this reason by 57.8% of its consumers. Hence it seems since these types of shows are shown on Comedy Central, an entertainment network, people primarily watch these programs for fun and to be entertained. Only as a consequence of viewing are consumers exposed to headline news.

Interestingly the exception to the trend discussed above is with commercial radio, which was used most commonly for headline news by 17% of its listeners. By nature news segments in commercial radio only report the headlines and radio personalities on their talk shows often when discussing a current event will only mention headline news stories. Thus it is not surprising that commercial radio would be used the most for this reason.

Another trend seen among media usage habits with soft news is that the majority of these sources are used the least for in-depth reporting. Morning talk programs (e.g. *Good Morning America* or *The Today Show*) and faux news shows each had only 4.4% of their respective consumers turn to these sources for in-depth information. I would have predicted these rates to be higher since by nature the programs tend to spend more time discussing each story on various different levels and highlighting different elements of each story. Once again commercial radio was the outlier being used the least for

entertainment, which can possibly be explained by participants being asked about the news aspect of commercial radio.

People watching certain programs for the views or opinions presented can have an important impact on the behavior and attitudes of viewers of those shows. Faux news programs (such as *The Daily Show* or *The Colbert Report*) had a significant percentage of consumers turning to this source for this reason (28.1%). This is important because as noted in Chapter One *The Daily Show* and other faux news programs often show their bias against mainstream media and the government.

Unsurprisingly cable news shows also had a substantial percentage of its consumers (23%) use this source for views and opinions. Often people will tune into the cable news shows on networks that most align with their own personal ideologies. For example someone with conservative ideals would be more likely to watch a news program on FoxNews than one on the more liberal MSNBC. Thus a possible difference between the viewers of the faux news programs and those of cable news shows is that viewers of faux news shows tune in to see the reaction and the opinion of the hosts, while cable news viewers tune in to have their own opinions substantiated.

Conclusion

The composition of the sample used in this survey is going to have an impact on the results of the hypotheses tested. Since all of the respondents were college students rather than a mixture of different education levels and socio-economic backgrounds, the conclusions reached from this study potentially could be very different than a study that is able to include all types of 18-24 year olds.

It is also important to take into consideration the hard news source that was used most heavily on a daily basis by most respondents, which is internet news sites such as Yahoo!News and GoogleNews. A possible explanation to why this is the most used source, out of all the hard and soft news sources maybe due to the fact that the sample used in this study was composed completely of college students. These students simply may not have much time to watch soft news or other shows for leisure.

This would explain the high usage of newspapers online as well because it is fast, convenient, and easy. Additionally, this sampling could have relied more on hard news than their other 18-24 year old counter parts is also directly related to the participants being college students since the material presented in classes might require these participants to turn to hard news sources for supplemental information or doing so is required by professors. This attribute of a high level of hard news usage by the sample could also affect the results of the hypotheses since it will be harder to isolate the sole effects of soft news. Hence in the forthcoming chapters the conclusions reached will be based on the sampling described above, and may not hold true for all 18-24 year olds.

Chapter Three: The Effects of Soft News On Viewer Cynicism and Voter Turnout

The effects of soft news on viewers can potentially have significant implications on the political process in the United States. An important faction of the soft news audience includes those in the age bloc of 18 to 24 years old, a group that is of interest not only to political scientists but also politicians as an important voting body that could conceivably change the outcome of an election. Many scholars have addressed the topic of the effect of soft news on the demographics of low-education or low-interest viewers, yet none have discussed the effect on the young adult population. Thus it was of importance to me to conduct a study to see to what extent soft news exposure effects viewers.

Ideally I would have been able to divide the sample between those who exclusively watch soft news programs, those who exclusively watch hard news programs, and those who watch a mixture of the two. However, there were only 2 respondents of 135 who watched solely soft news shows and no hard news at all. Thus in order to perform the data analysis for each hypothesis, respondents were broken down into different groupings.

The first means to distinguish viewers was through grouping those who consume hard news only (32.6% of the survey participants) and those who consume any soft news at all—this includes consuming hard news as well (67.4% of participants). Through grouping participants in this way, we can see if exposure to any soft news would manifest differences compared to the behavior or attitudes of exclusively hard news viewers.

However to further understand if the ratio of hard to soft news sources affects behavior and attitudes, the previous group was expanded to form three blocs. This includes hard news viewers only, those who watch both sources but a high level of hard news (5+ sources), and those who watch both sources but a low level of hard news (0-4 sources). The break down between these groups was more evenly split with 32.6% of participants falling into the hard news only category, 32.6% of participants falling into the group of consumers of both news types with a high number of hard news sources, and 34.8% of participants in the bloc of viewers of both news types with a low number of hard news sources.

This chapter will focus on addressing Hypotheses 1 and 3, which discuss the repercussions of soft news, broadly defined, on viewers. One such consequence, which is highlighted in Hypothesis 1, is that soft news will affect viewers' cynicism more negatively than hard news. This is important since a possible increase in cynicism due to the viewing of soft news could affect whether the viewer will vote (i.e. knowledge of the issues, if a citizen feels that their vote counts, if politicians will truly represent their interests, etc.). Furthermore Hypothesis 3 focuses on whether soft news shows affects a viewers' decision to vote or not vote at all.

The Effects of Soft News on Viewer Cynicism

Hypothesis 1 predicted that those who primarily watch soft news will be more cynical towards political institutions (politicians, government, and the electoral system) than those who watch a mixture of soft news and hard news or exclusively hard news. In order to determine if this is true the survey included six questions to measure cynicism

of the government and electoral system (for complete survey, refer to Appendix A). The cynicism questions were worded as follows:

Political Leaders: Today's political leaders are as good as those in past years

1	2	3	4	5
Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree

Government Efforts: There are a few bad apples, but most people in government are trying to do a good job

1	2	3	4	5
Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree

Trust in the Federal Government: How much of the time do you think you can trust the government in Washington to do what is right?

1	2	3	4
Just About Always	Most of the Time	Only Some of the Time	Never

Attitude Towards the Federal Government: Some people say they are basically content with the federal government, others say they are frustrated, and others say they are angry. Which of these best describes how you feel.

1	2	3
Basically Content	Frustrated	Angry

Reforms in the Federal Government: Which of the following statements comes closest to your views?

- a. The federal government needs very major reform
- b. The federal government is basically sound and needs only some reform
- c. The federal government doesn't need much change at all

Efficacy: There isn't much that one person can do to change the political system.

1	2	3	4	5
Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree

For the first five, an answer with a higher number for each of these questions correlates to more cynicism. For the question about efficacy, a lower number indicates more cynicism.

The results from this study did not substantiate my hypothesis with any meaningful statistical significance. As illustrated in Table 3.1, which highlights exclusively hard news viewers and viewers who watch both hard news and any soft news, there were only slight variations in the mean answers for each group. Mean answers to the questions about government efforts, trust, attitudes, reforms, and efficacy all had consumers of any soft news being slightly more cynical than their solely hard news counterparts. The question about trust, for example, asks respondents to what extent they can trust the government in Washington D.C. to do what is right. Only slightly more combination viewers were more cynical than exclusively hard news viewers with a mean answer of 2.65 compared to 2.55, both groupings falling in between answer 2 (most of the time) and answer 3 (only some of the time). The t-test was used to determine whether the difference between means is statistically significant. With p-values greater than .10 for all, the group means are not significantly different.

Table 3.1
Survey Question Answer Means

	Political Leaders	Government Efforts	Trust in the Government	Attitude Towards the Government	Reform Needed in Government	Efficacy
View Only Hard News	3.26	2.79	2.55	1.57	1.73	2.95
Any Soft News <i>(combination)</i>	3.26	2.84	2.65	1.63	1.78	2.66

The question about efficacy asked respondents if they agreed that there is not much a single person could do to change the political system. Hard news viewers have a mean answer of 2.95 compared to the combination viewer answer mean of 2.66, both

between answers 2 (agree) and 3 (neutral). Out of all the means in Table 3.3, this question had the largest difference between group means, yet this difference was not statistically significant. Hence although there is a small variation in the means of how cynical these two groups are, the difference is not great enough to support the hypothesis that any exposure to soft news causes more cynicism among these viewers than solely consuming hard news.

Table 3.2 further distinguishes media consumption. This allows us to see when the amount hard or soft news consumed changes, if there is any meaningful impact towards viewers' attitudes. Based on Table 3.2 there seems to be a trend that shows participants who watch a combination of news types with a low number of hard news programs (the closest to purely soft news viewers) are slightly more cynical than those who consume larger amounts of solely hard news. This is substantiated by the means for four of the six cynicism questions (specifically the questions on government efforts, trust in government, attitude towards the government, and efficacy). None of these differences in means, however, reach statistical significance (based on an ANOVA).

Table 3.2
Survey Question Answer Means

	Political Leaders	Government Efforts	Trust in the Government	Attitude Towards the Government	Reform Needed in Government	Efficacy
View Only Hard News	3.26	2.79	2.55	1.57	1.73	2.95
Combination; High # Hard News Sources	3.20	2.81	2.65	1.72	1.76	2.70
Combination; Low # Hard News Sources	3.33	2.87	2.64	1.53	1.79	2.61

This trend is possibly further contradicted by the mean answers of the questions about trust and attitudes towards the government, which show that combination viewers who

use a high number of hard news sources are more likely to be cynical than those who watch only hard news or less hard news. Interestingly for the question about attitudes toward the government, which asked if respondents were content, frustrated, or angry at the government, those who watched the least amount of hard news (and would be the closest to soft news viewers) were the least cynical and upset with the government with a mean answer of 1.53, compared to the high level of hard news and combination viewers at 1.72, and exclusively hard news viewers at 1.57. This directly conflicts with the hypothesis that soft news viewers would be more cynical than combination viewers or solely hard news viewers. This however does not mean that combination viewers with more hard news sources are more cynical since an ANOVA shows that this difference in mean answers is not statistically significant.

The results from this study do not support my first hypothesis that soft news viewers are more cynical. All participants in this study tended to respond in a similar manner to the questions that measured cynicism. Hence the results instead show that there is not a meaningful difference in the cynicism levels of people who use soft news, hard news, or different combinations of the two. It is important to note however that this study was not able to isolate solely soft news users and that the group that was categorized as the closest to soft news users still used a variety of hard news sources (between 1-4). Thus although the results from this study do not support my hypothesis that is not to say that if another sample were taken of 18-24 year olds that was able to also include exclusively soft news users, the results could potentially be different and be more in support of my hypothesis.

The Effects of Specific Soft News Sources on Viewer Cynicism

Another important question to answer is whether specific sources are connected to certain levels of cynicism. This could potentially be an explanation as to why Hypothesis 1 was refuted if the cynicism levels across the soft news source were different. This therefore could have affected the overall levels of cynicism when the soft news sources were all grouped together. The overall difference of cynicism levels among individual soft news sources did not seem to be significant since for the majority the t-test to compare this rendered result of p-value greater than .10.

There was however a few noticeable trends among morning talk news shows (i.e. *Good Morning America*) and talk shows (i.e. *Live with Regis and Kelly*). Both groups of viewers are more likely to feel that the government needs major reform compared to non-viewers, with the t-test result for morning news showing $p=.074$ and the viewer mean answer of 1.90 as well as talk showing $p=.070$ with the viewer mean answer of 1.94. This shows that these viewers are much more cynical about how the government is functioning than non-users. On the other hand these same viewers of talk shows are not as cynical about the electoral system as non-viewers with the average disagreeing that one person doesn't have the ability to change the political system. This is substantiated with a t-test result of $p=.084$ and the viewer mean answer of 3.11, showing a meaningful difference between talk show users and non-users in this attitude. *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report* viewers also proved to be more cynical in certain instances compared to non-consumers. This group of viewers tended to have less trust in the government in Washington D.C. to do what is right than non-viewers with a t-test result showing $p=.100$ and the viewer mean answer of 2.71.

The Effects of Soft News on Voting Behavior

Hypothesis 3 postulated that soft news consumption does not affect a viewers' behavior in their decision to go out and vote in an election. There are instead reasons apart from media usage that determines this behavior. In order to determine if this hypothesis was true, the survey asked participants if they had voted in the 2010 election this past November, had thought about voting but did not, usually vote yet did not in November, or did not vote. The other question used to gauge voting behavior asked the respondents who had not voted in the past election if they were registered to vote. Since, as described earlier, I was not able from my sampling to have a group of exclusively soft news users, the test for this hypothesis was not ideal. The hypothesis was therefore tested three different ways—the likelihood of voting or being registered to vote for hard news users vs. any soft news users, for hard news users vs. a combination of hard and soft use with a high number of hard news sources vs. a combination of hard and soft with a low number of hard news sources; and finally the likelihood to be registered to vote based on how many soft news sources are used.

The first two methods used to test this hypothesis seemed to substantiate my prediction since the data found in Tables 3.3-3.8 did not have Chi-Square Test results with $p < .10$ to show a statistically significant difference across the hard and soft news groups and their voting behavior. However in Tables 3.3, 3.4, and 3.5, which dealt with participants' voting tendencies, there was a trend among soft news users to vote or consider voting. Table 3.3 demonstrates that 36% of any soft news consumers voted in November compared to 31% of only hard news consumers. Table 3.4 further breaks down the respondents who use some soft news into those who use soft news with a high

number of hard news sources and those who use soft news with a low number of hard news sources. This table still showed that those who use some soft news are more likely to vote, yet it is those consumers who also use a high number of hard news sources who are the most likely to vote with 46% of this group having voted this past November compared to the 26.1% of soft news users with low numbers of hard news sources. However even with these higher percentages of soft news users voting compared to only hard news users, these differences were not statistically significant and thus supporting my hypothesis that soft news consumption does not affect ones decision to vote.

Table 3.3
Voting Tendencies Respondent Answers in Percentages

	Didn't Vote	No, but Thought About it	No, but Usually Do	Voted
View Only Hard News	42.9%	11.9%	14.3%	31%
Any Soft News (Combination)	31.5%	22.5%	10.1%	36%

Table 3.4
Voting Tendencies Respondent Answers in Percentages

	Didn't Vote	No, but Thought About it	No, but Usually Do	Voted
View Only Hard News	42.9%	11.9%	14.3%	31%
Combination; High # Hard News Sources	27.9%	16.3%	9.3%	46.5%
Combination; Low # Hard News Sources	34.8%	28.3%	10.9%	26.1%

Table 3.5
Hard News vs. Any Soft News Consumers Voting Behavior

	Didn't Vote	Voted
View Only Hard News	69%	31%
Any Soft News (Combination)	64%	36%

Table 3.6
Hard News vs. Combination Consumers Voting Behavior

	Didn't Vote	Voted
View Only Hard News	69%	31%
Combination; High # Hard News Sources	53.5%	46.5%
Combination; Low # Hard News Sources	73.9%	26.1%

Table 3.7
Voter Registration
Respondent Answers

	Not Registered	Registered
View Only Hard News	63%	37%
Any Soft News (Combination)	51%	49%

Table 3.8
Voter Registration Hard News vs.
Combination Respondents Answers

	Not Registered	Registered
View Only Hard News	63%	37%
Combination; High # Hard News Sources	42.1%	57.9%
Combination; Low # Hard News Sources	56.7%	43.3%

Table 3.6 highlights three different blocs of people who use various levels of hard news sources and divides their voting behavior by whether they voted or did not vote this past November. As noted in the Table 3.4 above, soft news consumers who use a high number of hard news sources were more likely to have voted than the other two groups. When this information is categorized between these groups as voting or not voting, a Chi-Square Test for Table 3.6 resulted as $p < .11$ (at .109), which is very close to showing statistical significance between the different groups. This result could disprove my hypothesis through showing that a certain amount of exposure of soft news versus that of hard news could affect a person's decision to vote. This potentially means that using a high number of hard news sources but also at least one soft news source would have an impact on the behavior of users than those who solely use hard news or soft news with a limited amount of hard news sources. We however do not know what soft news sources this group is using, and if there is a particular soft news source that is used by the majority of this group that would cause a result such as this.

The results seen above about what different media usage groups are more likely to vote or not vote are similar to which media usage groups were more likely to be registered to vote if they had not voted. Both Table 3.7 and Table 3.8 illustrate this by showing that those who use some form of soft news are more likely to be politically involved by registering to vote even if it did not result in them actually going out to vote.

Table 3.7 illustrates this with only 37% of hard news viewers being registered to vote compared to a 49% of consumers of any sort of soft news. Table 3.8 shows that those who watch some soft news along with higher quantities of hard news are more likely to register to vote, with 57.9% of this group doing so, compared to exclusively hard news viewers (37% doing so) and those who watch soft news and low levels of hard news (43.3% doing so). However, the data in Tables 3.7 and 3.8 is not statistically meaningful, which supports my hypothesis.

There is a noticeable trend in the data showing that those who consumed any soft news were more likely to be civically involved through voting or at least registering to vote than solely hard news users. Moreover it was seen that viewers of soft news and a high quantity of hard new sources (5+) were more likely to both vote and have registered to vote if they hadn't voted than the other two groups. Thus it was of interest to see if the number of soft news sources someone used affected their voting behavior, rather than just comparing soft versus hard news usage. A Chi-Square test for whether people voted or did not vote based on their soft news consumption was not statistically meaningful. However, this test found that there was a significant difference between how many soft news sources one watches and their likelihood to register to vote with $p = .094$ (Table 3.9)

Table 3.9
Likelihood of Voter Registration
Based on Number of Soft News Sources Used

<i># Of Soft New Sources</i>	Not Registered	Registered
0	66.7%	33.3%
1	44%	56%
2	47.1%	52.9%
3	100%	0%
4	100%	0%
5	0%	100%

Those who watch as many as five soft news sources were the most likely to have registered at 100% compared to consumers of one soft news source at 56% or two soft news sources at 52.9%. This result therefore refutes my hypothesis by showing that at least some exposure to soft news is linked to greater political involvement with people registering to vote. Another aspect of Table 3.9 that must be noted is the 100% of consumers of three or four soft news sources who are not registered to vote and the 100% of consumers of five soft news sources registered. These results should be interpreted cautiously, however, since those percentages were made from low numbers of the sample (i.e. there were five respondents who use three soft news sources, one respondent using four sources, and one respondent using five sources).

Based on the sampling and the inability to completely isolate exclusively soft news consumers, Hypothesis 3 can neither be completely validated nor refuted. There were however important trends, which refute this hypothesis rather than substantiate through showing that consumers of any soft news were had a higher likelihood to be civically engaged through either voting or registering to vote. This was further substantiated by soft news users of one or two sources being significantly more likely to register to vote than those with either no exposure to soft news sources. Although these trends were not statistically significant, thus supporting my hypothesis that exposure to soft news does not affect a consumers decision to vote or register, it is important to note that these results may be due to the small size of the sample. Thus if the sample size were larger, there potentially could have been some statistical significance to these trends and that would disprove my hypothesis.

The Effects of Specific Soft News Sources on Voting Behavior

Specific soft news sources seemed to have an impact on determining if viewers voted in 2010 or (for non-voters) were registered to vote (Table 3.10). Those who watch the faux news programs *The Daily Show* or *The Colbert Report* were more likely to vote (40.8%) or be at least registered to vote (52%) than those viewers of all the other sources. This is important because faux news programs are very different in format and content than the other soft news sources by spending much more time on actual news events and more often engaging in criticism and critiquing of the government. Thus if these viewers actually did vote, how they voted (i.e. for which candidate or issues) could be affected. However, morning TV had 38.7% of users vote and commercial radio had 37.5% of users, while 50% of consumers of both commercial radio and late-night talk TV at least registered to vote. A possible explanation for this is that morning TV, commercial radio, and late-night talk, although do not necessarily spend huge amounts of time on political news, do still expose people to certain political issues that these consumers find important, thus spurring them to vote. This has important implications towards refuting Hypothesis 3 since this trend, although not statistically significant, shows that these soft news programs due seem to increase consumers likelihood of civic engagement.

Table 3.10
Likelihood of Civic Engagement
Based on Soft News Source

	% Voted In 2010	% Of Non-voters Registered to Vote
<i>Morning TV</i>	38.7%	35.3%
<i>Talk TV</i>	27.8%	27.3%
<i>Late-night Talk TV</i>	28.6%	50%
<i>Faux News</i>	40.8%	52%
<i>Commercial Radio</i>	37.5%	50%

Conclusion

The goal of this chapter was to examine specific attitudes and behaviors of soft news consumers. Testing the hypotheses about these effects proved difficult since both Hypothesis 1 and 3 to be validated or refuted ideally needed to have a group of exclusive soft news users. This inability to isolate soft news consumers potentially affected and skewed the outcomes of the data analysis, especially in the case of Hypothesis 1, which specifically made prediction about a group that I was not able to accurately test. The sample in itself gave extremely surprising results based on the general media viewing habits of the participants. It was an unexpected finding that the majority of participants relied much more heavily on hard news sources rather than the anticipated soft news sources.

The results of the data analysis for Hypothesis 1 seemed to show consistent trends pointing towards greater levels of cynicism among soft news consumers than non-consumers, yet these trends were not statistically significant. There are many possible explanations as to why Hypothesis 1 was not substantiated by the statistical results from the study. An important issue to consider as part of the explanation is that all the participants, with the exception of two, used some form of hard news. The fact that a mixture of both hard and soft news sources were used by the group that was categorized as being the closest to soft news users, could attest to there not being a statistically significant difference in the cynicism levels between solely hard news users and those who use any form of soft news. There is a high possibility that those who are watching both sources are watching the same hard news sources as the exclusively hard news

users, which means both groups are possibly being influenced by the same thing, thus resulting in similar attitudes about the government and electoral system.

Another possible explanation is that these are simply the attitudes of the young people in America and their media viewing habits might not even influence these attitudes. Cassino and Besen-Cassino (2009) posit that even before consuming any form of media, the young population simply does not have an interest in politics and the political system leading to an indifferent attitude about the topic. The majority of the respondents, whether belonging to the exclusively hard news users or the any soft news users group, were relatively neutral in their answers about being cynical or not. Part of the reason why young Americans seem to be apathetic is because they do not have a stake in the game. This means that young people do not have a cause to rally around that hits them really close to home (such as a draft), unlike other times in American history. This group also, especially the participants in the sampling, for the most part do not have full-time jobs with a large portion of their salary going to taxes, meaning they are not as concerned where their tax dollars are going and being spent. They do not seem to be holding the government as accountable as past generations have. These are issues that affect attitudes and are not necessarily linked to media usage habits, perhaps further explaining why hard news users and soft news users had similar levels of cynicism.

Hypothesis 3 posited that soft news consumption would not affect a person's decision to register to vote or to vote. In testing this, an important trend was noted in the results of the data analysis—users of at least some form of soft news were more likely to be civically engaged through registering to vote or voting—although this trend was not statistically meaningful and thus supporting my hypothesis. An explanation for this trend

could be that the soft news users are all using the same or similar sources (such as a faux news programs), which sparks some form of involvement among viewers. Perhaps the fact that out of the soft news users, 28% said they turned to faux news programs (i.e. *The Daily Show or Colbert Report*) for views and opinions and possibly as a consequence of this 40.8% of these viewers voted and 52% had at least registered to vote. It could be that the viewers of these programs are receptive to what is being presented by the hosts and are sprung into action.

Conversely since this hypothesis was not refuted statistically by the results, it seems that there are other reasons that play a factor in determining whether a person will or will not vote. Scholars Cassino and Besen-Cassino (2009) posit that this age group feels powerless in respect to an individual having an impact on the political system. Thus this feeling may not necessarily be related to the media that they use, it might just be what they view as a reality from real life experiences. It may not even be that this group feels powerless; it could be that they simply do not care about voting, it is just not that important to them. As noted above this could be a result of many young Americans not having a driving cause or issue to spur them into action.

Based on the results of the tests done to test Hypotheses 1 and 3, it seems that although I was not able completely isolate soft news consumers, statistically watching some form of soft news does not have effects on viewers' attitudes but specific amounts of soft news usage can have an effect on users' voting behavior (i.e. a low number of soft news sources along with hard news use results in people being the most likely to register to vote or vote). Although statistically for the majority of the test results, soft news did not seem to have meaningful effects on users, throughout most of the data analysis there

were noticeable trends showing there did seem to a small difference in the attitudes and behaviors of exclusively hard news user and those who used any form of soft news. Thus it seems that soft news does not have a significant impact on users, but there is still the potential for users to be affected by soft news exposure.

Chapter Four: The Effects of Faux News on Viewers

Faux news programs such as *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report* are an important faction of soft news to concentrate on in terms of their specific effects on viewers for many reasons. First, faux news programs were the most used soft news source with 36.3% of the respondents turning to faux news programs and 3% using them everyday. Respondents primarily seem to use faux news for its entertainment value with 57.8% of participants citing this as their most common reason for tuning into these programs. This is important since even if these people only watch these programs for entertainment alone, the nature of faux news shows allows for some gain of political knowledge, which has the effect to shift political opinions (Cao 2008). Even still there is a large portion of these viewers who turn to faux news for the views and opinions offered by the hosts with 28.1% of viewers citing that they use this source for this reason. This is important because some of the people who turn to this source may be neutral about the issues and due to the hosts' subjective presentation of the material, these viewers could form their opinions on the basis of those of the hosts.

An important aspect of faux news, which has already been touched upon, is that the formatting and presentation of the information is drastically different than that of the other soft news sources. Most other soft news sources discuss the events in a "chit-chat" manner. Only the surface of the issue is touched, not the heart of the story, with these shows often focusing on the more popular culture aspects of an event. Faux news shows

conversely mimic the layout of a newscast and present a lot of factual information about a political issue. Faux news programs also differ from most other soft news sources—aside from late-night TV—by being extremely disparaging about the electoral system as well as the hard news’ refusal to engage in critical inquiry (Baym 2005). The hosts use the tool of comedy to engage in serious criticism of the government, frequently highlighting the hypocrisy of politicians or other government officials. The format of these shows also allows the hosts to subjectively report the stories making conclusions based on the information and offering their own opinions on the events, which often are on the liberal end of the spectrum. Such opinions and views can have the effect of breeding cynicism among viewers who watch these shows to see the take on political events that these hosts have. The results from chapter three did not statistically show this, however there were strong trends indicating this was the case.

Another important characteristic of the faux news audience is their media viewing habits of other soft news sources. Of these viewers, 38.8% use faux news as their only faux news source, a higher percentage than all the other soft news sources used as a respondent’s only soft news source. This is important because a large portion of faux news users are not being influenced by the opinions of other soft news hosts and thus it enables me to see that people may have certain attitudes or behaviors due to their influence by solely faux news programs and not that of other soft sources. An important feature of faux news audiences compared to non-users is that they have a higher propensity to vote with 40.8% of users doing so in 2010 or at least having registered to vote if they were a non-voter with 52% being registered. This is significant since viewers

vote choice or potential vote choice could be easily influenced by what they are exposed to on the faux news shows.

This chapter will concentrate on addressing Hypotheses 2, 4, and 5, which specifically discuss the influences of faux news programs on their viewership. One such possible repercussion highlighted by Hypothesis 2 is that due to the nature of the presentation of the information, which seems to have a liberal bias, and politicians targeted by the hosts, the viewers of these programs will ideologically lean towards the liberal end of the spectrum and vote for Democratic candidates. Another possible consequence, focused on in Hypothesis 4, is that faux news audiences will have an increase of political involvement in the form of political discourse with peers in comparison to non-viewers. Faux news programs have the potential to affect this behavior since they offer simplified information and issue positions making political news and events more accessible to viewers and easier for them to form an opinion and discuss these issues. Finally Hypothesis 5 posits that a possible effect of watching faux news programs is that viewers will have a higher level of factual knowledge than those who exclusively watch other forms of soft news or hard news. This is mainly due to the formatting of these shows, since they concentrate more in-depth on political news than other soft news programs and they often also simplify the information presented more so than hard news sources. Having higher levels of factual knowledge is important since it has the potential to affect how someone feels on the issues and by consequence how they vote (i.e. candidate choice).

Faux News Show Viewers' Ideology, Party Identification, and Vote Choice

Hypothesis 2 postulated that due to the content of the presentation of the information in faux news, the viewers of these programs would ideologically lean towards the liberal end of the spectrum, identify with the Democratic Party and vote for Democratic candidates in elections. In order to determine if this hypothesis were true, the survey asked respondents where they placed themselves on a conservative-liberal spectrum (the lowest number being very conservative and the highest number being very liberal) as well as with what party they identified themselves. Another question used on the survey to test this hypothesis asked those respondents who voted in November 2010 if they voted for a Democratic, Republican, or Other Party candidate. None of the results for Hypothesis 2 were statistically significant but there were noticeable trends that would be in support of my hypothesis.

Tables 4.1 and 4.2 dealt with respondents' ideological tendencies based on their media habits. These tables specifically highlight the important trend that those who watch *The Daily Show* or *The Colbert Report* are more likely to lean towards the liberal end of the ideological spectrum with a higher mean number in each table indicating a more liberal tendency. Although there is not a large difference in the means shown in Table 4.1, the mean number is higher at 3.37 for faux news users than the 3.15 of non-users. This is substantiated in the cross-tabulation which showed that there was a higher percentage of faux news viewers (12.2%) that considered themselves very liberal compared to non-viewers (5.8%), while conversely there was a higher percentage of non-viewers (41.9%) who considered themselves moderate compared to faux news viewers (36.7%). Table 4.2 showed that those who never use faux news programs were the most

likely to be conservative with an average of 2.93 compared to those who watch these shows every few days or once a week with an average of 3.40. Similarly, the cross-tabulations show that 32% of those who watch every few days consider themselves liberal compared to the 16% who watch the same amount that are conservative.

Table 4.1
Mean of Ideological Leaning

	<i>Mean</i>
<i>Faux News User</i>	3.37
<i>Non-User</i>	3.15

Table 4.2
Mean of Ideological Leaning Vs. Frequency of Faux News Use

	<i>Mean</i>
<i>Use Every Day</i>	3.00
<i>Use Few Days a Week</i>	3.40
<i>Use Once a Week</i>	3.40
<i>Use Once a Month or Less</i>	3.35
<i>Use Never</i>	2.93

Although there is no statistical significance for the trends found in Tables 4.1 and 4.2, it seems that these trends would support Hypothesis 2. The tables showed that the respondents who watch some for of soft news are more likely to have a liberal ideology than a non-viewer. Equally, the less often a respondent watches faux news programs, the more likely they are to show a moderate ideology. The cross-tabulations from the data analysis showed this with 47.8% of viewers who only watch these shows once a month or less to have moderate ideology compared to other respondents who have the same usage levels with 32.6% having liberal ideology and only 6.5% having conservative ideology.

The results for party identification of the respondents were similar to the trends seen above in regard to ideology. Although these results were not statistically significant, they seemed to support Hypothesis 2 that viewers of faux new programs would be more likely to identify themselves as Democrats than as Republicans. When excluding other party identifiers, the results from the cross-tabulation showed that 37% of faux news viewers identified with the Democratic Party compared to the 21.7% of viewers who

identify with the Republican Party. The respective mean numbers (1 being a strong Republican and 5 being a strong Democrat) also reflect this trend with faux news users having a higher average response of 3.28 to the average response of 3.16 of non-users. The difference between these numbers is not extremely large, yet it still highlights the penchant of *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report* viewers to be more Democratic.

Table 4.3 demonstrates that this propensity of faux news users to be more Democratic continues though the frequency of tuning into these shows in comparison to party identification. Those who use faux news programs everyday had a mean of 3.33 and those who even only just tune in once a month or less had a mean of 3.35 compared to those who never used they programs with a mean of 2.95. This table exhibits that even a little exposure to faux news leads to having a more Democratic identification and those who never watch are the least likely to be Democratic. The cross-tabulation validates this through showing that when respondents watch these shows a few days per week 37.5% sees themselves as Democrats while 25% see themselves as Republicans. Furthermore, for those who never watch these shows, 13.2% consider themselves strong Republicans and 26.3% Republicans—the highest percentages of this type of party identification in this cross-tabulation. The differences between these means and percentages are important to showcase since they show that Hypothesis 2 may be true, however none of the differences are large enough to have statistical significance. However, conversely must be noted that it could be that Democrats are more likely to tune into faux news programs rather than faux news shows causing people to become more Democratic.

Table 4.3
Mean of Party Identification Vs.
Frequency of Faux News Use

	<i>Mean</i>
<i>Use Every Day</i>	3.33
<i>Use Few Days a Week</i>	3.29
<i>Use Once a Week</i>	3.26
<i>Use Once a Month or Less</i>	3.35
<i>Use Never</i>	2.95

In terms of vote choice, when the option of other party candidate is excluded, viewers of faux news are following the same trends as other results above for Hypothesis 2. Table 4.4 explicitly demonstrates this with 68.4% of the faux news users voting for a Democratic candidate in November 2010 elections compared to only 31.6% of viewers voting for a Republican candidate. When vote choice is expanded to the frequency of the use of faux news, these tendencies seem to be even more pronounced (Table 4.5). Of those who tune into these shows everyday, 100% voted for a Democrat and 77.8% of those who watch a few days a week did so also. Comparatively 37.5% of those who watch faux news once a month or less voted for a Republican and 60% of faux news non-viewers also had this vote choice. These percentages show that the more one watches *The Daily Show* or *The Colbert Report*, the more likely they are to vote for Democratic candidates.

Table 4.4
Vote Choice in Percentages

	<i>Democrat</i>	<i>Republican</i>
<i>Faux News User</i>	68.4%	31.6%
<i>Non-User</i>	53.8%	46.2%

Table 4.5
Vote Choice Vs. Frequency of
Faux News Use in Percentages

	<i>Democrat</i>	<i>Republican</i>
<i>Use Every Day</i>	100%	0%
<i>Use Few Days a Week</i>	77.8%	22.2%
<i>Use Once a Week</i>	50%	50%
<i>Use Once a Month or Less</i>	62.5%	37.5%
<i>Use Never</i>	40%	60%

Tables 4.4 and 4.5 illustrate the vote choice trend extremely well, yet the differences in the percentages seen are not statistically significant and therefore do not support Hypothesis 2. This was something seen with all of the results for the tests used to gauge ideological leaning, party identification, and vote choice of faux news users. This relates to the results for Hypothesis 3 (discussed in chapter 3), which showed trends that soft news users were more likely to be civically engaged, specifically users of *The Daily Show* or *The Colbert Report*. This audience having these certain ideologies and party identifications (seen in Table 4.4 and 4.5) could provide a reason why this group seemed to be politically active in terms of voting behavior since they knew how they would like to vote. However, one explanation for all of the results showing definite trends in support of Hypothesis 2 is that the small sample size used in the data analysis makes it difficult for these trends to reach statistical significance. Specifically the sample used for determining the vote choice of faux news viewers compared to non-viewers was extremely small since there were only 51 respondents out of the 135 who actually voted. Hence if the sample size were larger, there is a possibility that the trends seen in all of the results above could manifest in meaningful statistical significance.

The Effect of Faux News Shows on Viewers' Political Discourse

Hypothesis 4 predicted that there would be an increased level of political involvement in the form of political discourse with peers among faux news viewers than those who do not use faux news programs. In order to test this hypothesis, the survey asked participants if they discuss politics (i.e. campaigns, elections, important political events) with their peers. A follow up question to those who answered yes inquired how

often the respondent would have this type of discourse, ranging from a response of 1 meaning everyday to a response of 5 equaling never. The results of these tests showed both meaningful trends as well as statistical significance in support of this hypothesis.

Tables 4.6 and 4.7 compare political discourse for faux news users and non-users and the levels faux news usage. Although there is no statistical significance from the results in these two tables, there are important patterns that point towards support for Hypothesis 4. Table 4.6 highlights this with 76.6% of faux news users showing a penchant for political discourse over the non-users at 67.1%. This is not a huge jump between percentages but still a noticeable increase of participants who watch *The Daily Show* or *The Colbert Report* having these types of discussions among their peers compared to non-users. Table 4.7 also exhibits this trend showing that those who tune into faux news programs at least once a week have the highest levels of political discourse among peers with 84.2% of respondents in this category doing so. Other high levels of political conversations were seen with participants who watch everyday (75%) and those who watch about once a month (77.8%). The differences between these percentages was very close to being statistically significant with a Chi-Square Test result of $p = .111$. This could possibly point to real statistical significance if the sample size were larger since the trends in this table were strong and the p-value was relatively low.

Table 4.6
Political Discourse in Percentages

	<i>Discourse</i>	<i>No Discourse</i>
<i>Faux News User</i>	76.6%	23.4%
<i>Non-User</i>	67.1%	32.9%

Table 4.7
Political Discourse Vs. Frequency of Faux News Use in Percentages

	<i>Discourse</i>	<i>No Discourse</i>
<i>Use Every Day</i>	75%	25%
<i>Use Few Days a Week</i>	70.8%	29.2%
<i>Use Once a Week</i>	84.2%	15.8%
<i>Use Once a Month or Less</i>	77.8%	22.2%
<i>Use Never</i>	55%	45%

Tables 4.8 and 4.9 showcase the correlation between the amount of faux news usage and amount of political discourse. The lower mean number of the responses indicates a higher frequency of political discussions. Specifically Table 4.8 highlights the finding that faux news viewers not only have higher levels of political discourse but also have this discourse more frequently among their peers with the average response of 2.89 compared to non-users who gave the average response of 3.38 (Table 4.8). The cross-tabulation for this table shows that 30.6% of respondents who are viewers of faux news have political discourse a few days per week as well as another 30.6% of these viewers having conversations with their peers at least once a week. Conversely 21.4% of non-viewers only have these types of discussions every few days. This data strongly supports that exposure to faux news heightens the level of political discourse among respondents.

Table 4.8
Mean of Frequency of Discourse Among Faux News Users and Non-Users

	<i>Mean</i>
<i>Faux News User</i>	2.89
<i>Non-User</i>	3.38

Table 4.9
Mean of Frequency of Discourse Vs. Frequency of Faux News Use

	<i>Mean</i>
<i>Use Every Day</i>	2.00
<i>Use Few Days a Week</i>	2.76
<i>Use Once a Week</i>	3.19
<i>Use Once a Month or Less</i>	3.43
<i>Use Never</i>	3.29

Table 4.9 demonstrates the continued trend of the influence of faux news and political discourse. Survey participants who used *The Daily Show* or *The Colbert Report* everyday or a few days per week had the lowest mean responses, an average response of 2 for the former and 2.76 for the latter, in terms of frequency of discourse. Table 4.9 also shows a large drop-off in the discourse between those who watch faux news once a week (average response 3.19) and those who watch once a month or less (mean response 3.43). This indicates higher levels of this behavior the more often one watches faux news. The cross-tabulation supports this by showing that 29.4% of respondents who watch these programs every few days have these political discussions a few days per week and another 35.3% if viewers who again watch faux news a few days per week also have discourse among their peers once a week. These trends are not only extremely noticeable but also significant since the T-Test result for Table 4.8 was $p = .032$ and the ANOVA result was $p = .077$ showing that the difference between the means was meaningful.

The results of the study substantiated Hypothesis 4 that there would be an increased level of political involvement in the form of discourse among peers for faux news viewers. It seems from the data analysis that those who watch these programs more frequently also had these political discussions the most often. This is important since it appears that watching *The Daily Show* or *The Colbert Report* has an impact on viewers' inclinations to discuss politics, which in turn can help people formulate and strengthen their own stances on issues thus potentially affecting other forms of political involvement and attitudes. It once again must be noted as with some results above, that this could simply be a casual link. Perhaps people who already engage in this type of discourse are

more inclined to turn into faux news programs since these shows highlight political inquiry thus drawing in these types of viewers.

Factual Knowledge Levels of Faux News Show Viewers

Hypothesis 5 posited that viewers of *The Daily Show* or *The Colbert Report* would have higher levels of factual knowledge than those who watched soft news or hard news but not these faux news shows. To test this hypothesis survey participants were asked to answer political factual knowledge questions. Such questions consisted of correctly identifying different political figures including: Hilary Clinton (Secretary of State), Scott Brown (Senator), Harry Reid (Senate Majority Leader), Elena Kagan (Supreme Court Justice), and Joe Biden (Vice President of the United States) as well as answering which political party became the majority in the House of Representatives after the November 2010 elections.

It was not possible to fully test this hypothesis. As with the prior chapter, a clean division could not be made between solely faux news viewers, solely soft news viewers (excluding faux news), and solely hard news viewers. This means that the variable of faux news viewers still includes participants who watch other soft news shows and hard news programs. Similarly the variable of soft news users excludes faux news users but includes hard news users. Thus the conditions were not ideal to test this premise about factual knowledge of faux news viewers, but some important trends can still be seen from the results of the cross-tabulation, which can help form conclusions about this hypothesis.

The major trend that can be seen in Table 4.10 is that for five out of the six knowledge questions, the faux news viewers had higher percentages of being correct over hard news viewers and soft news viewers. However, often these percentages were not

significantly different between faux news and hard news viewers, which was seen in the percent correct for the new House majority question with 85.7% of faux news consumers and 85.1% of hard news consumers answering correctly. The difference between percent correct by faux news and soft news viewers is usually larger. Using the same example above, 77.4% of soft news viewers were correct about the new House majority compared to the 85.7% of faux news viewers—8.3 percentage points being a much larger difference than the .6 between faux news and hard news consumers.

Table 4.10
Percent Correct of Factual Knowledge Questions

	<i>Faux News Users</i>	<i>Soft News Users, No Faux News Users</i>	<i>Hard News Users, No Faux News Users</i>
<i>New House Majority</i>	85.7%	77.4%	85.1%
<i>Clinton</i>	69.4%	45%	53.1%
<i>Brown</i>	16.3%	20%	22%
<i>Reid</i>	16.3%	7.5%	14.8%
<i>Kagan</i>	20.4%	10%	18.5%
<i>Biden</i>	81.6%	80%	80.2%

The one political knowledge question in which the faux news users had the lowest percent correct (16.3%) compared to soft news users (20%) and hard news users (22%), was identifying Scott Brown as a Senator. Again the differences between these percentages were not staggering but significant enough to take notice of. Perhaps an explanation for this is that Scott Brown is a Senator from Massachusetts and thus only well known among the respondents from that state (hence the lower correct percentages). It is possible therefore those who learned about his election, which was pivotal in allowing the House Republicans to attempt to filibuster the healthcare reform bill in early 2010, from hard news sources that were from Massachusetts were interested to see what the hosts of these faux news programs had to say about this event. It would give a possibility why faux news users percent correct was lower since it might have only been

an event of interest to Massachusetts residents and thus only they turned to the supplemental faux news source after seeing it on a hard news source.

Another noticeable element on Table 4.10 is that there were two political factual knowledge questions that had high percentages of correct answers across all the different media usage groups. The first question was about the new majority party in the House of Representatives following the 2010 elections (i.e. Republicans) with no group falling below 75% of respondents being correct and the other question asked respondents to identify Joe Biden (Vice President of the United States) with no group falling below 80% of respondents being correct. There could be many reasons why people across the board were more likely to be correct about these factual knowledge questions. In terms of the new House majority, the election which determined this was less than three months from when the survey was given and it was a major political event that most of the college students would be aware of simply from being in an academic environment. Therefore it was not surprising that more than three-fourths of each group type knew this political fact. The reason why so many participants, no matter what their media viewing habits consisted of, were able to correctly identify Joe Biden is because he is a very high-profile political figure in comparison to the other people respondents were asked to identify. Common knowledge might have come into play for a lot of participants in identifying Biden, rather than their knowledge that comes from their media viewing habits.

The results for Hypothesis 5 could not fully be substantiated due to the nature of the sample or simply to the reality of this group's media usage. However there were trends seen in Table 4.10 that would suggest faux news users have at least the same political factual knowledge levels as hard news viewers. This can most likely be attested

to the fact that all except two participants in this study used some form of hard news, meaning that most of the faux news users also used hard news. This provides an explanation to why the percentages correct were very similar between the two groups since they were both possibly exposed to the same level of facts. This also would give a reason why the soft news knowledge level percentages were similar to the other two categories. What pushed the correct percentages to be a little higher among the faux news users could be the supplemental information these consumers obtained from these shows that reaffirmed the factual knowledge gained from hard news, while other forms of soft news often only reiterate the headlines.

Conclusion

The goal of this chapter was to explore the influences of faux news programs on their viewership. Such repercussions of faux news looked at in-depth include how attitudes of consumers are affected (i.e. ideology, party identification, and vote choice), behavior in terms of political discourse, and political knowledge levels. The size and make-up of the sample used in this study made it difficult to find a statistical significance in the results that would have supported Hypothesis 2. In the case of Hypothesis 5 the sample or even purely the media viewing habits of this group made it impossible to attempt to find statistical significance since the media sources (based on the sample) could not be compared cleanly. However the results based on this sample validated Hypothesis 4 (increase of political discourse) as well as showed trends that would be in support of Hypothesis 2 (viewers would be liberal Democrats who voted democratically) and Hypothesis 5 (heightened levels of political factual knowledge).

Statistically the results did not substantiate Hypothesis 2. An important contributing factor, which has already been mentioned numerous times in this chapter, is the small size of the sample. There were only 135 people who participated in this study making it difficult for the results to reach significance, even when it seems the differences between the means or the data in the cross-tabulations were large enough to be meaningful and truly support a hypothesis. This occurred with Hypothesis 2, which had results that showed a sizeable trend in the different measures of attitudes. There was a noticeable tendency for faux news consumers to lean towards the more liberal end of the spectrum, identify with the Democratic Party, and vote democratically. If the sample size were larger there is a strong possibility that the results would actually substantiate the hypothesis since the trends were strong for these tests.

There were however some Republicans and those who considered themselves conservative who watched faux news programs. Their reason for watching may not be ideology based, but rather a preference for entertainment. If these particular users already have certain opinions and political beliefs and are solely watching because Jon Stewart is “funny” then it is unlikely that their inclinations would change from viewing these shows. Another reason why users who tend to vote more conservatively could also turn to these programs is to see what the liberal take on a political matter is in order to see all sides of an issue. Thus this number of Republicans and conservatives using faux news could be another explanation as to why there is no statistical significance to support this hypothesis since not every viewer of these shows is susceptible to being swayed in their views and actions by the ideological biases presented in these programs.

The results for Hypothesis 4 showed that when people watch faux news on a frequent basis (everyday or a few days a week), they are more likely to have political discourse among peers. This finding could have an important impact on political institution because political discourse is a form of involvement that could lead to more normative actions by this age group. Conversely it could be that these people already have high levels of discourse and it is this that prompts them to watch these faux news programs. Nonetheless, discourse allows people to form or substantiate their opinions as well as see many different sides of a particular issue, and faux news shows often give people the tools needed to do this (i.e. a certain position or facts about a matter). Once a person's beliefs are solidified they may be more likely to take action, such as vote, since they know how they feel about a topic and can compare it to the issue position a candidate has about the same subject.

It is important that 18-24 year olds have this discourse and become more politically involved since they are the next generation who will have a real impact on politics and the course the government will follow. If this generation stays apathetic into middle age and this becomes the trait that defines this group, the political system of democracy, the basis of this country, will suffer if the people do not want a say in how their money is spent and how the government is run. Hence if *The Daily Show*, *The Colbert Report*, or other faux news programs can spark an interest in this group and start the trend of discussing politics at a younger age, the health of democracy in this country will be aided.

Hypothesis 5 posited that factual knowledge levels would be higher among respondents who watch faux news programs compared to exclusively soft news or hard

news users. This hypothesis could once again not be found statistically significant partially due to the characteristics of the sample. The inability to make a clean break among the different types of media consumers made it impossible to fully test the hypothesis. Trends from the variables that could be made tended to support this hypothesis rather than refute it. Nevertheless the difference between factual knowledge levels of faux news users and hard news users who do not tune into faux news shows were not substantially different. A possible explanation for this could be that the variable considered as a faux news user still included hard news users. Thus it is very possible that the bulk of these faux news users could have obtained their factual knowledge from their exposure to hard news. Hence one reason why faux news users had higher percentages correct on knowledge questions could be that they were exposed to the information twice and therefore the facts were more likely to stick.

The results for the tests done to test Hypotheses 2, 4, and 5 either showed statistical significance or at the very least substantial trends to validate the suggested effects of faux news exposure on viewers. Faux news has the potential to affect attitudes (i.e. ideologies, party identification, and vote choice), political discourse, and increased knowledge levels among 18-24 year olds. This is significant because these attitudes and behaviors can have a meaningful impact on the functioning of democracy in the United States.

Chapter Five: Conclusion

The young adult population of the United States (18-24 year olds) are the first generation to grow up during an era when having multiple televisions and computers in the house became the norm and when the internet evolved leaps and bounds to become a form a media that could be utilized by most sectors of society. These new forms of media added not only a function of convenience but also an element of entertainment. This led more Americans to turn to the television or the internet for news rather than the traditional newspaper. Thus these new forms of media with more choice options exert an important influence on American society.

As noted above, television also includes an entertainment component. Soft news is an example of the growing reach of entertainment. The phenomenon of soft news is a hybrid of shows that mix politics with entertainment. These programs often encompass sensationalism and human-interest components when reporting on select high-profile political issues. Different forms of soft news include daytime talk shows such as *Oprah* as well as late-night talk such as *The Late Show with David Letterman* to the now popular comedic faux news programs such as *The Daily Show*. Scholars have noted that large contingents of the audiences for these shows are 18-24 year olds (Cassino and Besen-Cassino 2009). This study found that his demographic primarily turns to these shows for their entertainment aspect rather than for in-depth reporting.

The viewing of soft news can have important implications due to the nature of the presentation of the information as well as its content. Hence this study was interested in

looking at the relationship between use of soft news and levels of cynicism about the electoral system as well as voting behavior. This study also looked at the correlation specifically between faux news programs (e.g. *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report*) with attitudes such as ideologies and party identification as well as the behaviors in relation to vote choice and political involvement in the form of political discourse. A final correlation of interest was between these faux news shows and factual political knowledge levels. The results of the data analysis found that some of these attitudes and behaviors seemed to in fact be related to the viewing of soft news.

The Results

Effects of Soft News on Attitudes and Behavior

This study has shown that consumption of soft news does not have a sweeping overall impact on consumers' mind-sets and actions. Cynicism levels and voting behavior in relation to the use of soft news were tested and the results showed that there was not a link with these two attitudes and behaviors. It is more often than not that people will form opinions about issues outside of media consumption and will not be easily swayed by "what they watch on TV." Voting behavior also most likely works in a similar way; people will likely vote because they care about an issue or candidate and not simply or solely because they watch a certain program.

Hypothesis 1, which postulated that soft news users generally would have higher levels of cynicism compared to non-users, was not supported by the results from this study. There were however slight trends in the data analysis that showed that soft news users were slightly more cynical than non-viewers, however there was no statistical

significance to these differences. Most of the respondents, soft news consumers and non-consumers, answered the questions on cynicism similarly, all being relatively neutral in their attitudes towards the government. However there were results that illustrated that certain soft news sources made those consumers more cynical about certain aspects of the electoral system. For example I found that viewers of morning TV and talk TV were much more cynical than non-viewers in the attitude that the government needs a major reform. I also found that consumers of *The Daily Show* or *The Colbert Report* have less trust in the government in Washington D.C. to do what is right than non-consumers. Thus when all the consumers of different soft news sources are grouped together, the cynicism levels as whole group are not higher than non-users—refuting my hypothesis—yet consumers of individual soft news sources are slightly more cynical than non-consumers in certain categories—partially substantiating my hypothesis.

Hypothesis 3 also examined soft news usage positing that the consumption of soft news would not affect a consumer's likelihood of voting or registering to vote. The results of this study supported this hypothesis by showing that there was not a correlation being consuming soft news shows and actually voting or registering to vote. Yet there were trends in the results that suggested that using soft news does in fact affect this behavior. For example, the number of soft news sources someone used affected his or her level of civic engagement. Participants who responded that they watch five soft news sources were more likely to be registered to vote compared to those who use only one or two of these sources. The difference between these levels of political involvement however was not statistically meaningful, thus my hypothesis was not refuted by this data.

Effects of Faux News on Attitudes and Behavior

The remaining hypotheses concentrate on the relationship between watching faux news programs and specific attitudes and behaviors. The relationships between consuming faux news programs showed that there were trends for consumers to be more liberal and Democratic as well as have higher levels of political factual knowledge, while there was a direct correlation with increased political discourse. However this being said, all of these results could simply be causal. It could be that Democrats and liberal people are drawn to faux news shows since the ideologies align with their own rather than the shows causing audience members to become more Democratic. The same could be said about an increase of discourse among viewers—these types of people could simply be drawn to the show due to its format. People who have high levels of political factual knowledge could simply be hungry for more information leading them to watch faux news. It is important to remember that just because there seems to be a correlation between two things it does not mean that only one leads to the other. Thus the results below need to be taken with a the proverbial “grain of salt.”

Hypothesis 2 suggested that viewers of faux news would ideologically be liberal, would identify with the Democratic Party, and vote for Democratic candidates. The results did not statistically substantiate this, yet there were noticeable trends in the data that would lend support to this hypothesis. Respondents who did not watch any faux news were more likely to be conservative than those who use these shows every few days or once a week. The study also showed that those who never tune into these programs were more likely to identify themselves as a Republican or strong Republican. Moreover, when it came to the amount of faux news watched and its relationship with vote choice,

there was an extremely pronounced trend with 100% of the participants who watch these programs everyday having voted for the Democratic candidate. These trends nevertheless were not statistically significant and therefore were not able to support my hypothesis.

Hypothesis 4, which predicted that there would be an increased level of political discourse among faux news users compared to non-users, was supported by the results. It seems that not only is tuning into faux news related to political discourse, but also the amount used leads to more political discussions. Based on the study there seemed to be a link those who watched faux news everyday and also having political discourse often, while those who watched less often did not engage in as much political discourse.

Finally Hypothesis 5 posited that factual political knowledge levels would be higher among faux news consumers compared to non-consumers. The data showed trends that would indicate support for this hypothesis. It seemed that those who used faux news had slightly higher levels of factual political knowledge than solely hard news users and those who watch soft news programs excluding faux news. One possible explanation could be that faux news consumers were also consumers of hard news. It could be therefore that the high levels of factual knowledge by faux news users could have been obtained from also using hard news programs and the faux news programs therefore substantiated the information. This explanation is supported by the results, which showed that hard news users were within a few percentage points of having the same factual knowledge levels as faux news users.

Limitations of the Study

One possibility why some of these hypotheses were not supported might have to do with the size of the sample. The sample was not large, consisting of 135 participants. Thus even when strong trends were seen in respondent answers, the small number made it difficult for statistical significance to be found in the data. Hence, this is an explanation for why many of the hypotheses that had results with trends seeming to support them were not validated by the data analysis. Consequently the number of variables for some of the data analysis had to be expanded to include solely hard news users, combination users with high levels of hard news sources, and combination users with low levels of hard news sources. Thus when there were three variables to consider, each variable group had a smaller respondent base in its data analysis making statistical significance even harder to come by even when there were trends. This limitation of the study could have influenced the conclusion reached that soft news does not increase levels of cynicism. This is a possibility since there were trends in the tables showing differences among these different variables but the respondent base was too small to have any real meaning.

Another difficulty with the sample size was that only 2 out of 135 respondents used only soft news sources and no hard news sources. This made it very difficult to examine the effect of soft news on users since I was unable to isolate this group from other media influences. As a consequence, in my study I was able to categorize hard news consumers as those who only used hard news, while I had to categorize soft news consumers as those who consumed any form of soft news as well as hard news. This likely affected my results since soft news consumers were probably influenced by hard news as well as the soft news thus causing the results of the survey to possibly

misrepresent the actual affects and reality of watching these various news types. For example as noted above, the study found that faux news users have the highest levels of factual political knowledge with solely hard news users coming very close to these levels. From the sample I was not able to test those who use only faux news and no other sources—all the faux news consumers in this study also used other sources. Hence there is no way of determining if faux news truly caused this increase of factual political knowledge among respondents or if the other sources also added to the political knowledge. Potentially with a larger sample base I would have been able to have a substantial amount of solely soft news users. However, it could simply be the reality that very few people only consume soft news.

Additionally the make-up of the sample also had likely effects on the overall results of the study. The sample was not truly representative of all American 18-24 year olds. The participants of the study were all students at a small private liberal arts college, primarily white, with the majority coming from families that earn more than \$100,000 per year. To be more representative the sample would have had to include people at private/public and big/small colleges as well as those who do not attend college, greater racial and ethnic diversity, and people of various socio-economic backgrounds. Having a sample that was much more diverse than the one used in this study would possibly cause the results to be significantly different since diverse education levels, races, and incomes would affect attitudes and behaviors in distinctive ways.

A more representative sample could result in a difference in the relationship between soft news and the attitudes as well as the behavior seen in the group studied. For example more diversity in education levels could yield a sample that relies more heavily

on certain sources than the ones relied on by the sample in this study. This could influence the group differently depending on the types of sources and the amount used of each type, compared to the actual sample. This diversity then could change the outcome of the results since the education level most likely has impact on how a person processes the information, which could then possibly effect what they do with this information in terms of behavior. Racial and ethnic diversity also come with distinctive viewpoints and opinions, which can definitely affect how a person interprets the information presented on these news shows. This would thus cause a different relationship between the attitudes and behaviors studied. Hence, as seen above, there were limits on the research due to the small sample size and the difficulty of obtaining a sample that is truly representative of the young adult population in the United States.

While there were apparent flaws with my sample, the reason why some of my hypotheses were not supported by the results could simply be due to the fact that these hypotheses were wrong. Although there are trends supporting the hypotheses showing that there are some factions of 18-24 year olds who had these attitudes and behaviors, it is likely that the lack of statistical support for the hypotheses shows that the general population simply does not have these attitudes and behaviors. For example, Chapter Two found that this group consumed a larger amount of hard news sources rather than soft news, a result that was opposite of what most of the literature from Chapter One had said about this bloc's media viewing habits. A further illustration is with the results refuting Hypothesis 1 and Hypothesis 2. It could purely be the reality for this age group that soft news does not have the effect of making users more cynical than non-users or that faux news consumers would not have a more liberal ideology than non-consumers.

One possible reason why some hypotheses could be wrong is that they postulate about the effects of soft news when some of these behaviors or attitudes could actually be effects of watching hard news. Cynicism for example could actually manifest itself among hard news consumers since often these sources, although not giving an opinion on the events, focus on stories that highlight the misgivings of the government and politicians and the risks of overseas engagements. Soft news in fact could possibly instead be an entertaining relief for people from these realities.

Another reason why these hypotheses could be wrong is that they were based largely on the effects that scholars had seen amongst the older less educated and low-awareness viewers—another large faction of the soft news audience. There has not been much literature about the effects of soft news on young adults, thus soft news could have certain effects on this group and the hypotheses could have concentrated on the wrong effects. It could just be that soft news influences the behavior and attitudes in this younger demographic differently than it does in this older demographic.

A third possibility why some of my hypotheses were not substantiated is that in fact these hypotheses about the effect of exposure to soft news are correct, but it is difficult to tease out these effects in the real world. It could be that soft news does in reality cause more cynicism among viewers of this age group, yet there are many outside influences in the real world, such as personal experiences, the views and opinions of those that one associates with, etc., which could also affect one's attitude. There are a large number of diverse variables in everyday life that affect each person differently, which simply cannot be accounted for in a controlled study. Even still, in a controlled study it is very difficult to isolate the factors in participants' attitudes and behaviors since

each person brings their own personal biases to the study, which very much potentially could stem from something completely independent of media consumption.

A way a different study could possibly address this issue, at least for attitudes, is to show a group clips of soft news and hard news about the same topics. After showing the clips questions similar to the ones on the survey used in this study could be asked to gauge attitudes. This way there are no immediate outside influences that could affect how a person views and processes the information presented, which therefore would allow their true attitudes based on this media consumption to be measured. Yet even with this methodology is not perfect and people could still have their own personal experiences affecting their attitudes.

Implications of Soft News Consumption

Although there are many possible explanations for why there were these certain results, the results nonetheless still have important normative implications. The results for Hypothesis 1 statistically showed that users of soft news were not more cynical than non-users and that in fact most people in their age group are neutral in their attitudes towards the government and electoral system. This could have good implications for democracy since it means people in this group do not feel completely powerless and pessimistic about the political system. This could possibly make this group more likely to participate in the system through voting since they do not, for the most part, seem to have negative associations about participating in the government. This points to the possibility that soft news has better effects than alleged by scholars in their discussion of its effect on different demographics. These scholars feared that soft news consumption would

disenchant people about the electoral system through highlighting politics negatively and its seeming challenge of legitimacy of leadership. It seems however that this is not necessarily the case since soft news does not create a an electorate distrustful in their government, but instead citizens who are aware of political realities—good and bad.

Similarly the results of Hypothesis 4 showed that there seems to be a correlation between watching faux news and engaging in political discourse with peers. However this result might not simply be a correlation as much as causation, meaning that people who have high levels of discourse may be more likely to be drawn to faux news shows, thus being a large faction of these audiences, rather than these shows causing an increase of discussion among viewers. Nonetheless, this is something that is very healthy for democracy since discourse allows people to hear other opinions as well as solidify their own personal opinions and stances. Solidifying these beliefs allows people to vote consistently for candidates and issues that fit their own issue positions. This allows democracy to function properly since it is important for the people voting to have conviction for certain issues and truly understand what each candidate stands for and what policies they want to implement. If people simply vote to vote and do not care, know about, or understand the issues the candidates stand for, than we would end up with a government and people in power who do necessarily represent and reflect the beliefs of the majority of the population, which would go against the whole point of living in a country that uses democracy as its form of government.

There are many positive aspects of soft news outlined above, yet there are also some elements of soft news that we should worry about. Often soft news shows, aside from faux news programs, focus on the more sensational aspects of political news or the

glamorous politicians. These programs may mention important political events, but they regularly do not delve into substantial details about the issue or political figure. This is not damaging now, as the study showed that the majority of respondents turned to these shows for entertainment, however, in the future it could become worrisome if this group turns to these shows for in-depth reporting since often there is not much substance after mentioning the event.

I would speculate for the broader electorate that soft news would also not be heavily used. When people do turn to soft news I would expect it to be for its entertainment value rather than a way to get the nightly headlines. I therefore would not expect soft news to have any real meaningful effects towards the general electorate's political attitudes and behaviors. I think they would be more influenced by what and how information is presented by hard news sources. I do not sense that soft news, aside from the low-awareness and low-interest demographic, holds much weight among most Americans.

Nevertheless based on the findings from my study, even though soft news does not seem to garner a huge influence, I am optimistic about what effects it does seem to have on young Americans. Although my sample did not consume large amounts of soft news, there seemed to be a correlation between those who consumed some level of soft news and civic engagement through voting, registering to vote, or partaking in political discourse among peers. These are important positive aspects because these activities form the basis of a healthy functioning democracy. In the very near future this generation of 18-24 year olds will be the group in power as legislators and politicians as well as becoming the main faction of society who will vote and decide on these legislators. Thus

it is promising for the future to see that the media viewing habit of consuming soft news does not seem to have adverse affects on the attitudes and behaviors on this youthful demographic.

Appendix A

Political Science Study

Winter, 2011

Thank you very much for your participation in this study. I would like you to answer some questions about your media habits, political outlook and beliefs, and some general background characteristics.

No one will ever be able to find out what your personal answers are, so please respond to the questions as honestly and completely as you can. Although I hope you can provide as complete information as possible, you may choose not to answer any question you find objectionable. Finally, to keep your responses anonymous, do not write your name anywhere on this questionnaire.

If you have any questions at any time, please ask me.

Once again, thank you for your participation. I very much appreciate your help with this project.

For the following questions, simply circle the number on each scale that comes closest to your opinion or, if appropriate, jot down short answers.

1. How many days a week do you watch television?

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

2. How many hours per day do you watch television?

0-1 hr 1-4 hrs 4-7hrs 7+ hrs

<u>How often do you</u> use the following media? Please indicate by checking the appropriate box.	Everyday	Few Days A Week	Once A Week	Once Per Month or Less Often	Never
3. National nightly network news on CBS, ABC or NBC					
4. News shows on cable networks (CNN, Fox or MSNBC)					
5. Local television news					
6. The Today Show, Good Morning America or The Early Show					
7. The View, Live with Regis and Kelly or Oprah					
8. The Late Show with David Letterman or The Tonight Show with Jay Leno					
9. The Daily Show with Jon Stewart or The Colbert Report					

	Everyday	Few Days A Week	Once A Week	Once Per Month or Less Often	Never
11. A daily newspaper					
12. New Magazines such as Time, U.S. News, or Newsweek					
13. News on commercial radio					
14. Political talk radio (e.g. Rush Limbaugh)					
15. Internet news websites such as Google News or Yahoo News					
16. Websites of major national newspapers (such as USA Today.com or NewYorkTimes.com)					
17. TV news websites (such as CNN.com or ABCNews.com)					

<u>Why do you use the following media? Please indicate by checking all boxes that apply.</u>	Latest Headlines	In-depth Reporting	Views And Opinions	Entertainment	Don't Watch These Programs
18. National nightly network news on CBS, ABC or NBC					
19. News shows on cable networks (CNN, Fox or MSNBC)					
20. Local television news					
21. The Today Show, Good Morning America or The Early Show					
22. The View, Live with Regis and Kelly or Oprah					
23. The Late Show with David Letterman or The Tonight Show with Jay Leno					
24. The Daily Show with Jon Stewart or The Colbert Report					
25. E! News or Entertainment Tonight					
26. A daily newspaper					
27. New Magazines such as Time, U.S. News, or Newsweek					
28. News on commercial radio					
29. Political talk radio (e.g. Rush Limbaugh)					
30. Internet news websites such as Google News or Yahoo News					
31. Websites of major national newspapers (such as USA Today.com or NewYorkTimes.com)					
32. TV news websites (such as CNN.com or ABCNews.com)					

33. Today's political leaders are as good as those in past years.

1 2 3 4 5
Strongly Agree Agree Neutral Disagree Strongly Disagree

34. There are a few bad apples, but most people in government are trying to do a good job.

1 2 3 4 5
Strongly Agree Agree Neutral Disagree Strongly Disagree

35. How much of the time do you think you can trust the government in Washington to do what is right?

1 2 3 4
Just About Always Most of the Time Only Some of the Time Never

36. Some people say they are basically content with the federal government, others say they are frustrated, and others say they are angry. Which of these best describes how you feel.

1 2 3
Basically Content Frustrated Angry

37. Which of the following statements comes closest to your views?

- a. The federal government needs very major reform
- b. The federal government is basically sound and needs only some reform
- c. The federal government doesn't need much change at all

38. There isn't much that one person can do to change the political system.

1 2 3 4 5
Strongly Agree Agree Neutral Disagree Strongly Disagree

39. In talking to people about elections, we often find that a lot of people were not able to vote because they weren't registered, they were sick, or they just did not have time. Which one of the following statements best describes you:

- a. I did not vote in the election last November
- b. I thought about voting last November, but I didn't
- c. I usually vote, but I didn't last time
- d. I am sure I voted

40. If you voted in the election for the House of Representatives last November, whom did you vote for?

- a. Democratic candidate
- b. Republican candidate
- c. Other party candidate

41. If you did not vote last November, were you registered to vote in this election?

Yes No

42. Have you ever worked/interned for a politician or participated in a politician's campaign?

Yes No

43. Do you discuss politics (i.e. campaigns, elections, important political events) with your peers (i.e. classmates, friends, etc.)?

a. Yes No

b. If you answered yes, please indicate how often.

1	2	3	4	5
Everyday	A Few Days Per Week	Once a Week	Once a Month	Less Often

44. Some people are not interested in politics, while others are quite interested. How interested are you in politics?

1	2	3	4
Not at all interested	Not very interested	Somewhat interested	Very interested

45. Which point on this scale best describes your political views?

1	2	3	4	5
Very conservative	Conservative	Moderate	Liberal	Very liberal

46. Generally speaking, do you usually think of yourself as a Republican, a Democrat, an Independent, or what?

1	2	3	4	5	6
Strong Republican	Republican	Independent	Democrat	Strong Democrat	Other [Specify:]

47. The following is a list of various public figures. After each name, please identify the job or political office that the person currently holds.

Hillary Clinton _____

Scott Brown _____

Harry Reid _____

Elena Kagan _____

Joe Biden _____

48. Which political party will become the majority party in the House of Representatives at the start of the 112th Congress?

- a. Democratic Party
- b. Republican Party

49. What is your year in college? First Year Sophomore Junior Senior

50. What is your major? _____

51. What is your age? _____

52. What is your sex? Female Male

53. What is your race? White Black Asian Hispanic Other: _____

54. Some people say they belong to a certain social class. What social class would you say your own family belongs to?

Working class

Middle class

Upper class

55. What is your family's annual income?

\$0-20,000 \$21-40,000 \$41-60,000 \$61-80,000 \$81-100,000 \$101-120,000 \$121,000+

Thank you very much for your participation.

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