

Kristen D. Landreville\*

# Satire as uncertain territory: Uncertainty expression in discussion about political satire, opinion, and news

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**Abstract:** This study integrates satire literature and uncertainty-based theories in order to introduce more theoretical organization into the political communication and discussion literature. In doing so, the main goals of this study are (1) to bring conceptual organization to various types of political messages (i.e., satire and news), (2) to show how and why satire, in particular, is linked with uncertainty, and (3) to examine the extent to which satire and news can arouse uncertainty and encourage discussion of uncertainty in political conversations. Four types of political media messages (traditional news, opinion news, juvenalian satire, and horatian satire) are used in a computer-mediated discussion experiment to answer the study's hypotheses. Results show that uncertainty differed across political messages (i.e., satire aroused more uncertainty) and uncertainty was expressed in discussion.

**Keywords:** political satire, news, media, discussion, uncertainty, experiment

## 1 Introduction

Constructive political discussion among citizens is traditionally regarded as an indicator of a healthy democracy (e.g., Habermas 1989 [1962]; Tarde 1989 [1898]). At the same time, politics bears an inherent complexity, ambiguity, and intricacy (Delli Carpini and Williams 1996) that makes it a topic ripe for uncertainty arousal. Relevant to the political humor literature is the idea that satire is a source of uncertainty and catalyst for political discussion. For instance, consider the famous *New Yorker* magazine cover with then-presidential-candidate Barack Obama and his wife being depicted as Muslim terrorists (Blitt 2008), which the Obama campaign called “tasteless and offensive” and the *New Yorker* editor called “obvious distortions” using satire

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\*Corresponding author: Kristen D. Landreville, Department of Communication & Journalism, University of Wyoming, 425 Ross Hall 1000 E. University Ave., Laramie, Wyoming 82071, USA, E-mail: krisland@gmail.com

(Gaskell 2008). And more recently, in France, the murders of satirists at the Charlie Hebdo satirical magazine, by terrorists upset about the depictions of Islam and the Prophet Muhammad, are an extreme example of how satire can touch a collective nerve and inspire discussion about politics, religion, violence, and freedom of speech (Bilefsky and de la Baume 2015). *The Onion*, a satirical newspaper, is so regularly misinterpreted as true that a website called Literally Unbelievable chronicles and re-posts people's interpersonal Facebook discussions about *Onion* stories interpreted as true. In the end, these examples highlight the potential for satire to be interpreted as inappropriate or offensive by audiences and for satire to be misinterpreted as true.

Considering that uncertainty arousal is more likely when situations are ambiguous, complex, and unpredictable (Babrow et al. 1998), and considering that satire is oftentimes defined by its openness and heavy interpretative load (Feinberg 1967), uncertainty reduction theory (URT) is suggested to study the crossroads of political discussion and mass-mediated messages about politics. The main goals of this study are (1) to bring conceptual organization to various types of political messages (i.e., satire and news), (2) to show how and why satire, in particular, is linked with uncertainty, (3) and to examine the extent to which satire and news can arouse uncertainty and encourage discussion of uncertainty in a computer-mediated discussion experiment.

## 2 A conceptual organization of political messages by ambiguity

Political messages present information about policies, political actors and their motivations, causes and consequences of political events, and many other issues. Oftentimes, these political messages can be ambiguous in their meaning and interpretation. This project conceptualizes ambiguity on two dimensions: ambiguity of message goals and ambiguity of message implications. These distinctions imply that there are various levels of openness between the message and receiver about a given message's (1) goals (i.e., why the message was created and with what intentions/motivations) and (2) implications (i.e., various interpretations of the message). When considering the two dimensions (goals and implications), four types of political messages come into view: two types of news stories (traditional news and opinion news) and two types of satire (horatian and juvenalian). These four message types are the foci of this study and are explained below.

## 2.1 Message goals and message implications in news

### 2.1.1 Message goals in news

For the first dimension, ambiguity of message goals, traditional news and opinion news are relatively low. Traditional news attempts to inform us (i.e., educate) and opinion news attempts to influence us (i.e., persuade). Professional journalism is built upon the idea that the public needs to be informed by a disinterested media in order to be active, informed participants in democracy (Schudson 1999). Objectivity, as a principle, was designed to benefit the public by providing neutral and balanced reporting from which people could base their opinions and draw their conclusions about the world (Schudson 1999). While the goal to inform seems uncontroversial, the technique of objectivity does have its critics who argue (1) objectivity is a goal that can never be achieved (e.g., Glasser 1988) and, for that matter, (2) *should not* be achieved (e.g., Hemánus 1976). Other alternatives to objective news include commentary, editorials, partisan news sources, and advocacy journalism (McQuail 1992; Schudson 1999). The goal to influence is transparent to the audience because of the lack of objectivity and presence of clearly stated opinion. Thus, while traditional news and opinion news do differ in terms of their approach to informing citizens, both traditional and opinion news are transparent in terms of their goals.

### 2.1.2 Message implications in news

The second dimension, ambiguity of message implication, represents the degree of interpretative load placed on the message recipient. In traditional news, the lack of definitiveness and clarity in its conclusions (i.e., presenting multiples sides of an issue) leaves the message more ambiguous compared to opinion news. The interpretative load, placed on the receiver to judge the story's sources and information, is fairly demanding for traditional news (McQuail 1992). The techniques that result from the goal of objectivity that defines traditional news (e.g., providing a balanced view of multiples sides of a given topic) are intended to reduce uncertainty about the world and let people decide their own opinion when given a neutral presentation of facts. However, this may not always be the case. For example, exposure to multiple opinions of an issue (a common traditional news practice) rather than one interpretation and evaluation of the issue (a common opinion news or punditry practice) may raise more questions than answers for someone. When multiple sides are presented, one must sift through and contemplate more facts. On the other hand, interpretation of opinion news can be useful for citizens because it can put the world into context for the audience. In short, the

moral implications of facts are essentially opinions on how to view the particular issue, which are more obvious in opinion news (McQuail 1992). Therefore, the argument can be made: traditional news stories can be relatively more ambiguous than opinion news in terms of message implication.

## 2.2 Message goals and message implications in satire

### 2.2.1 Message goals in satire

Compared to news, satire is relatively high on the first dimension of ambiguity of message goals. It is sometimes unclear to the audience if the goal of a piece of satire is to inform, influence, entertain, or reveal: “Although satire often contains both humor and criticism, attempts to find the precise amount of each are not particularly useful,” (Feinberg 1967: 4). The motivations of a particular piece of satire are not always clear, and objectivity of information presentation is not of primary concern (or even a matter of concern at all) (Simpson 2003). It is not humor for humor’s sake; satire has a larger purpose than to simply generate laughter (Feinberg 1967). While satires may differ in style, all satires are ambiguous in terms of the message goals and leave the audience wondering the true purpose of the satire (i.e., to inform, to influence, to reveal, to persuade, to entertain, to humor).

### 2.2.2 Message implications in satire

This study focuses on two types of satire, horatian and juvenalian, for investigation of the second dimension of message ambiguity. These two types of satire were chosen because they are clearly differentiated in the satire literature, and recent studies in political humor have investigated these types of satire as well (e.g., Holbert, Hmielowski, Jain, Lather, and Morey, 2011; LaMarre et al. 2014). Horatian satire, named for the first Roman satirist Horace (65–8 BC), is “to tell the truth, laughing” of a social and ethical problem (Highet 1962: 234). This is a softer approach compared to juvenalian satire. Juvenalian satire, named for a second early Roman satirist Juvenal (60–140 AD), is a more definitive, bitter, and angry approach to satire (Highet 1962; Sander 1971). The two types of satire have been described as opposites in terms of their techniques: “if Horace’s satire borders on comedy, Juvenal’s comes close to tragedy. If Horace’s satire evokes laughter, Juvenal’s provokes indignation, the half-smile that vanishes as the barb and lash are applied relentlessly” (Sander 1971: 254). These two types of satire possess different levels of ambiguity of implications. Horatian satire, characterized by the lack of clarity and the presence of more

gentle, subtle, and wry message delivery, makes the interpretation more ambiguous than juvenalian satire. Juvenalian satire, characterized by the sharp message delivery, makes the interpretation less ambiguous.

In short, horatian satire mirrors traditional news such that the message's implications are more ambiguous and less clear; juvenalian satire mirrors opinion news such that the message's implications are less ambiguous and clearer. In terms of the message's goals, the two forms of satire are more similar to each other (more ambiguous goals) and the two forms of news are more similar to each other (less ambiguous goals).

### 3 Political media messages and political discussion

Scholars have forwarded several theoretical approaches to political discussion (e.g., Cho et al. 2009; Kim et al. 1999). Cho et al. (2009) propose an O-S-R-O-R model that shows how political talk, messaging, and cognitive reflection mediate the influence of campaign advertising and news media use on political participation and knowledge. The O-S-R-O-R (i.e., orientation-stimulus-reasoning-orientation-response) model maintains that reasoning (e.g., intrapersonal mental elaboration, interpersonal collective consideration) is a key mediator in the step between message processing and outcome orientations. Likewise, Kim et al.'s (1999) model attempts to answer "what stimulates political conversation?" Kim et al. (1999) predict that frequency of political talk should be positively related to (1) amount of news media use and (2) perceived friendliness of one's conversational environment.

While both theoretical approaches present evidence that ultimately supports their models, there is a missing step between media exposure and political discussion – what cognitive or affective mechanisms are driving the motivation to discuss (or elaborate) on politics? In other words, *why* do political media messages spark conversation? This study addresses one possibility of what is internally motivating individuals to talk about politics with others – *uncertainty*.

### 4 Uncertainty-based theories and political discussion

In the introduction to a special *Journal of Communication* issue on uncertainty and communication, Babrow (2001) noted that uncertainty should be a

foundational and universal focus of communication research. This study applies uncertainty concepts to a new domain of communication that has not yet seen an emphasis on uncertainty – political humor and discussion. Specifically, people may want to reduce uncertainty about satire and political media messages through communication. But first, a brief summary of the fundamental uncertainty theory in communication is warranted.

Uncertainty was formally introduced to the interpersonal communication literature by Berger and Calabrese's (1975) URT and further explicated by subsequent theorizing by Berger (1979) and colleagues (Berger and Bradac 1982). Uncertainty in interpersonal communication is generally regarded as a cognitive state that relates to knowledge and understanding of the self, partner, or relationship (Berger and Bradac 1982). One of URT's basic assumptions is that people operate in a world of uncertainty and engage in social interactions that produce exchanges of information (i.e., verbal or nonverbal) under varied conditions of uncertainty (Berger 2005). This is because individuals cannot always know the effects of their communication on their communication partners, and individuals are not always sure of the intentions or internal states of their communication partners (Berger 2005). Therefore, uncertainty in social interaction exists, and there is a continuum of individual awareness/unawareness of intentions, goals, and actions in each social interaction (Berger and Bradac 1982).

Even more important, individuals are motivated to avoid uncertainty because it produces anxiety and negative feelings, so we find methods to reduce this uncertainty. Specifically, URT describes three communicative options when an individual is confronted with uncertainty: Individuals can passively (e.g., social comparison, listening, observation), actively (e.g., talking with others), and interactively (e.g., talking with the source of uncertainty) *reduce* uncertainty. After an uncertainty reduction strategy is selected and implemented, uncertainty may or may not be reduced. Using URT, this project seeks to integrate the concept of uncertainty into the political satire literature and, in a broader sense, the mass communication literature as well.

## 5 Satire and uncertainty

Delli Carpini and Williams (1996) argue that politics is fundamentally ambiguous and open for interpretation, and that political opinions can be dynamic, situationally-based, and interactive with one's surroundings (e.g., politically-oriented mass media messages). In particular, political messages that use satire

are largely defined by uncertainty. Scholars can look to English literary criticism work to help create models that account for how satire's ambiguity relates to the arousal of uncertainty from satire. Specifically, a basic triad of satirist, satirized, and satiree is discussed in the literature, and the potential for uncertainty arousal among any one of those elements exists (Bogel 2001; Knight 2004; Simpson 2003).

The *satirist* is the message composer, the *satirized* is the message target, and the *satiree* is the message recipient. In order for the satire to be comprehended and perceived as humorous, a specific interplay among the components must occur (Bogel 2001; Knight 2004; Simpson 2003). Simpson's (2003) model of satirical uptake describes the many requirements needed for processing satire. Simpson (2003) applies and adapts Habermas' criteria for communication understanding (i.e., universal validity claims) to the study of satire; in such that comprehension (i.e., satiree understands the satire), truth (i.e., satiree shares knowledge of the satirized with satirist), sincerity (i.e., satiree recognizes the sincerity and intentions of the satirist), and appropriateness (i.e., satiree recognizes the appropriateness of the satire) are essential to the satirical interaction. Simpson's model of satirical uptake is based on Habermas' Theory of Communicative Action (1984, 1987), which explains that in order for a speech act to be successfully communicated and acceptable, the speech act must possess these universal validity claims: be sincere (non-deceptive), be socially appropriate or right, and be factually true (or more broadly, representationally adequate). When the validity claims are met, social cooperation and understanding occurs. Satire, by definition, disrupts the development and acceptance of these validity claims. Moreover, social cooperation and understanding will likely not result from unsuccessful satirical uptake; this has implications for subsequent social interaction and communication such that uncertainty and lack of consensus may occur.

Clearly, many pieces must fall into place for satire to be successful. Successful processing of satire means the satiree interprets the satire in the same manner in which the satirist intended and shares the satirist's comprehension, truth, sincerity, and appropriateness claims (Simpson 2003). However, successful processing of satire does not always occur. In fact, perception of the message as satire may not even occur at all (LaMarre et al. 2009). Moreover, Simpson (2003: 156) argues that the "satirical discourse is not amenable to the sort of binarism which is calibrated through an opposition between "right" and "wrong" interpretations." The high cognitive load placed on the satiree, such as demand for prior knowledge (Young 2004), leaves much room for uncertainty.

Therefore, because “the real world of discourse is much more messy and unstable than the highly normative world encoded in the model of universal pragmatics,” interactants often *redefine* and *reshape* the communicative interaction (Simpson 2003: 163). This is especially true in the negotiation of satire, where the principles of sincerity and appropriateness are often destabilized. This destabilization may result from uncertainty arousal within the satiree. For example, the satiree is asked to distrust the satirist and assume insincerity. But sometimes, the satiree misses or is uncertain about the insincerity claim, the satire misfires, and the satire is not understood. This impacts the other validity claims of truth and appropriateness. In that case, the satiree may judge the satire to be inappropriate or offensive (Simpson 2003). Condren (2014) also notes the potential conflicting nature of satire. “One man’s satiric chastisement is another’s slanderous imputation and humor is likely to be appreciated only where the satire is liked” (Condren 2014: 663).

As noted earlier, a real-world example of such a scenario occurred during the 2008 presidential election when the *New Yorker* magazine printed a caricature of Barack Obama and his wife dressed as gun-wielding Islamic terrorists in the White House (Blitt 2008). The Obama campaign complained it was “tasteless and offensive” (Gaskell 2008). In this example, the evaluation of the appropriateness of the satire was not the analogous for *The New Yorker* editor and the Obama campaign. Destabilization was evident when the Obama campaign issued the statement, “*The New Yorker* may think, as one of their staff explained to us, that their cover is a satirical lampoon of the caricature Sen. Obama’s right-wing critics have tried to create. But most readers will see it as tasteless and offensive. And we agree,” (Gaskell 2008). Also, inside the magazine, there was no explanation for the satirical cover. Certainly, there was a lack of consensus about the satire between the satirized and satirist, which continued to impact the political discussion about the serious political issues at hand. *New Yorker* editor David Remnick responded, “The burning flag, the nationalist-radical and Islamic outfits, the fist-bump, the portrait on the wall - all of them echo one attack or another. Satire is part of what we do, and it is meant to bring things out into the open, to hold up a mirror to the absurd. And that’s the spirit of this cover,” Remnick said (Gaskell 2008).

This example highlights the potential for political satire to create uncertainty in that it can be interpreted in many ways. A person may be uncertain if the magazine and cartoonist *intended* to imply they are Muslim terrorists (uncertainty directed at the source); a person may experience uncertainty about the *implications* of the *New Yorker*’s cover (uncertainty directed at the message); a person may feel uncertain about what he or she thinks about the



appropriateness or truthfulness of the perceived political satire (uncertainty about one's own reactions); and a person may feel uncertain about what their Muslim neighbors think (uncertainty about others' reactions).

These four types of uncertainty (i.e., source-uncertainty, message-uncertainty, self-uncertainty, and other-uncertainty) that are generated by media messages can be referred to as media-based uncertainty. These four types are analogous to the self-other-relational sources of interpersonally-based uncertainty. In the interpersonal communication literature, self-uncertainty is defined as the inability to predict one's own attitudes and behavior – a lack of knowledge about oneself (Knobloch and Solomon 1999). In media-based uncertainty, self-uncertainty is still a lack of knowledge about oneself, but it is geared toward how one feels about a particular media message. In other words, media-based self-uncertainty is the individual's *own* meta-thoughts and meta-feelings about a message's meaning, interpretations, and implications. Next, other-uncertainty (or partner-uncertainty), in the interpersonal communication literature, is the perception that one is unable to predict a partner's attitudes and behavior – a lack of knowledge about the partner (Knobloch and Solomon 1999). Likewise, media-based other-uncertainty is the individual's thoughts and feelings of what another person or group thinks and feels about a message's meaning, interpretations, and implications.

And finally, relational-uncertainty is being unable to predict a relationship's future status as a unit and dyad – a lack of knowledge about an interpersonal relationship (Knobloch and Solomon 1999). Relational uncertainty predicts the well-being of relationships (Knobloch 2008; Solomon and Knobloch 2004), and a relationship's success or failure is influenced by how people communicate under relational uncertainty (Planalp et al. 1988). In media-based uncertainty, it is analogous to the interplay between source-uncertainty and message-uncertainty. Recall that source-uncertainty addresses the message creator's intentions and message-uncertainty addresses the message's descriptive or explanatory meaning. Successful uptake of satire is dependent, in part, on how an individual interprets the source's message intentions and how an individual understands the message itself. In short, the relationship between source understanding and message understanding is crucial.

As mentioned earlier, when the universal validity claims are met in message processing of satire, social cooperation and understanding occurs. However, satire, by definition, disrupts the development and acceptance of these validity claims, and social understanding will likely not result from unsuccessful satirical uptake. Thus, the satirist-satirized-satiree triad is also analogous to the self-other-relational triad in interpersonal communication. Specifically in

interpersonal relationships, “individuals who lack knowledge about their relationships may have difficulty interpreting their partner’s messages” (Knobloch 2010: 78). Likewise, in media-based uncertainty, the satiree (i.e., the message recipient, or the “self” in interpersonal terms) who lacks knowledge about the satire/satirized (i.e., the message, or the “relationship” in interpersonal terms) may have trouble interpreting the satirist’s message (i.e., the message creator, or the “partner” in interpersonal terms).

## 6 Hypotheses

Because this is an initial study in media-based uncertainty, only one type of media-based uncertainty (i.e., message-uncertainty) is examined. First, the two types of satires are compared to the two types of news.

*H1: Participants exposed to a message with more ambiguous goals (i.e., satire) will have more (a) self-reported message-uncertainty and (b) expressed message-uncertainty in a discussion compared to the participants exposed to a message with less ambiguous goals (i.e., news and opinion news).*

Likewise, the two types of messages that have relatively higher levels of ambiguity of message implications (horatian satire and traditional news) are compared to the two types of messages that have relatively lower levels of ambiguity of message implications (juvenalian satire and opinion news).

*H2: Participants exposed to a message with more ambiguous implications (i.e., horatian satire and traditional news) will have more (a) self-reported message-uncertainty and (b) expressed message-uncertainty in discussion compared to the participants exposed to a message with less ambiguous implications (i.e., juvenalian satire and opinion news).*

Finally, a link between participants’ self-reported message-uncertainty and participants’ expressed message-uncertainty during the discussion is proposed.

*H3: Self-reported message-uncertainty will positively predict message-uncertainty expressions during discussion.*

## 7 Method

An online discussion experiment was conducted to address the hypotheses. Stimuli, procedures, self-report survey measures, and the content analysis for the discussions are explained.

## 7.1 Stimuli

Four stimuli messages (horatian satire, juvenalian satire, traditional news, and opinion news) were created about the ability of young people to find jobs in a new economic climate while competing against older generations of workers. The stimuli were pretested before the final study was conducted. For control purposes, both the author name and title were made to be consistent across all stimuli during the experiment. The title was always, “A silver-haired tsunami in the new economy,” and the byline was always “Corey Larson.” To enhance experimental control, there were no visual cues that indicated what type of message the article may have been (i.e., all articles were printed on white paper in the same plain text format). These four messages were used as the independent variable in the experiment. See the Appendix for excerpts of the stimuli.

## 7.2 Procedures

Ninety-four participants were recruited from two large introductory-level communication classes at large university in the Midwestern United States. Participants attended one of 20 discussion groups on the university campus. There were five groups for each of the four conditions (opinion news  $n=23$ , horatian satire  $n=23$ , juvenalian satire  $n=23$ , traditional news  $n=25$ ). Groups ranged from three to five participants, with five-member groups comprising 15 of the 20 groups. Among the 94 participants were 41 males (43.6%) and 53 females (56.4%) whose average age was about 20.5 years old. Most participants were white ( $n=77$ , 81.9%).

Participants were separated in different small computer rooms, so no participants interacted face-to-face at any time. First, participants completed a short survey that asked about demographics and political orientation. Then, participants read the stimuli assigned to their group. Next, the participants filled out a pre-discussion survey that included manipulation check questions and asked about their uncertainty about the article they read. Finally, participants engaged in a 30-minute computer-mediated discussion using Google Talk software.

The moderator (the researcher) and all participants were in the same online conversation so everyone could see each other’s statements. The conversations were private (not a public chat room), synchronous (live and in real-time), and text-only (no avatars or screenshots of participants). Each discussion started with the question, “people can have a host of reactions to the article you just read. What thoughts and feelings do you have about the article?” The purpose of

this initial broad question was to provide the atmosphere for uncertainty expression to occur, without the moderator directly asking participants about their questions or confusion. If uncertainty expression did occur, then the moderator probed the thoughts and feelings behind that expression by asking participants to explain themselves and/or help the group understand where they were coming from. When participants had differing opinions, evaluations, thoughts, and emotional reactions to the article, the moderator intervened with questions about potential reasons for disagreement.

While the participants helped guide the flow of the discussion and the moderator probed at particular points of interest, all conditions and groups were asked six standard questions that were designed to address each of the four types of media-based uncertainty. The purpose of always posing these questions across sessions was to keep the discussions as similar as possible (within the bounds of different stimuli and participants). At least one question for each type of media-based uncertainty was posed to participants. The location of these standard questions in the discussion changed across groups, depending on the natural flow and content of discussion. When a particular type of media-based uncertainty type did not emerge naturally and the discussion was close to conclusion, the moderator would then pose any remaining questions.

It is important to note that even though the moderator guided the discussion, participants were encouraged to talk among one another, to directly address specific comments, and to ask questions. In general, the moderator's purpose was to probe the natural discussion when instances of uncertainty arise, while also ensuring that the six standard uncertainty questions were asked. The average number of times that the moderator intervened during the 20 discussions was between 12 and 13 times. This intervention average includes every time the moderator typed a message to the group (i.e., statements, requests for clarifications, probing, and original questions). There was no significant difference in moderator intervention (i.e., frequency of moderator comments) among the conditions,  $F(3, 16) = 0.569$ ,  $p = 0.64$  (horatian  $M = 12.6$ , juvenalian  $M = 12.0$ , news  $M = 14.2$ , opinion  $M = 12.6$ ).

## 7.3 Measures

### 7.3.1 Exogenous variables

Gender, age, political ideology of social issues, political ideology of economic issues, communication apprehension in group discussion (six items from the communication apprehension scale by McCroskey 1982), and tolerance of

ambiguity (nine items from the need for closure scale by Kruglanski et al. 1993) were measured in the initial demographics and political orientation survey (before participants read the stimulus and began discussion). These particular measures were selected because of their potential to impact an individual's participation in a group discussion about a political topic.

Before hypothesis testing, a series of ANOVAs were run to determine if there were differences among stimuli groups on these variables. Additionally, an ANOVA was run to test for differences among stimuli groups for the length of the discussion (i.e., the number lines of group chat in Google Talk). The only attribute that was significantly different among stimuli groups was political ideology of economic issues,  $F(3, 90) = 3.07$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ,  $\omega^2 = 0.062$ . Thus, political ideology of economic issues was controlled in all of the subsequent hypothesis testing. Political ideology of economic issues was measured with one question that asked, "how liberal or conservative do you consider yourself to be on economic issues?" Options ranged from 1 (very conservative) to 7 (very liberal).

### 7.3.2 Message-uncertainty

Participants reported their understanding of the respective article in their responses to five items on a (1) strongly agree to (9) strongly disagree scale. The five items were, "It is clear to me what this article is trying to say," "I am confident that I am interpreting the information and arguments in the article correctly," "I am certain I understand the implications of the information and arguments in the article," "I don't really understand the implications of this (reversed)," and "The message this article is trying to send is clear." An index was created from these five items,  $M = 4.02$ ,  $SD = 1.67$ ,  $\alpha = 0.90$ .

In addition, analyzing uncertainty expressions during the discussion about the message was another manner in which to measure uncertainty. Thus, a content analysis of the discussions was conducted.

### 7.3.3 Content analysis of discussions

The author developed the codebook using both theoretical reasoning and the actual discussion data to guide the operationalization of the concepts. First, before the type of the uncertainty was established (e.g., whether it was source- or message-uncertainty), an uncertainty expression had to be defined. An uncertainty expression was defined as a question or non-question uncertainty expression. Specifically, question-asking was conceptually defined as

expressions that attempted to retrieve information from others (either punctuated with a question mark or not). Typical question-asking words were considered who, what, where, when, why, how, and can. As for non-question uncertainty expressions, the discussions themselves assisted heavily in the development of this category. Even though the author already had several common phrases of uncertainty in mind before codebook development (I'm uncertain, I don't know, I'm not sure, I'm confused), four discussions were reviewed (i.e., one of each stimuli message) to ensure all non-question uncertainty expressions were included in the codebook. This process resulted in fourteen additional expressions added to the codebook. Now that an uncertainty expression was defined, the type will be defined.

For analysis of uncertainty expressions, conceptual definitions were provided in the codebook, followed by the operational definitions, and several examples for that type of uncertainty. For example, message-uncertainty was defined conceptually as the message's descriptive or explanatory meaning. Operationally, message-uncertainty was defined as any questions or uncertainty expressions directed toward understanding the meaning, interpretation, or implications of the message (i.e., either specific parts of the article or the article in general). For a copy of the codebook, please contact the author.

Two undergraduate research assistants enrolled at the author's university conducted the content analysis. Coder training and coding was conducted in a two-step process. First, the online group discussions had to be unitized, so coders were first trained on unitization. Unitization involves identifying the key concepts to the study – that is, the concepts that will be later categorized and coded. In this case, participants' individual uncertainty expressions during the online discussions had to be identified so coders could later categorize them. Coders were instructed *not* to categorize the uncertainty expression. Rather, coders were merely instructed to highlight the expression on a hard copy of the transcript. Once coders finished this task (about three days), unitizing reliability was calculated using Guetzkow's  $U$  (Guetzkow 1950). Guetzkow's  $U$  is the difference between the number of units coded by coder A and the number of units coded by coder B, divided by the total number of identified units coded by both coders. It is a measure of disagreement and a calculation of less than 0.05 is considered strong. It is a common reliability estimate for unitizing small group discussions (e.g., Bonito and Lambert 2005; Pavitt and Johnson 1999). Unitizing reliability was highly reliable at  $U = 0.01$ .

Moving forward, the two coders were given the same four discussion group transcripts from which they did unitizing reliability. Coders then categorized each uncertainty expression by type (i.e., source-, message-, self-, or other-uncertainty). Once coders finished this task (about three days), intercoder reliability was

assessed on these four transcripts. Krippendorff's *alpha* coefficient served as the reliability estimate, which accounts for chance agreement and number of coding categories. An SPSS macro, developed by Hayes and Krippendorff (2007), was utilized in all reliability analyses. Results show that coders exceeded the recommended minimum reliability level of 0.667 needed for interpretation of the data (Krippendorff 2004):  $\alpha = 0.80$ . The two coders then independently coded the remainder of the transcripts.

## 8 Results

### 8.1 Manipulation checks

There are two manipulation checks because of the two dimensions of ambiguity. For the ambiguity of message goals, a question at the end of the post-article/pre-discussion survey that asked participants to identify what type of message they had just read. Participants could categorize the message as either satire/humor, news/opinion, none of those options, or don't know. Unsuccessful categorization or recognition of satire is a defining attribute of satire – people are not sure about the author's goals and the label of "satire" may not be applied to the message. Indeed, results show that the satirical pieces were significantly more likely to be incorrectly categorized than the news/opinion pieces,  $\chi^2(1) = 3.740$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ,  $\varphi^2 = 0.040$ . This shows support for the manipulation of ambiguity of the message's goals. At the same time, perceptions of humor were significantly higher in the satirical messages compared to the news/opinion pieces,  $F(1, 90) = 44.267$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ,  $\omega^2 = 0.320$ . This reveals that even though the participants had a harder time identifying the satirical messages as satire, news, or opinion, participants still found the satirical messages more humorous than the news and opinion articles.

The second dimension of ambiguity relates to the message's implications. For this dimension, participants were asked how confusing and unclear the article's arguments and information were on a scale of (1) "strongly disagree" to (9) "strongly agree." These two items comprised a confusion index,  $r = 0.850$ ,  $p < 0.001$ . For this manipulation check, a single-factor analysis of variance (ANOVA) revealed statistically significant differences in the confusion of the article by stimuli,  $F(3, 89) = 6.27$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ,  $\omega^2 = 0.145$ . In regard to differences between high ambiguity of implications (i.e., the horatian satire and news article) and low ambiguity of implications (i.e., the juvenalian satire and opinion news), a contrast was conducted, grouping the horatian satire and news article

and comparing that to the juvenalian satire and opinion news. This analysis revealed that the horatian satire and news group ( $M = 3.67$ ) had higher a confusion index than the juvenalian satire and opinion news group ( $M = 2.91$ ),  $t(89) = 1.99$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ,  $\omega^2 = 0.041$ .

## 8.2 Hypotheses testing

H1a addressed the extent to which the level of ambiguity of message goals can influence pre-discussion, self-reported message-uncertainty. An ANCOVA was conducted; the independent variable, or fixed factor, was ambiguity of message goals, and the dependent variable was pre-discussion message-uncertainty, with political economic ideology the covariate. Results show that self-reported message-uncertainty was significantly higher in the satire conditions ( $M = 4.45$ ,  $SD = 1.71$ ) than the news conditions ( $M = 3.61$ ,  $SD = 1.55$ ),  $F(1, 92) = 6.25$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ,  $\omega^2 = 0.055$ . Thus, H1a was supported.

H1b posited that participants exposed to a message with more ambiguous goals (i.e., satire) will have more message-uncertainty expressions in the subsequent discussion compared to the participants with exposure to a message with less ambiguous goals (i.e., news/opinion). Because expressed uncertainty may be influenced by group placement during the discussions, an ANOVA was examined to determine the influence of group placement. Results from the ANOVA showed that the discussion group did significantly influence expressed message-uncertainty,  $F(19) = 2.713$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ,  $\omega^2 = 0.233$ . Therefore, group placement was controlled in the subsequent linear mixed-effects modeling analysis for H1b. The dependent variable was message-uncertainty, the fixed component was ambiguity of message goals, and the random component was the group. Indeed, messages with high levels of ambiguity of message goals produced more message-uncertainty expressions (satire  $M = 1.22$ ,  $SD = 1.38$ ) than messages with low levels (news/opinion  $M = 0.58$ ,  $SD = 0.89$ ),  $F(df = 1, 18.985) = 4.421$ ,  $p < 0.05$ . There was no group by stimuli interaction, Wald  $Z = 1.436$ ,  $p = 0.151$ . Thus, H1b was supported.

H2a addressed the extent to which the level of ambiguity of message implications can influence pre-discussion message-uncertainty. Again, an ANOVA was used. Results show that self-reported message-uncertainty was significantly higher in the conditions with higher levels of ambiguity of message implications (i.e., horatian satire and news;  $M = 4.38$ ,  $SD = 1.75$ ) than the conditions with lower levels of ambiguity of message implications (juvenalian satire and opinion news;  $M = 3.64$ ,  $SD = 1.51$ ),  $F(1, 91) = 5.97$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ,  $\omega^2 = 0.050$ . Thus, H2a was supported.



H2b predicted more message-uncertainty expressions for messages with high levels of ambiguity of message implication. Because group placement did significantly influence expressed message-uncertainty, it was controlled in the subsequent linear mixed-effects modeling analysis. The dependent variable was message-uncertainty, the fixed component was ambiguity of message implication, and the random component was the group. Results showed there was no significant difference of message-uncertainty,  $F(df = 1, 18.866) = 0.902$ ,  $p = 0.653$ , (horatian/news  $M = 1.00$ ,  $SD = 1.41$ ; juvenalian/opinion  $M = 0.76$ ,  $SD = 0.90$ ) between messages with high and low ambiguity of message implication. There was no interaction with group, Wald  $Z = 1.686$ ,  $p = 0.092$ . H2b was not supported.

H3 investigated the influence of pre-discussion, self-reported message-uncertainty on expressed message-uncertainty during the subsequent conversations. An OLS regression model was run with expressed message-uncertainty as the dependent variable, pre-discussion message-uncertainty as the independent variable, and political ideology of economic issues, stimuli, and group placement as control variables. Results showed that pre-discussion message-uncertainty was a significant positive predictor of expressed message-uncertainty during conversation, unstandardized  $B = 0.139$ ,  $SE = 0.076$ ,  $t = 1.83$ , one-tailed  $p < 0.05$ . Thus, H3 was supported. Table 1 shows the pre-discussion uncertainty means across all four stimuli, as well as the frequency of uncertainty expressions across stimuli.

**Table 1:** Pre-discussion uncertainty and frequencies of uncertainty expressions during discussions.

	Type of Article				
	Horatian	Juvenalian	News	Opinion	All
Pre-Discussion Message-Uncertainty	5.08	3.82	3.74	3.46	4.02
Total Message-Uncertainty Expressions	37	18	11	17	83

Note: Higher means denote higher uncertainty levels on the 9-point scale. Horatian  $N = 23$ , Juvenalian  $N = 23$ , News  $N = 25$ , Opinion  $N = 23$ .

## 9 Discussion

To review, this study conceptually organized different types of political messages, including satire, news, and opinion. It bridged seemingly disparate literatures of mass media, political discussion, interpersonal communication, and satire, and it

injected interpersonal communication theory (i.e., uncertainty) into the political discussion, satire, and mass media literatures; these are all objectives recommended by scholars in these fields (see Eveland et al. 2011; Nabi and Oliver 2010). Generally speaking, results show that (1) uncertainty about mass-mediated political messages was aroused and expressed, and (2) uncertainty can differ across political messages with varying levels of ambiguity. Participants experienced uncertainty arousal, and more so with the messages that possessed higher levels of ambiguity of message goals (i.e., H1a was supported) and message implications (i.e., H2a was supported). Participants also expressed uncertainty significantly more in the discussions about the satires (i.e., higher levels of ambiguity of message goals; H1b was supported). Yet, participants did not differ in their uncertainty expressions when messages were grouped by ambiguity of message implications (i.e., H2b was not supported). These results, and a quick glance at Table 1, show that the main driver of uncertainty arousal and expression seemed to be the horatian satire. This suggests that perhaps a continuum of ambiguity of message goals and a continuum of ambiguity of message implications would be a more appropriate conceptualization than the categorical approach offered in this manuscript. Nevertheless, distinguishing among different types of satires is very important in future political entertainment research (see Holbert et al. 2011; LaMarre et al. 2014).

The link between cognitive uncertainty and expressed uncertainty during discussion was also assessed, and there was support for this link; see results for H3. Participants used discussion as a way to express their feelings and thoughts of uncertainty that they experienced when reading the various political messages. Future research should examine if discussion about media-based uncertainty can reduce the initial cognitive uncertainty that participants experienced.

This work integrated mass media and interpersonal communication, which scholars have recently called for (Benoit and Holbert 2010). Two dimensions of message ambiguity were outlined in order to provide nuance to the study of satire and news. Specifically, ambiguity of message goals and ambiguity of message implications were described in relation to satire and news. Both dimensions of ambiguity were independently conceptualized and manipulated in the discussion group experiment. Furthermore, four types of media-based uncertainty were proposed: source-uncertainty, message-uncertainty, self-uncertainty, and other-uncertainty. This study examined message-uncertainty as a first step in this research program.

Another contribution of this study is to the political communication literature. Current theories and lines of inquiry into political discussion focus on mass media as motivation for discussion. While mass media certainly play a large role at initiating political discussion, I offered a specific cognitive process (uncertainty) in

response to mass-mediated messages as a potential influence on political discussion. Indeed, results revealed that uncertainty was expressed during discussion.

Particularly important to the political humor literature is the finding that satires aroused more uncertainty than news and opinion. In the end, there are no interpretative rules bestowed on the satiree by the political satire. Indeed, the satirist does not articulate clearly the exact message he or she is attempting to convey to the satiree. Yet, the satiree must think in certain ways in order to understand the satirical message (Knight 2004). “The problem of contextual knowledge is complicated by the openness of satiric reference. Imaginative literature is relatively indeterminate; its contextual meaning is supplied by readers” (Knight 2004: 46). This notion is similar to Simpson’s (2003) requirement of comprehension and similar to scholars’ arguments that the audience needs a certain level of knowledge to understand political humor (Young 2004). Thus, uncertainty arousal within the satiree about the message’s implications is a plausible cognitive reaction to satire. When this occurs, there is a destabilization of the basic triad of satirist, satirized, and satire, and universal validity claims are violated, which can then initiate unintended reactions by the satirist, such as audience members taking offense to the satire. Future research in satire should consider uncertainty-based theories for theoretical direction in explaining, predicting, and understanding the large array of perceptions, behaviors, and attitudes toward satire.

## 9.1 Limitations

One set of limitations concerns the stimuli. A single political issue – the economy – with a single focus – the ability of young people to find jobs – was chosen as the topic for all the stimuli. Many scholars advocate multiple message designs in media effects research (e.g., Jackson and Jacobs 1983), and there is certainly value in future research that uses multiple messages to investigate the concepts examined in this study. Likewise, further limitations exist due to the prioritization of experimental control over ecological validity. For example, it is likely an uncommon occurrence that participants would encounter a media message with merely an author’s name and an article title, without any larger media organization identified. This lack of context in the experiment may have inflated uncertainty arousal and expression. However, today’s diverse and extensive media environment, especially on the Internet, may provide more opportunities for individuals to encounter unknown and difficult-to-classify media sources. Nevertheless, in a future study, it would be worthwhile to provide participants a message with an identified media organization. Additionally, experimental control over the online discussions also took precedence when determining the

composition of the discussion groups. Individuals who did not know one another were used as participants in the discussion, which may have created artificially high levels of uncertainty.

A final limitation deals with statistical power. Post hoc power analyses on all of the results were conducted, using G\*Power 3.1.9.2 (Faul et al. 2007), in order to assess on the observed power of the study. In general, the power levels ranged from a low of 0.56 to a high of 0.67, with a “medium” effect size of 0.25 (Cohen 1988) and  $\alpha$  error probability of 0.05. If future studies wanted to reach the recommended power level of 0.80 (Cohen 1988), with a similar effect size of 0.25, then the sample size should increase to a total of 128 participants. This would provide stimuli conditions of 32 participants, rather than the 23–24 participants that were used in the current study.

Even with the limitations noted above, this research project has made solid ground in advancing the literature in political humor, political discussion, and uncertainty. It brought an interpersonal communication perspective – URT – to political discussion and political media research. Future research in understanding, explaining, and experimentally testing political satire should strongly consider URT and other uncertainty-based theories. To conclude, this study examined actual communication patterns about several types of political media messages, and results showed that political messages, especially satire, can be uncertain territory for citizens.

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## Appendix

**Table 2:** Excerpts from stimuli messages.

Stimuli Message	Excerpt
News	During past recessions, older workers simply would have retired rather than search want ads and apply for jobs, said John Beard, director of the Department of Ageing and Life Course at the World Health Organization. “But these days, with outstanding mortgages, bank loans and high medical bills, many of them cannot afford to be out of work,” Beard said. “Many seniors complain that federal spending programs designed to help them, such as Social Security and Medicare, are helpful and critical, but aren’t enough.”
Opinion	And finally, old people are actually taking away jobs. During past recessions, old workers simply would have retired rather than search want ads and apply for jobs. But these days, with outstanding mortgages, bank loans and high medical bills, many of them can’t afford to be out of work. Many seniors complain that Social Security and Medicare, though helpful and critical, aren’t enough. So now while the oldsters are still pulling in that monthly government check, they are also competing with us young people for the same limited number of jobs.
Horatian	In a joint agreement between Democrats, Republicans and a very eager set of business leaders, the elderly are being phased out over a five-year period. That’s right. The bull market is coming back, baby! With the “elder round-up” being implemented in controlled stages, our leaders thus have solved the problem of employees whose skill set has gone out of date. At the same time, by the way, they’ve also fixed Social Security, solved the health care crisis and prevented about 70 percent of our low-speed traffic accidents.
Juvenalian	See, the New Economy is all about streamlining and you are a potential speed bump on the progress highway. The workforce of the New Economy is being downsized. One computer is doing the job of six of you. Competition amongst you and workers of all ages is on the rise. It’s like GLADIATOR but with resumes and portfolios instead of swords and those cool axe things. To survive, you are going to need a strategy. I have that strategy: kill everyone over 65. I told you it was like GLADIATOR. I know: “How Swiftian of me!” But this is no modest proposal. Kill them.

Note: For the full-length stimuli messages, please visit <http://kristenlandreville.com/manuscript001.pdf>.

## Bionote

### **Kristen D. Landreville**

Kristen D. Landreville is an assistant professor in the Department of Communication and Journalism at the University of Wyoming. Her research examines the communication and processing of political satire, entertainment, and news, as well as political discussion and emerging media.