

# LAUGHING MATTERS

**SAMANTHA BEE, COMEDY  
& THE REFUGEE CRISIS**

**CATY BORUM  
CHATTOO**

**CENTER FOR MEDIA  
& SOCIAL IMPACT  
SCHOOL OF COMMUNICATION  
AMERICAN UNIVERSITY**

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**A REPORT OF THE LAUGHTER EFFECT PROJECT**

**CMSi**  
CENTER FOR MEDIA & SOCIAL IMPACT

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## ABOUT THE PROJECT

*Laughing Matters: Samantha Bee, Comedy & the Refugee Crisis* is the third report in a three-part investigation about comedy and social influence, *The Laughter Effect*. All were directed and written by **Caty Borum Chattoo**, and produced under the auspices of the **Center for Media & Social Impact at American University's School of Communication**. All three projects were funded by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. The first project, *Entertainment, Storytelling & Social Change in Global Poverty*, an experimental design study that examined the persuasive impact of the comedic documentary film, *Stand Up Planet*, was published in February 2015; it was funded under the auspices of Learning for Action, LLC. Borum Chattoo also served as the executive producer and producer of the documentary, which premiered in 2014 in the United States and India. The second project, *The Laughter Effect: The [Serious] Role of Comedy in Social Change*, provides a broad synthesis of research and case studies about comedy and its role in social change, and provides recommendations to strategists about the use of comedy for social change. **Lauren Feldman, PhD**, Associate Professor in the School of Communication and Information at Rutgers University, served as an advisor for this study. Smith Geiger, LLC, facilitated sample recruitment and survey facilitation and charts. The reports are available at [www.cmsimpact.org](http://www.cmsimpact.org).

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## ABOUT THE CENTER FOR MEDIA & SOCIAL IMPACT

**The Center for Media & Social Impact (CMSI)** at American University's School of Communication, based in Washington, D.C., is an innovation lab and research center that studies, showcases and creates media for social impact. Focusing on independent, documentary, entertainment, and public media, CMSI bridges boundaries between scholars, producers, and communication practitioners who work across media production, media impact, public policy, and audience engagement. The Center produces resources for the field and research; convenes conferences and events; and works collaboratively to understand and design media that matter. [www.cmsimpact.org](http://www.cmsimpact.org)

# HIGHLIGHTS

In an increasingly polarized information climate, entertainment media may be vital in public engagement around serious social issues—to attract attention, to amplify the reach of journalism, and to cut through the clutter. Journalism, in its contemporary forms—including investigative journalism, solutions journalism and explanatory journalism—continues to play a vital role to ensure global citizens are aware, informed and engaged in serious social issues. And yet, journalism alone may not reach all people.

But what about the potential influence of comedy? With its contributing narrative frames of hope and optimism, comedy may play a real role in fueling social change by encouraging people to seek out and share funny topical information. Once they have arrived at the comedy, they may stumble across meaningful or even new information and insights about social issues.

This study compares audience responses to two short-form video clips focused on the contemporary Syrian refugee scenario: (1) *Full Frontal with Samantha Bee*, and (2) *CNN News*. For a mix of civic organizations, humanitarian groups, foundations and other social justice advocates, major implications of this research include:

**A varied media menu—serious news, but also entertainment and comedy—that infuses hope and inspiration can be useful in terms of spurring action and audience engagement.** Comedy viewers engage thoughtfully with the content. They devote real mental effort into their viewing experiences, and they see comedy content as “informative,” not merely entertaining. Attitudes of empathy toward refugees shift noticeably after watching comedy.

**Comedy effects are retained over time.** Two weeks after viewing, viewers’ positive attitude shifts about refugees last, indicating more than a one-time effect. In this way, comedy’s potential “sleeper effect”<sup>1</sup>—its memorable qualities—can be particularly compelling for complex social issues.

**Comedy may be particularly meaningful in areas such as empathy (vs. hard facts).** Generated thoughtfully, as part of an overt public engagement effort, comedy that’s designed and permitted to be entertaining and funny can then attract attention to tough social issues.

**Comedy and news work symbiotically.** Comedy doesn’t need to be seen as an “either/or” proposition with news in terms of portrayals of social issues. Instead, comedy can provide needed positive frames that can encourage public engagement alongside serious news.

**Comedy can be useful for engaging audiences who are not as engaged with news.** Favorable public opinion is a powerful connector to social change over time, so reaching hard-to-reach individuals is a vital pursuit. For viewers who are not engaging with news content, comedy may be the most useful storytelling mechanism of all. For individuals who do not regularly engage with news, comedy appears to have a greater impact than news on personal attitudes about refugees (on some key measures such as, for example, willingness to welcome refugees into their communities, belief that refugees are people like them). Notably, for individuals who are “low news consumers,” watching the comedy—or watching comedy and news—was associated with greater positive attitude shifts about refugees over time, but this effect is not seen for low news consumers who watch only news. The takeaway: News alone won’t get them, but perhaps comedy will.



With the premiere of her TBS show, *Full Frontal with Samantha Bee*, comic Samantha Bee made history as the sole woman host in the U.S. late-night-satire genre.

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# INTRODUCTION

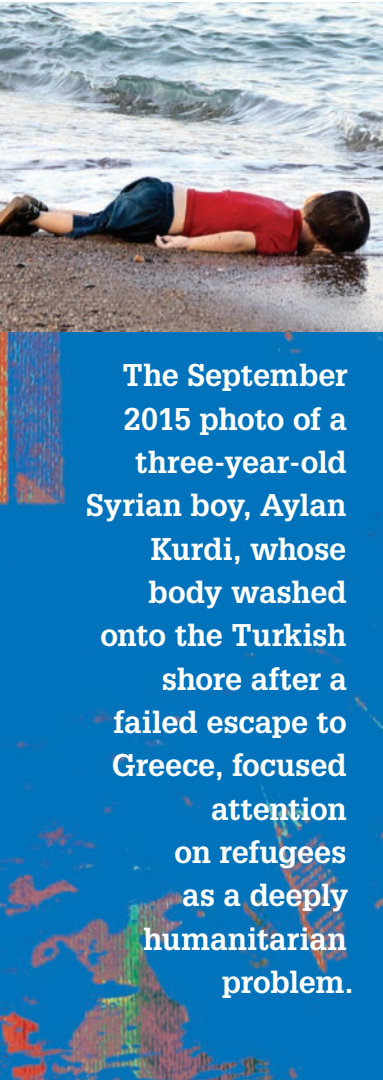
## A COMPLEX GLOBAL ISSUE IN A POLARIZED ENVIRONMENT

In March 2011, life in Syria changed dramatically. A peaceful people's protest against the Syrian Arab Republic government quickly devolved into conflict and violence over the following months,<sup>2</sup> forcing thousands of Syrians to flee and bestowing upon them a new label: "refugee."<sup>3</sup> Two years after the events of the 2011 Arab Spring, according to the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR), the total number of displaced Syrians living as refugees reached one million.<sup>4</sup> Against the backdrop of the looming threat of ISIS and extremism, much of the U.S.'s and Europe's Middle East media coverage relied on sensationalism and anti-Muslim stereotypes while failing to fully cover the looming refugee situation.<sup>5</sup>

In recent years, as Syrians continue to flee conflict and violence, rhetoric pivoted in the United States, as the 2016 presidential candidates addressed the refugee scenario, occasionally framing the crisis as linked with terrorism.<sup>6</sup> Not only has the global response been labeled a "catastrophic failure" by Amnesty International,<sup>7</sup> but sympathy toward refugees is not easy to find in the United States, at least according to public opinion data. In November 2015, according to a Gallup poll, 60 percent of Americans indicated their opposition to plans for the U.S. to take in 10,000 refugees; the issue stance breaks down sharply along partisan lines, with 84 percent of Republicans opposing such plans, compared with 40 percent of Democrats.<sup>8</sup> Formal solutions to the refugee scenario range from resettlement in the United States and other countries, to additional financial resources from donor countries. Thus, the role of public attitudes and beliefs about refugees is important, given the symbiotic relationship between favorable public opinion and policy.<sup>9</sup>

## THE ROLE OF MEDIA & NARRATIVE

For a humanitarian crisis compounded by communication challenges, the role of media and narrative is key. Indeed, several years into the crisis, the September 2015 photo of a three-year-old Syrian boy, Aylan Kurdi, whose body washed onto the Turkish shore after a failed escape to Greece, focused attention on refugees as a deeply humanitarian problem<sup>10</sup> and increased news coverage about their plight.<sup>11</sup> Journalism organizations continue to retain a global spotlight on the issue, and humanitarian organizations like Save the Children continue to raise awareness and encourage public support for refugees through communication campaigns and video storytelling.<sup>12 13</sup> As with other global humanitarian challenges, supportive organizations and public engagement campaigns serve in symbiotic public awareness roles alongside journalists and serious news coverage.



The September 2015 photo of a three-year-old Syrian boy, Aylan Kurdi, whose body washed onto the Turkish shore after a failed escape to Greece, focused attention on refugees as a deeply humanitarian problem.

## THE [POTENTIAL] ROLE OF COMEDY

From a U.S. audience perspective, what role might comedy play in an increasingly serious and polarized social issue as complex as the Syrian refugee crisis? Comedy, a form of media entertainment not usually considered in overt public engagement strategies around global social issues,<sup>14</sup> may serve an increasingly valuable role.<sup>15</sup> As detailed in the CMSI report, *The Laughter Effect: The [Serious] Role of Comedy in Social Change*, comedy may be compelling as a media mechanism to reach new audiences and complement serious news media coverage, particularly in today's cluttered media environment.<sup>16</sup> In other political and civic issues, comedy has been shown to cut through the noise and attract attention to serious issues, encourage sharing and message amplification, encourage conversation around taboo topics, and encourage empathy.<sup>17</sup> Comedy may have a kind of persuasive sleeper effect, whereby audiences can recall a serious message over time due its comedic presentation.<sup>18</sup> And finally, comedy and news media may work together in a powerful symbiotic fashion, given comedy's potential gateway effect, in which experiencing social issue information through a comedic portrayal may open a door to seeking serious information through news.<sup>19</sup> In other words, comedy may not necessarily be best positioned as a sole pursuit in terms of public engagement around a complex, dire social issue such as the Syrian refugee crisis, but it is worth consideration as a new idea to work alongside serious journalism.

### RESEARCH OBJECTIVES & QUESTIONS

The purpose of this research is to understand how a U.S. audience is engaged, motivated and changed—in terms of knowledge, attitudes, beliefs and possible actions about a challenging social problem (the current Syrian refugee crisis) after watching a short-form comedy video and a short-form journalism video on the topic. The research questions included:

- **Can comedy act as an effective media vehicle to encourage positive attitudes, perceptions and planned actions in response to a serious social challenge (the Syrian refugee crisis)?**
- **How do viewers respond to both comedic and serious journalistic treatments of the issue?**
- **What is the impact on an audience when comedy and journalism are paired together?**
- **Over time, is the effect of viewing a comedic treatment of a serious social issue retained?**



# METHODOLOGY

## OVERVIEW

To assess the overall audience impact of both a comedy short-form video and a serious journalistic short-form video, this study uses a pre-viewing and post-viewing experimental design with a national sample. Respondents were first recruited to take an online survey. Before watching any videos, they were asked a series of questions designed to measure their baseline awareness and perceptions of topics related to refugees and other salient global social issues. These respondents were then randomly assigned to one of four experimental conditions:

1. **Comedy: 316 people watched the comedy video (Full Frontal with Samantha Bee video)**
2. **News: 316 people watched the news video (CNN News video)**
3. **Comedy Priming News: 315 people watched the comedy video first, and the news video next**
4. **News Priming Comedy: 314 people watched the news video first, and the comedy video next**

Following the assigned viewing, all respondents were asked a series of follow-up survey questions designed to gauge their responses to the videos they watched and to uncover any shifts in knowledge, attitudes, and intended behaviors. Finally, all viewers were invited to answer brief final follow-up questions two weeks later in order to gauge effects over time.

## VIEWING CONDITIONS: COMEDY & NEWS

The recruited audience watched one of two (or both) online videos focused on the Syrian refugee crisis. Both videos included statistics and facts about the core social issue, and both featured women as the dominant spokespersons/characters in their respective videos' narratives.

**Comedy Video:** *Full Frontal with Samantha Bee*, segment focused on Syrian refugees

**Aired:** February 19, 2016 on TBS

**Video duration:** 7 minutes

**URL:** [www.youtube.com/watch?v=s5y70oKbAKY](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s5y70oKbAKY)

**Synopsis:** Comedy news host Samantha Bee opens the video with a comedic monologue in front of a studio audience, in which she satirically presents Syrian refugees with the question of "who shouldn't be in America?" She cuts to news clips and uses voiceover to provide the current facts about the number of displaced Syrians. The majority of the video features Bee on location at a refugee camp in Jordan, which she sets up comically with the question, "I traveled...to ask them, 'who *are* you?'" In the video, Syrian refugees living in the camp—including families and children—interact and laugh with her, and they speak to her on camera. Bee also intercuts a quick-cutting montage of American pundits who claim Syrian refugees are members of terrorist organization ISIS, as well as a studio interview with Jordan's International Organization for Migration, Kate Dorsh, an expert on the refugee resettlement process. The video also includes a clip of Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau as he warmly welcomes a Syrian family to their new resettled home in Canada.

**News Video:** CNN segment titled *Syrian Refugees Find Shelter in Middle East Nations*

**Aired:** September 1, 2015 on CNN

**Video duration:** 6 minutes, 57 seconds

**URL:** [www.cnn.com/videos/tv/2015/09/01/exp-syrian-refugee-crisis-in-the-middle-east.cnn](http://www.cnn.com/videos/tv/2015/09/01/exp-syrian-refugee-crisis-in-the-middle-east.cnn)

**Synopsis:** Two CNN anchors open the video in studio by providing context about the Syrian conflict, along with the most recent statistics and facts about the Syrian refugee crisis (number of Syrians displaced by conflict, the current number of Syrian refugees, and the number of Syrians killed over the past few years), presented with graphic text superimposed over still photographs of the destruction and physical deterioration of the area. For the majority of the video, the anchors interview Andrea Koppel, who is presented as “vice president of global engagement and policy” for Mercy Corps, a global humanitarian organization. From an in-studio interview, Koppel provides details about the challenges facing refugee families who need resettlement in other countries, including medical and education challenges impacting children; the images intercut between her interview and video images of Syrian refugee children and families walking over destroyed streets, picking over rubble. Syrian refugees themselves did not speak on camera as interviewees or subjects.

## ONLINE SAMPLING & SURVEY PROTOCOL

This study was conducted entirely online, using samples drawn from industry-leading market research sample vendors, including Survey Sampling International (SSI), Research Now, and Protégé. This distribution of sample vendors is used intentionally as a way of mitigating any potential audience biases that may be present in any one online sample provider.

A total of 1,261 respondents were recruited for the initial pre- and post-viewing survey. Of the total sample, 885 completed the delayed re-contact questions, and 1,261 completed the pre- and post-viewing survey. All respondents were U.S.-based adults between the ages of 18 and 64, with age, gender, and ethnic quotas implemented to ensure a U.S. Census-distributed sample. This research was conducted between August 10 and September 1, 2016, with an average length of interview, including the video viewing, of 35 minutes (average interview length for the delayed re-contact was just under five minutes).

The survey included approximately 65-70 questions in total, with respondents randomly assigned to viewing conditions. T-testing on mean responses of viewers in both categories demonstrates the efficacy of this randomization: We found no statistically significant differences between the mean scores of respondents in the two groups until after exposure to the stimulus.\*

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\* We used a wide range of univariate and multivariate approaches to our analysis of the survey data: Comparisons between mean responses among viewers of the two documentaries and among viewers of the same film (when questions were asked both pre- and post-stimulus) were conducted using T-Tests, with a 95% confidence interval ( $p < 0.05$ ) as the basis for significance. Comparisons between the pre-/post- perceptual shifts among those who watched comedy vs. news were conducted using ANCOVA (analysis of covariance) modeling, using the Levene's test for the homogeneity of variance assumption to control for different baseline means. ANOVAs with additional post-hoc tests were used to determine significant differences within and among various subgroups, including viewers of different ages and baseline social awareness. A 95% confidence interval ( $p < 0.05$ ) was employed as the basis for significance. Correlation between one viewer response (such as narrative or emotional engagement with a program) and another (such as likelihood of acting in certain ways) was measured using Pearson's correlation coefficient as the determining measure. In all cases in which we tested for meaningful differences between two figures, we used mean scores as our basis.



# MAJOR FINDINGS

## PART 1: THE IMPACT OF COMEDY

Viewers are deeply engaged with the entertainment value of comedy. But it's not all laughs—they also find the comedy nearly as informative as the news.

After watching either news or comedy, audiences were asked to choose phrases to describe the clips. On virtually every one of these video descriptors, comedy is meaningful as a way to connect viewers with the serious social issue, beyond just being entertained. Viewers see the comedy as funnier and unique, but they are also significantly more likely to say that the comedy video:

- Made me feel hopeful about an important issue
- Made me think differently about an important issue
- Was memorable and easy to understand

Viewers find comedy more entertaining than news (41% of comedy viewers say it's entertaining vs. 8% of news viewers who say the news is entertaining). But they also find it nearly as informative as the news piece (30% of comedy viewers say it's "informative," compared to 36% who say the same for news).

**Viewers' attitudes toward the social issue (in this case, refugees) are moved by comedy.**

### THE POSITIVE IMPACT OF COMEDY

PRE- TO POST-VIEWING SHIFT IN ATTITUDE SCORES RELATED TO REFUGEE CRISIS

	CHANGE*	MEAN		CHANGE*	MEAN
COMEDY ONLY	+12	+.342	Much more should be done to help with the refugee crisis immediately	+9	+.310
	+10	+.326	Refugees will bring out the best in my country, showing that we are a kind people		
	+9	+.348	I would be willing for my country to take in a quota of refugees		
	+8	+.275	We all have a responsibility to help refugees	+6	+.180
	+5	+.266	If we don't help refugees now, we will face worse consequences later	+7	+.225
	+1	-.259	My country has no responsibility to accept refugees		
	-8	-.437	Refugees are a threat to Americans due to terrorism	-1	-.241
			NEWS ONLY		

\* Change refers to the shift in 6-7 responses on a 7-point scale, in which "1" indicates "strongly disagree" and "7" indicates "strongly agree."

**Comedy generates empathy and even personal connection to the issue.**

Intuitively, we know that consuming news is important to develop understanding and awareness of contemporary public issues. But comedy here plays a key role. When we control for the baseline attitudes and test for viewers who saw **news only** vs. those who saw **news + comedy** or **comedy only**,



we see that those who did not watch any comedy are less likely to show a significant shift from pre-exposure to post-exposure on the following:

- Concern for the refugee issue
- Agreement that “refugees will bring out the best in my country, showing that we are a kind people”
- Agreement that “I would be prepared to offer refugees temporary accommodation where I live”
- Disagreement that “Refugees are a threat to Americans due to terrorism”

**Viewers are enthusiastic and interested in comedy. But it is not because they casually experience the comedy; those who watched the comedy also say they invested serious mental effort as they viewed.**

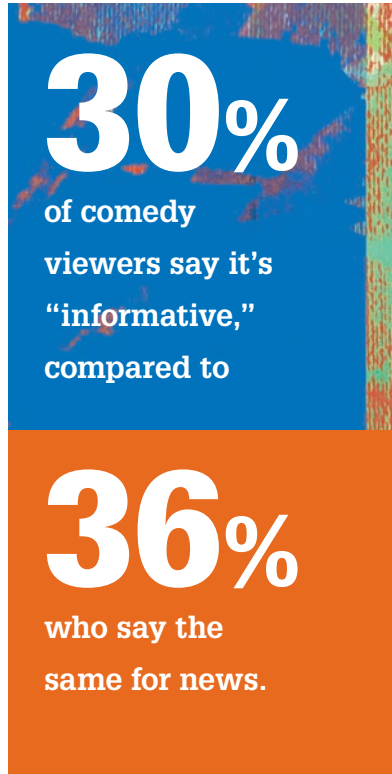
- Viewers watch comedy primarily “to relax and be entertained” (78%) and “to have fun” (71%). (77% of news viewers watch “to learn about important issues,” and 75% watch “to keep up with what’s happening in the world”.)
- But comedy is not just entertainment: *Comedy-only* viewers are more likely to describe their clip as “inspiring” than *news-only* viewers (35% vs. 27%), and more likely to describe it as having “held my attention” (65% vs. 48%).
- Comedy viewers are also more likely to describe the comedy clip as having made them “feel hopeful about an important issue” (36% vs. 20%).
- Comedy viewers were significantly more likely to say they invested “mental effort” in watching the clip than news viewers (31% vs. 23%).

**Comedy has a lasting impact over time on attitudes about the core social issue—particularly when it comes to attitudes connected with hope and empathy.**

Taken as a whole, comedy viewers retained positive social-issue attitudes over time—particularly attitudes that connect with hope and empathy for refugees.

- For those who see a comedy video—whether alone or in tandem with the news video—their perceived *understanding of the refugee issue* increases *significantly* immediately after watching the clip, and again two weeks later,\* meaning that the increased understanding is retained over time.
- For those who see a news video *alone*, there is also a shift on understanding of the issue from pre-exposure to post-exposure within the survey. However, that sense of increased understanding (for the news-only viewers) *is not retained* two weeks later, suggesting that the comedy segment is needed to cement the effect.
- Positive shifts were also retained over time (from pre-viewing levels to delayed re-contact) for **comedy** viewers on key attitudes about the social issue. This *sustained* impact is true for viewers who watched comedy only, or one of the priming conditions (where comedy is included), but not for viewers who watched news only. Comedy viewers’ attitudes significantly shifted in the short-term and two weeks later, on these attitude measures:
  - **INCREASED:** I would be willing for my country to take in a quota of refugees.
  - **INCREASED:** Refugees will bring out the best in my country, showing that we are a kind people.
  - **DECREASED:** Refugees are a threat to Americans due to terrorism.

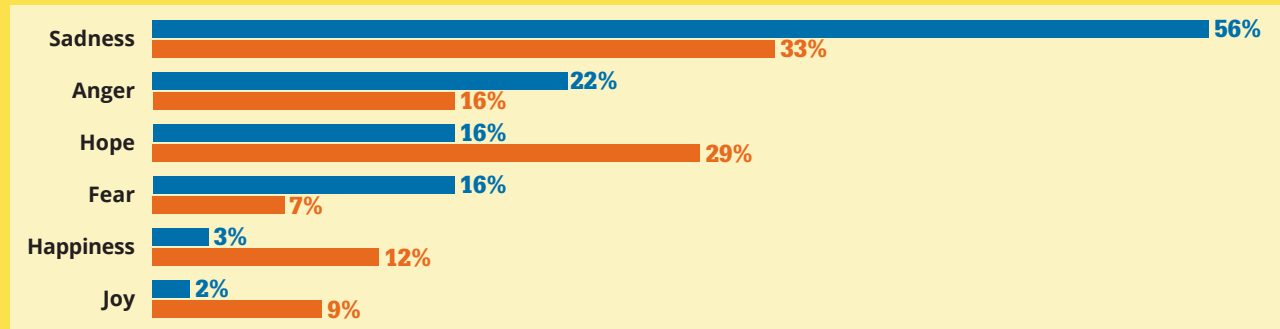
\* A total of 1,261 respondents were recruited for the initial pre- and post-viewing survey; of this total sample, 885 (70%) completed the delayed re-contact survey.



# THE EMOTIONAL IMPACT OF NEWS VS. COMEDY

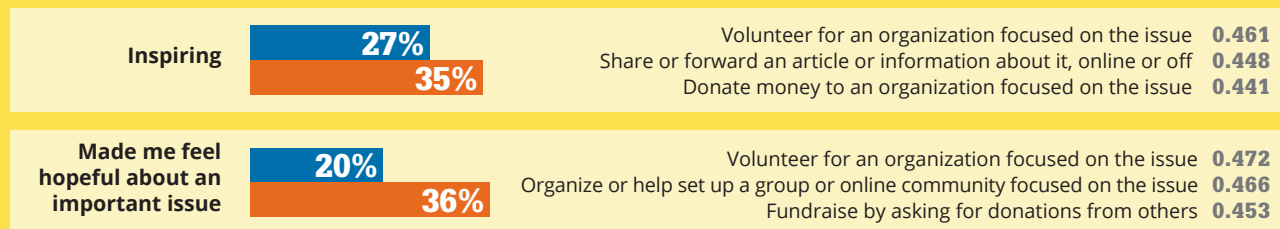
Q: WHILE WATCHING EACH SEGMENT, TO WHAT EXTENT DID YOU EXPERIENCE EACH OF THESE EMOTIONS?

NEWS ONLY  
COMEDY ONLY



Q: HOW WELL DOES EACH OF THE FOLLOWING WORDS OR PHRASES DESCRIBE EACH SEGMENT?

STATISTICAL CORRELATION WITH KEY ACTIONS



Viewers see comedy as joyful and hopeful—in turn, these emotional responses connect with some willingness to take social actions related to the issue.

### Emotional impact:

- The news piece makes viewers *sadder* (23-point gap), more *afraid* (9 points), and *angrier* (6 points) than the comedy piece.
- The comedy piece is 14 points more likely to give viewers *hope*, 9 points more likely to make them *happy*, and 7 points more likely to give them *joy*.

**Positive emotional responses—inspiration and hope—correlate with action.** Comedy viewers are significantly more likely to say that their clip inspired them and made them feel hopeful, which connects with an intent to act.\*

- Understanding that a “perfect” correlation is 1 (100%),\*\* the emotion of “*feeling inspired*” has a nearly .40 correlation score on average with an intent to act in a variety of ways—including “volunteer” (.46 correlation); “share or forward an article” (.45 correlation); and “donate money” to a related organization (.44 correlation).
- The emotion of “*feeling hopeful*” has a .42 correlation on average with an intent to act—including “volunteer” (.47 correlation); “organize or help set up an organization” (.47 correlation); and “fundraise” (.45 correlation).

\* Understanding the correlation coefficient: The larger the coefficient, the stronger the relationship between the variables. A coefficient of 1 (100% correlated) would indicate a perfect linear relationship. For context, the average correlation between emotion and action for those who find the video “entertaining” is 31%—for those who find it “funny,” it’s 14%.

\*\* See the explanation about correlation in the footnote above.

## PART 2: THE IMPACT OF NEWS

News viewers see journalism on this topic as credible, trustworthy and believable.

- People who watched the *news only video* were significantly more likely than those who watched the *comedy only video* to describe their video as “informative” and “believable.”
- Viewers were also more likely to call the expert on the news piece “trustworthy,” “reliable,” “honest,” “credible,” “qualified,” “informed,” and “expert” than they were to describe comedian Samantha Bee in that way, and they were more likely to say that “the main person in the video was serious about advancing her goals.”
- News-only consumers were more likely to describe the primary message of the video as “believable,” “convincing,” and “true.”
- News-only respondents were significantly more likely than comedy-only respondents to agree, in the delayed re-contact, that “if we don’t help refugees now, we will face worse consequences later.” News, in other words, may have conveyed a greater sense of urgency.

## PART 3: THE SYMBIOSIS OF NEWS & COMEDY

Pairing news with comedy is particularly powerful in terms of shifting attitudes.

When viewers watch a comedy clip followed by a news clip—or news followed by comedy—broad and significant effects emerge, regardless of the order in which viewers see the clips. In other words, comedy and news together can be a powerful combination for shifting attitudes on a serious social issue, but not because of the order in which viewers experience these two different mediated forms of information. According to this research, viewers’ attitudes can shift after watching comedy first, or news first—but the comedy is the important factor overall.

### PAIRING NEWS WITH COMEDY

PRE- TO POST-VIEWING SHIFT IN ATTITUDE SCORES RELATED TO REFUGEE CRISIS

	CHANGE*	MEAN		CHANGE*	MEAN	
COMEDY PRIMING NEWS	+14	+.448	Much more should be done to help with the refugee crisis immediately	+14	+.455	NEWS PRIMING COMEDY
	+12	+.232	I would be willing for my country to take in a quota of refugees	+9	+.252	
	+11	+.327	If we don’t help refugees now, we will face worse consequences later	+11	+.290	
	+10	+.346	We all have a responsibility to help refugees	+7	+.290	
	+8	+.232	I would be prepared to offer refugees temporary accommodation where I live			
	+5	+.229	Refugees will bring out the best in my country, showing that we are a kind people	+12	+.287	
	-3	-.267	My country has no responsibility to accept refugees	0	-.204	
	-10	-.594	Refugees are a threat to Americans due to terrorism	-7	-.545	

\* Change refers to the shift in 6-7 responses on a 7-point scale, in which “1” indicates “strongly disagree” and “7” indicates “strongly agree.”

Viewers who see the comedy video primed by news are significantly more likely than those who see comedy-only to:

- Agree that “If we don’t help refugees now, we will face worse consequences later”
- Disagree that “My country has no responsibility to accept refugees”
- Disagree that “Refugees are a threat to Americans due to terrorism”

## PART 4: BEYOND THE CHOIR

### Can Comedy Help To Reach People Who Aren't As Engaged With News?

Based on respondents' indicated news media habits, we divided them into two groups as "high engagement" or "low engagement" news consumers to examine the extent to which comedy may be useful for those who don't regularly expose themselves to news. In other words, highly-engaged news consumers are likely to be exposed to journalistic coverage of current social issues. But what about individuals who are not engaged as avid news consumers? For this group, comedy may become a particularly important vehicle for social issue information (and building empathy and connection).

DEMOGRAPHICS OF HIGH VS. LOW NEWS CONSUMERS		
	LOW NEWS CONSUMERS N=370	HIGH NEWS CONSUMERS N=389
<b>GENDER</b>	49% Male 51% Female	52% Male 48% Female
<b>AGE</b>	40.1 Average Age 40% Millennials	40.4 Average Age 39% Millennials
<b>ETHNICITY</b>	84% White 10% Black 8% Hispanic 5% Asian	72% White 16% Black 14% Hispanic 10% Asian
<b>INCOME</b>	\$67,968 Median Income	\$68,954 Median Income
<b>EDUCATION</b>	58% College Graduates	61% College Graduates
<b>EMPLOYMENT</b>	56% Employed (Full-Time)	59% Employed (Full-Time)
<b>CENSUS REGION</b>	22% Northeast 22% Midwest 34% South 24% West	23% Northeast 17% Midwest 41% South 19% West
<b>VOTER REGISTRATION</b>	88% Registered 12% Not Registered	95% Registered 5% Not Registered
<b>POLITICAL AFFILIATION</b>	30% Conservative/ GOP 47% Liberal/ Democrat 18% Other	29% Conservative/ GOP 61% Liberal/ Democrat 7% Other
<b>DAILY SOCIAL MEDIA USE</b>	66% Facebook 22% Twitter 23% Instagram 18% Snapchat	80% Facebook 35% Twitter 33% Instagram 27% Snapchat

When individuals with a low news-consumption profile see comedy only, they are significantly more likely than when they watch only the news clip to have the following responses. The clip was:

- Unique
- Held my attention
- Memorable
- Entertaining
- Funny
- Made me feel hopeful about a serious issue

Not only did these low-engagement news consumers see the comedy as more entertaining, but they engaged with it in a thoughtful way, with attention and focus. Compared to their judgments about the news video, these low-engagement news consumers were significantly more likely to say about the comedy:

- “I identified with a character in this video”
- “Events in this video are relevant to my everyday life”
- “I experienced happiness, joy, hope”
- “I didn’t experience sadness, fear”
- “This issue is interesting to me”
- “I focused on the arguments that were made”
- “I concentrated on the video’s arguments”
- “While watching the video I paid close attention to each point that was made”

Moreover, for these low-engagement news consumer respondents, comedy appears to have a greater impact than news on personal attitudes about refugees (on some key measures), suggesting that news won’t get them, but perhaps comedy will. In addition, we see a significant positive pre-viewing to post-viewing shift on “I would be willing for my country to take in a quota of refugees” among the low-engagement news consumers who watch the comedy video. For low-engagement news consumers who watch only the *news* video, there is no such significant shift.

On each of the following elements, low-engagement news consumers are more likely to show a positive shift over time (two weeks after viewing) when they watch comedy—but not when they watch *only news*:

- “We all have a responsibility to help refugees”
- “Refugees will bring out the best in my country, showing that we are a kind people”
- “Refugees are a threat to Americans due to terrorism” (Note: “positive” shift on this element means they are less likely to agree with it.)

This difference isn’t limited to *comedy-only* viewers. Among those who watch *both* comedy and news videos, we see significant attitudinal shifts from pre-exposure to delayed re-contact on each of the following elements for *low-engagement* news consumers (but not for high-engagement news consumers):

- “Much more should be done to help with the refugee crisis immediately”
- “We all have a responsibility to help refugees”
- “If we don’t help refugees now, we will face worse consequences later”
- “Refugees will bring out the best in my country, showing that we are a kind people”
- “I would be prepared to offer refugees temporary accommodation where I live”
- “I would be willing for my country to take in a quota of refugees”
- “Refugees are a threat to Americans due to terrorism” (negative shift)

**For low-engagement news consumer respondents, comedy appears to have a greater impact than news on personal attitudes about refugees (on some key measures), suggesting that news won’t get them, but perhaps comedy will.**



# IMPLICATIONS & CONCLUSION

**For those individuals paying the least amount of attention to serious journalism, comedy serves a particularly important role in raising awareness and softening attitudes about a complex social issue, at least as suggested by this examination.**

For those who endeavor to spark public engagement with serious social issues that affect global citizens, leveraging multiple media genres—both informative and entertaining—can be useful. Indeed, in such a polarized environment, it may be important, now more than ever, to consider cultural content that can break through the clutter and attract audiences. The role of comedy does not supplant the need for serious journalism, but its value is clear.

This study finds important conclusions about the potential power of comedy to illuminate a serious social issue—and, importantly, to increase feelings of empathy and connection. In particular, comedy may act as a gateway to taking in serious information. Perhaps most valuable: For those individuals paying the least amount of attention to serious journalism, comedy serves a particularly important role in raising awareness and softening attitudes about a complex social issue, at least as suggested by this examination. Although those who only watched the news clip saw the social issue as more urgent or important to “help refugees now” to avoid “facing worse complications later”—which may be consistent with the somber tone of serious journalism—the frames of hope and optimism provided by comedy are important in the full gestalt of a challenge as complicated as the refugee crisis. Additionally, while this study finds important findings about the valuable role of serious journalism in this issue—and social issues more generally—its major objective is the exploration of comedy in social change. Decades of research provide deep evidence of the role of journalism in framing public issues, speaking truth to power, shaping public opinion, and serving as a foundation of democracy, so this report doesn’t attempt to replicate it here.

As with all research, there are important limitations to highlight. Notably, this study examines one particular issue, the Syrian refugee crisis, and it does so by examining only one pair of videos. There is more work to be done, and additional research should consider additional social issues, more video content, and perhaps additional forms of both journalism and comedy (for example, sketch or stand-up comedy and solutions journalism). This report’s findings and potential utility for NGOs, media organizations and others should spark additional questions and research. Perhaps most importantly, it should encourage new innovation and collaborations between humanitarian organizations, media companies, comedy talents and social-change researchers and strategists.

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## ENDNOTES

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AMERICAN UNIVERSITY  
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