The Influence of Parodies on Mental Models: Exploring the Tina Fey–Sarah Palin Phenomenon

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During the 2008 presidential campaign season, Tina Fey’s timely impersonations of Sarah Palin on Saturday Night Live attracted overwhelming attention, both on television and online. Throughout the campaign, press buzzed about a possible “Fey Effect”: a negative impact of Fey’s impersonations on Palin’s favorability ratings and a subsequent decline in the GOP ticket. The current study seeks to test for this effect by measuring if Fey’s impersonations of Palin rendered caricatured traits more salient in viewers’ mental constructions of the candidate, namely character traits central to the Fey impersonation, including issues of intelligence, competence, experience and the Governor’s rural background. Findings show that exposure to both the interview and its parody cause viewers to devote more cognitive attention to Palin’s intelligence, competence and experience. In addition, the SNL parody is unique in its influence in rendering rural traits more salient in associations with Palin. Ultimately, this research finds that the agency of influence rests in the real Palin, allowing us to establish evidence of a “Palin Effect.”

Keywords: Agenda Setting; Comedy; Humor; Media Effects; Parody; Political Entertainment; Priming; Television

The Increasing Importance of Political Entertainment

Political communication scholars are increasingly acknowledging that the historical separation of entertainment and news is obsolete, as both maintain political relevance.
in today’s postmodern media environment (Baym, 2005; Delli Carpini & Williams, 2001; Jones, 2005). This increasingly vague distinction between entertainment and news programming is illustrated in everything from politicians’ inclusion of talk show appearances within their campaign circuits (Baum, 2005), to the extensive political knowledge found among viewers of political satire programs (Young & Tisinger, 2006).

Given the tendency of political content to overlap with non-news programming, the political implications of entertainment-based television is an important area of research to explore. Because viewers do not make a cognitive distinction between legitimate and illegitimate sources of political information (Holbrook & Hill, 2005), and because the political information environment is one of hybrid genres and interpretations (see Gray, Jones, & Thompson, 2009), it is increasingly important that political communication scholars apply political communication theories to entertainment-based programming (Holbert, 2005).

**Agenda Setting and Priming**

The attempt to quantify the impact of entertainment-based television has led to a broad and fruitful area of research, allowing scholars to better identify and explicate the processes responsible for these effects. Agenda setting and priming (Iyengar & Kinder, 1987), originally explored exclusively in the context of news programming and other forms of traditional political information, have provided one framework through which scholars have examined political entertainment effects (Holbert, Lambe, Dudo, & Carlton, 2007; Holbert et al., 2003; Holbrook & Hill, 2005; Young & Tisinger 2006). These effects are not about direct persuasion but, rather, subtle cognitive effects that take advantage of how the brain is hardwired.

Agenda setting and priming, rooted in the concept of construct salience, involve ideas and concepts becoming more accessible in memory after recent and frequent activation (see Price & Tewksbury, 1997). Both of these theoretical approaches are based on cognitive mechanisms rooted in associative network models of knowledge storage and retrieval (Anderson, 1983). According to this literature, information is housed in the form of interconnected networks of related constructs, also referred to as schemas, based on prior knowledge and experience (Markus, 1977). Once a construct is activated in tandem with other constructs, the residual excitation surrounding these nodes and networks renders these constructs more likely to be used in subsequent judgments (Carlston & Skowronski, 1986). According to this mechanism, recent and frequent activation of cognitive constructs increases construct salience, hence rendering them more likely to come to mind in relevant decision-making processes.

There are a few factors that contribute to the chronic (or cumulative, over time) accessibility of new constructs, which scholars suggest produces more significant effects in aggregate opinion (Roskos-Ewoldsen, Roskos-Ewoldsen, & Carpenter, 2002). The recency and intensity of an incoming message will enhance its perceived importance, rendering it more salient in the mind of the receiver (Higgins, Bargas, & Lombardi, 1985) and is, hence, more likely to be integrated into, and perhaps
dominate, one’s schema. Furthermore, if the message is consistent over time, it will be chronically accessed by the receiver and, therefore, become a prominent node in the individual’s schema (Price & Tewksbury, 1997).

The tenets of associative network models of information storage and retrieval introduce the implication that people have limited information capacities (Fiske & Taylor, 1991) and, therefore, want to avoid exhausting their mental resources when making a decision or judgment. To reach conclusions as efficiently as possible, they refer to appropriate preexisting networks of information, retrieving familiar, accessible constructs. Through schematic processing, individuals are able to make logical hypotheses without having to cull all the information in the current environment to make sense of it (Louis, 1983; Weick, 1979). These cognitive shortcuts are often used to facilitate our quick impressions of entire groups of people, including political parties, ethnic and age groups. In doing so, we access a relatable stereotype schema to inform or fill-out our perceptions of the unfamiliar. Such perceptions may lead to accurate or inaccurate conclusions, depending on the situation (Harris, 1994).

When applied to political communication research, we find that news coverage of particular topics increases the salience of those constructs in the minds of the viewers, thereby encouraging viewers to ascribe increased importance to those issues (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). Once rendered salient, viewers then use these issues as criteria on which to judge their leaders (Iyengar & Kinder, 1987). Historically, the former of these effects has been referred to as agenda setting, and the latter as priming. Research expanding on the study of priming effects has found that this kind of media influence is not reserved to the priming of policy topics or issues, but extends to the salience of image characteristics or personality traits as well (Weaver, Graber, McCombs, & Eyal, 1981). In their study on The West Wing, Holbert et al. (2003) found that the program’s portrayal of the president primed a more positive image of the president in viewers’ minds. Similar findings have emerged from studies on the effects of late-night political jokes where the salience of candidates’ most caricatured traits is enhanced as a function of exposure to such programming (Moy, Xenos, & Hess, 2006; Young, 2006).

Live From New York . . .

This study seeks to expand the literature on priming through political entertainment in the context of sketch comedy show, Saturday Night Live (SNL), a program that has been under-explored in the growing body of political entertainment research. Premiering just over 1 year after the Watergate Scandal, SNL has become a central part of America’s diverse hybrid political media environment. Since its 1975 debut just following the Watergate scandal, SNL has caricatured a score of political figures from both sides of the aisle, from Chevy Chase as a clumsy Gerald Ford to Fred Armisen as “Fauxbama.” Yet, perhaps none has drawn as much attention—from the public and the popular press alike—as comedian Tina Fey’s impersonations of Vice-Presidential (VP) candidate, Sarah Palin.
The “Fey Effect”

Looking back to the highly charged 2008 presidential election season, it is impossible to ignore the overwhelming popularity of Tina Fey’s impersonations of Sarah Palin on SNL. Drawing in audiences of over 10 million for live airings and 9 million more in subsequent showings available digitally and online (Bauder, 2008), SNL enjoyed a surge in ratings. The October 18 episode in which Sarah Palin guest-starred as herself alongside her caricaturist attracted SNL’s largest audience in over 14 years (Snider, 2008). Popular video-sharing Web sites like YouTube.com and Hulu.com helped propel the parody to unprecedented popularity by allowing viewers to watch and rewatch the skits.

Donning a sleek up-do and a pair of glasses, while laying on a thick Alaskan accent, Fey’s impersonations were described by journalists as “dead-on, word-for-word” (Wiser, 2008) and “pitch-perfect” (Fairbanks, 2008). Her performances even placed her in Time’s “Person of the Year 2008” issue. Citing reasons for the selection of Fey as one of Time Magazine’s “People Who Mattered,” the author wrote, “Fey made smart sexy and nerdy cool, and she proved that comedy can still have serious political clout: her winking impression of Governor Sarah Palin defined the governor before she had a chance to define herself” (Grossman, 2008, p. 16).

During the 10-week period of Palin’s campaign, a total of six parodies aired on SNL in which Fey impersonated Palin, consistently packaging the governor as unintelligent, inexperienced, ultra-conservative, and rural. The biting caricatures were timely; the first parody of Fey as Palin and Amy Poehler as Hillary Clinton aired just 2 weeks after the announcement of Palin’s candidacy. The second parody of Palin, with Fey sitting opposite Amy Poehler portraying a stoic and staid Katie Couric, aired just 2 days following the air date of the original interview it was parodying. In this caricature, Fey’s Palin was portrayed as an ill-informed, ultra-conservative neophyte from small-town America.

As early as the beginning of October, journalists buzzed about a possible “Fey effect” in response to the inverse relationship of the SNL viewing surge and Sarah Palin’s rating plummet. In a leading Rasmussen poll about the possible effect of Fey on public opinion, it was reported that 33% of independents believed that the caricature was hurting the Grand Old Party (GOP) ticket (Sands, 2008). Even Palin could not ignore the mounting attention and scrutiny surrounding the Fey impersonations, joking during a GOP rally in Florida that her CBS interview gaffes were intended “to keep Tina Fey in business” (Barr, 2008).

Although journalists and pundits reinforced the notion that some kind of Fey effect on public opinion was in motion, there was no empirical research at the time to support such a claim. Although the Rasmussen Poll did report an impressive estimate of self-reported effects, asking individuals if media messages are affecting their own or others’ political judgments is fraught with measurement error and bias. Using self-reported measures as evidence of a causal relationship between exposure to SNL and opinion of Palin is certain to overestimate the actual effects, particularly in a press environment in which the journalistic narrative reinforced the notion that Fey’s
impersonations were hurting the GOP ticket. Because of the infinite factors correlated with selective exposure to and perception of the Fey impersonations, a more sophisticated experimental approach is necessary to tease out a causal relationship. To evaluate the potential impact on public opinion posed by exposure to the Fey impersonations we need (a) a theoretical framework to account for the underlying mechanism at work and (b) a controlled experimental design to assess said effects.

The Priming of the Palin Caricature

The first aspect of Palin’s candidacy that renders it a likely context for media effects stems from the fact that until the announcement of her candidacy, Palin was largely unknown to the American citizenry. According to the results of a Gallup Poll administered on August 30, just 1 day after the announcement of her candidacy, seven out of ten Americans did not know enough about Palin to be able to estimate their favorability of her, making her name identification the lowest of recent VP candidates (Newport, 2008). Furthermore, the relationship between Palin and her traveling press corps was described as “barely existing” nearly 1 month after her nomination (Vogel, 2008). The lack of communication between Palin and her pool of campaign reporters served only to heighten the ambiguity surrounding the GOP’s VP pick. Unable to tap into preexisting schemas or heuristics to serve as bases for judgments about Palin, the public and journalists alike were actively trying to construct an understanding of who Palin was. In essence, they were trying to efficiently create Palin schemas by using whatever relevant information they had available.

As outlined earlier, recency, intensity, and consistency increase the salience of new information and foster its chronic accessibility over time. Given the lack of preexisting information about Palin, as well as the lack of communication between Palin and her press pool, Fey’s impersonations emerged at an interesting moment in the campaign. Palin’s reticence, combined with Fey’s popular and readily accessible impersonations (debuting just 2 weeks into the Palin candidacy), had the potential to inform and shape the public’s perceptions of Palin in important ways.

The simplified, one-dimensional Fey caricature represents an easily digestible image of Palin; one that likely enables viewers to easily tap into and update their Palin schemas, especially because this schema (rural and unintelligent) may be closely related to other stereotypes in memory. The multiple parodies and replays thereafter would have required viewers to repeatedly activate this caricature, hence rendering certain Palin traits (rural, conservative, and unintelligent) more salient in the minds of viewers. According to the underlying mechanism involved in priming, it would follow that when called on to evaluate Palin, viewers of the Fey impersonations would likely link the salient aspects of the parody to their evaluation of Palin herself.

Given that the effects on public opinion of Sarah Palin in the real world occurred in September and October 2008, our goal in this project was not to capture the actual effects of exposure to political impersonations on viewers’ opinions of the unknown candidate in question. Instead, this project seeks to understand the underlying cognitive mechanism through which such exposure may have been influential at the
time. Because this study was set several months after the election, when Palin’s name and persona were diffused throughout the population, the hope is to use this analysis to isolate how such exposure might affect construct salience. Such information can help us make an educated guess about how this mechanism may have exerted influence at a time when the attitude object (Palin) was less well known. Therefore, we propose our main hypothesis of the study: Exposure to impersonations of a political candidate will increase the salience of the candidate’s caricatured traits in the minds of viewers.

Given the easily evoked image by Fey that portrayed Palin as unintelligent, incompetent, inexperienced, and rural, we expect that after exposure to the SNL sketches, these traits were rendered salient in people’s mental constructions of Palin. We propose the following specific hypotheses:

H1: The salience of constructs related to Palin’s intelligence, competence, and experience (ICE) will be stronger after exposure to Fey’s impersonation on SNL.

H2: The salience of constructs related to Palin’s rural background will be stronger after exposure to Fey’s impersonation on SNL.

H3: The salience of ICE constructs will be greater in the posttest among participants in the SNL condition than those in either the CBS condition or the control group.

H4: The salience of rural constructs will be greater in the posttest among participants in the SNL condition than those in either the CBS condition of the control group.

H5: Looking at the SNL condition, the salience of SNL-related items will be stronger after exposure to Fey’s impersonation on SNL.

H6: The salience of the SNL index will be higher in the posttest among participants in the SNL condition than those in either the CBS condition or the control group.

Although many studies of media priming use interaction effects to examine the influence of closed-ended items on overall favorability as a dependent variable (see Iyengar & Kinder, 1987), this analysis incorporates a comprehensive approach to the measurement of construct accessibility. By using a subtle coding scheme to capture construct salience in respondent thought listings, this study measures salience in a way that also accounts for an individual’s level of information storage and retrieval. In the next sections, we give an overview of network models of memory, then offer implications implicit in the model. Finally, its efficient and appropriate application in surveying the political effects of entertainment television is explored as we examine the impact of exposure to Tina Fey’s popular impersonations of Sarah Palin on SNL during the 2008 presidential election season.

Method

To test these hypotheses, we employed a three-conditions, between-subject design using undergraduate participants at a large, Eastern university. The experiment was conducted over the course of 3 weeks in April 2009. The experiment consisted of two online surveys. Approximately 375 students were invited to participate from courses in business, history, anthropology, political science, and mass and interpersonal communication. Of those, a total of 255 students (68% response rate) started
the pretest, four of whom did not complete it (pretest $N = 251$). Only those who completed the pretest were eligible to participate in the posttest, which was completed by 225 students (posttest $N = 225$). In exchange for their participation, students who completed both parts of the study were entered in a raffle to win one of four Amazon.com gift certificates in the amounts of $100, $50, or $25.

The study was administered online through Qualtrics Survey Software (Qualtrics Labs, Inc., Provo, UT). On Monday, April 27, students were e-mailed a link to complete an online survey, and were given until Friday, May 1 to complete it. All participants were given the same pretest survey, which included open-ended evaluations of various political candidates, as well as media use items, presidential candidate trait ratings, political interests, and participation. Two weeks later, on Monday, May 11, students who completed the pretest were e-mailed a link to complete the second part of the survey, and were given until Friday, May 15 to complete it. In this part of the experiment, students were randomly assigned to view one of three clips embedded into the survey. The clip was then followed by the posttest questionnaire, which included most of the same items as the pretest. The participants in Condition 1 viewed a YouTube clip (approximately 6 min in length) of Katie Couric’s original interview with Sarah Palin that aired on CBS, whereas those students in Condition 2 viewed a Hulu.com clip (approximately 6 min) of the SNL parody of that interview, featuring Amy Poehler as Katie Couric and Tina Fey as Sarah Palin. The control group was shown a YouTube clip on travel in Peru (approximately 10 min). Randomization checks on pretest variables—including graduation year, gender, political interest, political attention, party identification, candidate trait ratings, and candidate favorability ratings—showed no significant differences between conditions.

Measurement of Dependent Variable: Construct Salience

In both the pretest (Time 1) and posttest (Time 2), participants were asked to indicate the first words or phrases that came to their minds when they thought of each of the following candidates: Joe Biden, John McCain, Barack Obama, and Sarah Palin (presented in random order). In the pretest, these prompts were immediately issued following the media use items and randomized through Qualtrics. In the posttest of the experiment, these prompts were immediately issued following exposure to the experimental stimuli. The Sarah Palin prompt was the first question for all posttest respondents, and the other three candidates were randomized through Qualtrics. To test for a Fey effect on the salience of Palin’s caricatured traits, a coding scheme was developed to evaluate the content of the open-ended items about Palin. The coding scheme was designed to capture the salience of various aspects of Palin that related to the SNL parodies.

Palin Open-Ended Coding Scheme

The coding scheme applied to the open-ended items consists of 16 different coding constructs. To determine reliability of the coding scheme constructs, a sample of 30 random participant responses was blindly and independently coded by two trained
coders. Based on these 30 participant responses, a suitable Krippendorff’s alpha was obtained (see the later discussion on this).

Salience of the ICE Score

The ICE score measures the presence or absence of salient thoughts related to Sarah Palin’s ICE ($\alpha = 1.00$). If any part of the response makes reference to any of these attributes, it is coded as 1; and if these traits are not mentioned, the response is coded as 0. It merely measures whether these references are present.

Salience of Constructs Associated with Palin’s Rural Background (Rural Score)

This item captures the salience of comments related to Sarah Palin’s rural roots ($\alpha = 0.66$), coded as 1 if present or 0 if not present. Terms like “small-town,” “hick,” or “back-country” are examples of salient rural items. Next, the coding scheme included an item structured as an index, which counted the total number of related terms in the response.

The SNL index ($\alpha = 1.00$) measured the salience of items in participant responses that were consistent with constructs present in the SNL parodies. This index was measured by totaling the number of related terms in the response, based on the following terms (or their variations): “Katie Couric,” “SNL,” “Tina Fey or Fey,” “Russia/proximity of Alaska to Russia,” “You Betcha,” “Ya know,” “Maverick,” “Bush doctrine,” and “Caribou Barbie.” In addition, all response terms were mutually exclusive, being counted toward only one category.

Analytical Procedures and Results

The underlying hypothesis guiding this study posited that exposure to an impersonation of a political candidate will increase the salience of the caricatured traits or aspects of that politician in the minds of viewers. Hence, we posited the following:

\[ H1: \text{The salience of constructs related to Palin’s ICE will be stronger after exposure to Fey’s impersonation on SNL.} \]

To test $H1$, we ran a paired-samples $t$ test to compare the ICE scores between the pre- and the posttests among participants in the SNL condition. As illustrated in Table 1, among participants in the SNL condition, the ICE score was significantly greater ($p < .001$) in the posttest than the pretest, hence confirming our hypothesis that these constructs would be more salient after exposure to the parody. The ICE score was also significantly greater after exposure to the stimulus among participants in the CBS condition ($p < .001$). However, no significant differences emerged between pre- and posttests for those in the control group ($p < .10$):

\[ H2: \text{The salience of constructs related to Palin’s rural background will be stronger after exposure to the SNL parody.} \]
To test $H2$, we ran a paired-samples $t$ test to compare the rural salience scores between the pre- and the posttests among participants in the SNL condition. As illustrated in Table 2, among participants in the SNL condition, the rural score was significantly greater in the posttest than in the pretest ($p < .057$), hence confirming our hypothesis that these constructs would be more salient after exposure to the parody. Among participants in the control group, the rural score was significantly lower in the posttest than in the pretest ($p < .033$). There were no significant differences between pre- and posttests among participants in the CBS condition ($p < .658$):

$$H3: \text{The salience of ICE constructs will be greater in the posttest among participants in the SNL condition than those in either the CBS condition or the control group.}$$

To test $H3$, we ran a one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) with a Bonferroni post hoc test to compare the ICE scores between posttests among participants in the various conditions. As illustrated in Table 3, there were no significant differences between conditions ($p = 1.0$), hence our hypothesis was not supported. However, results indicate that the salience of ICE constructs was significantly higher in the

Table 2 Means, Standard Deviations, and Significance Tests Using Paired-Samples $T$ Tests Comparing Pre- and Posttest Estimates: Rural Salience Scores

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Condition</th>
<th>CBS</th>
<th>SNL</th>
<th>Control</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rural salience score</td>
<td>$M$</td>
<td>$SD$</td>
<td>$M$</td>
<td>$SD$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pretest</td>
<td>.05</td>
<td>.22</td>
<td>.04</td>
<td>.19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Posttest</td>
<td>.06</td>
<td>.24</td>
<td>.12</td>
<td>.32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$P$</td>
<td>.658</td>
<td>.057</td>
<td>.033</td>
<td>.835</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$N$</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>224</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. SNL = Saturday Night Live.
two experimental groups compared to the control group (SNL, $p < .002$; CBS, $p < .017$), as illustrated in Table 3:

\[ H4: \text{The salience of rural constructs will be greater in the posttest among participants in the SNL condition than those in either the CBS condition or the control group.} \]

To test $H4$, a one-way ANOVA with a Bonferroni post hoc test was used to compare the rural scores between the various posttest conditions. As illustrated in Table 3, there was no significant difference between the SNL and CBS conditions ($p < .524$), hence not confirming our hypothesis. Result indicate that the salience of rural constructs was greater after exposure to SNL than the control (approaching significance $p < .076$). However, this effect was unique to the SNL condition, as no significant differences emerged between the CBS condition and the control group:

\[ H5: \text{Looking at the SNL condition, the salience of SNL-related items will be stronger after exposure to the parody.} \]

To test $H5$, we ran a paired-samples $t$ test to compare the SNL indexes between the pre- and posttests among participants in the SNL condition. As illustrated in Table 4, the SNL index was significantly lower in the posttest than the pretest among

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Condition</th>
<th>Time-2 ICE score</th>
<th>Time-2 rural score</th>
<th>Time-2 SNL index</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>CBS</td>
<td>.67</td>
<td>.06</td>
<td>.15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SNL</td>
<td>.72</td>
<td>.12</td>
<td>.28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Control</td>
<td>.45</td>
<td>.02</td>
<td>.37</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. ICE = intelligence, competence, experience; SNL = Saturday Night Live.
participants in the SNL condition ($p < .006$), hence contradicting our hypothesis that these items would be more salient after exposure to the parody. The SNL index was also significantly lower in the posttest than the pretest for those in the CBS condition ($p < .005$), but no significant differences emerged between pre- and posttests within the control group ($p < .099$):

**H6:** The salience of the SNL index will be higher in the posttest among participants in the SNL condition than those in either the CBS condition or the control group.

To test H6, one-way ANOVA with a Bonferroni post hoc test was used to compare the SNL indexes between posttests among participants in the SNL and CBS conditions. As illustrated in Table 3, there was no significant difference between conditions ($p < .547$), hence not confirming our hypothesis. No significant differences emerged between the SNL indexes among participants in the SNL condition or the control group ($p < .985$). However, results indicate that the SNL index was lower in the CBS condition than in the control condition in the posttest ($p < .063$).

**Discussion**

Will Ferrell as President Bush: My God you are folksy.

Tina Fey as Governor Sarah Palin: Why thank you Mr. President. I like to think I’m one part practiced folksy, one part sassy and a little dash’a high school bitchy.

The popularity of Tina Fey’s Palin impersonations during the 2008 presidential campaign, both among viewers and the popular press, inevitably lead to a question of impact. Was there a “Fey effect”? If so, what is a plausible mechanism underlying that effect, and, most important, is it quantifiable? Our results suggest that, explained through the cognitive mechanism of priming, yes, a Fey effect likely did exist; however, something strong may have been operative as well: A “Palin effect.”

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**Table 4** Means, Standard Deviations, and Significance Tests Using Paired-Samples T Tests Comparing Pre- and Posttest Estimates: SNL Index (Salience of Constructs Directly Related to SNL Parodies)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Condition</th>
<th>CBS</th>
<th>SNL</th>
<th>Control</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>SNL salience index</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pretest</td>
<td>.36</td>
<td>.55</td>
<td>.52</td>
<td>.78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Posttest</td>
<td>.15</td>
<td>.48</td>
<td>.28</td>
<td>.60</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* SNL = Saturday Night Live.
By using a randomized experiment to test the effects of exposure to Fey’s impersonations on the salience of key constructs, this study offers a theory-driven exploration of how such simplified caricatures might help viewers fill out perceptions of a relatively unknown candidate. This controlled experiment cannot definitively identify how Fey’s impersonations affected people’s opinions of Palin during the actual campaign itself. However, finding significant effects months after this caricature had become a part of the political landscape, in a controlled study, suggests that the actual impact of these effects may have been even stronger during the election, when people were still forming their Palin schemas.

These results support the hypothesis that exposure to the parody increased the salience of constructs associated with Palin’s ICE and rural background. However, both the real interview and its SNL parody caused viewers to experience increased salience of constructs related to Palin’s ICE. Given that participants who viewed the original CBS interview were as likely as those in the SNL condition to have those caricatured traits primed, it seems unreasonable to hold Fey alone accountable for the increased salience of these caricatured constructs. Instead, Palin seems to have fostered the salience of these traits all by herself. It is important to note here that the parodies were drawn directly from Palin’s press interviews, often quoting Palin verbatim. Even before the SNL parody of the Couric interview was aired, critics of Palin’s responses voiced their opinion of her poor performance in various popular press outlets. Perhaps the reason the SNL episode parodying Couric’s interview received such high ratings (a 15 share in metered markets, making it the highest rated show on television on September 28; Gorman, 2009) was because viewers had heard of Palin’s poor performance and anticipated Fey’s skewering of her on Saturday night.

These two forms of content—the original and its parody—are so intertwined that it is conceptually impossible to view the parody as a distinct entity from its real-life source. Put simply, the parody could not exist without the original interview. As articulated by Gray et al. (2009), parody exemplifies the concept of intertextuality—that is, the notion that we make sense of ideas and texts relative to other texts, rather than in isolation from one another. The authors wrote:

...[P]arody aims to recontextualize how we make sense of another text or genre. 
...Moreover, just as humor in general can provide reflection on the social convention that is targeted, parody aims to provoke reflection and re-evaluation of how the targeted texts or genre works. (p. 18)

Hence, perhaps it is both fair and logical to identify the actual agency in the context of “parody” effects within both the heightened parody and the original “text” itself—in this case, Palin.

Yet, it is also possible that the identified Palin effect is an artifact of the time delay between the election and our examination. Perhaps Fey’s caricatures had already been enmeshed in people’s Palin schemas (given that our study was conducted in April 2009). Respondents may have been basing evaluations of Palin on both the real Palin and Fey’s one-dimensional impersonation, as both may have already exercised some influence in shaping participants’ Palin schemas.
Another finding worth exploring is the fact that both experimental groups had significantly lower SNL indexes after exposure to stimuli. To explain this finding, we must first consider the nature of this construct. Unlike the ICE or rural salience scores, the SNL index was comprised of more general, meta-aspects of SNL content. For example, the SNL index consisted of explicit mentions of Fey, SNL, and quotes from the iconic impersonation. In this way, the construct reflects a more surface level processing of concepts related to the parody than the ICE or rural indexes might indicate.

Hence, the increased salience of ICE constructs within the CBS and SNL conditions may illustrate the concept of spreading activation. With direct exposure to the relevant stimuli (in this case, the actual CBS and SNL interviews), nodes that are linked, both directly and indirectly, to those stimuli are subject to residual excitation and, therefore, culled into mental focus (Anderson, 1983). In this case, the stimuli may have directly activated SNL constructs but, due to residual excitation, resulted in the increased salience of these more subtle, yet Palin-associated, details (ICE constructs).

One unique outcome of the parody, compared to the original CBS interview, was its ability to render rural traits more salient in the minds of viewers. The salience of constructs related to Palin’s rural, small-town background was significantly higher after exposure to the parody; and, conversely, the rural score was significantly lower in the posttest for those in the control group, further strengthening the significance of this rural effect. Findings suggest that Fey’s portrayal of Palin, including a thick accent and “folksy” demeanor, permeated people’s thoughts about Palin, hence indicating the activation of rural constructs. In general, people cull information from accessible schema when called on to form an impression of a person. These schemas allow us to go beyond the explicit information at hand. Given the simplified nature of a caricature, it makes sense that these easily packaged images complement and play into preexisting schematic stereotypes. The one-dimensional Fey caricatures primed rural stereotypes, allowing participants to make associations with Fey, including designations such as “hick” or “backwoodsy” (two such criteria coded within the rural salience score).

Given our sample of college students from a large, Eastern university, certainly our results cannot be generalized to the greater population. In addition, because we do not know the extent of previous exposure to the Fey caricatures, we cannot say to what extent respondents’ perceptions of Palin had already been affected by the Fey caricature before the start of our study. Capturing self-reported rates of previous exposure to the Fey caricatures would certainly have been a possibility, although concerns about priming respondents in the various conditions led us to exclude such measures. Although these concerns are fair, it is important to note that our examination is designed to explore the underlying mechanism through which a priming effect may have occurred. In addition, our use of a three-conditions, between-subject design, with a pre- and posttest enables us to draw comparisons both over time and across conditions. Given the successful randomization checks completed after the pretest, we have no reason to assume that these three conditions were systematically different from one another due to any factor outside of the experimental stimulus, hence increasing our confidence in the internal validity of our study.
These findings again confirm that political entertainment is a source of political influence. The lack of distinction between the effects of the SNL parodies and the CBS interview further illustrate that the historical distinction between news and entertainment relevancies obsolete. Although this study has assessed priming in the context of Fey’s Palin caricatures, other possible effects of exposure—including how the parodies influenced McCain favorability and vote choice—should be explored. In addition, future studies should consider the moderating effects of individual level constructs in these salience effects. These variables might include political knowledge, interest, and gender.

References


