

World of Warcraft:
International Climate Change Coverage on *The Daily Show* and *The
Colbert Report*

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to investigate the portrayal of international climate change cooperation on the satirical programs *The Daily Show* and *Colbert Report*, and to compare this portrayal with that in mainstream media discourse. Quantitative content analysis of *The Daily Show* and *Colbert Report* was used to demonstrate the proportion of overall coverage of climate change dedicated to an international perspective, and to identify which international topics were covered. A qualitative analysis of specific segments from both programs was performed to identify the targets of humor and the nature of the messages. The analysis revealed that the programs targeted other media's coverage of international climate policy events, yet themselves demonstrated cynicism regarding the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change climate negotiation process. These messages were compared to those of traditional media outlets, which showed that mainstream outlets framed the issue of climate negotiation as a conflict, while the satirical programs focused more on the inefficiencies and ineffectiveness of the United Nations. The cynicism of these programs may influence the opinions of their audiences.

For two weeks at the end of 2009, leaders from around the world met in Copenhagen, Denmark, to attempt to negotiate the future of international climate change policy cooperation. However, American media was conspicuously inattentive to this significant policy event. This conference was a meeting of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), the body responsible for attempting to create an international agreement to combat climate change. The member countries meet annually at the Conference of the Parties, where negotiations take place in an attempt to create a binding international agreement.¹

At the Copenhagen conference, President Obama and 200 other world leaders converged to attempt to negotiate a binding agreement to replace the Kyoto protocol. The Kyoto protocol was a 1997 agreement which entered into force in 2005, but was rejected by the United States under President Bush.² Because Copenhagen was the first UNFCCC conference during President Obama's administration, there was a spirit of optimism surrounding the conference, leading many to refer to it as "Hopenhagen."³ Yet despite the general optimism many felt entering this conference, the overall results were disappointing. No binding agreement was created, instead the "Copenhagen Accord," a non-binding agreement that many felt was a waste of the potential of this conference, was created by President Obama and other nation leaders.⁴ This document passed on the responsibility of creating a new international agreement to later conferences. Because parties were unsuccessful at Copenhagen, the 2012 COP in Doha should have been the most significant UNFCCC event, as it was the deadline year when the Kyoto protocol expired. This conference resulted in the extension of Kyoto until 2020, a generally disappointing result. The Copenhagen conference had the most potential for the international

1 UNFCCC 2013. *Meetings*. <http://unfccc.int/2860.php>

2 UNFCCC 2013. *Kyoto Protocol*. http://unfccc.int/kyoto_protocol/items/2830.php

3 Dubash, Navroz. *Copenhagen: Climate of Mistrust*.

4 Ibid.

community to create a new international climate agreement. The failure of an event that began with such hype led to widespread cynicism regarding the effectiveness of international cooperation.⁵

The Copenhagen Accord was created by the leaders of the United States, China, India, and other Annex 1 countries. In the UNFCCC, countries are categorized as either Annex I, Annex II, or Non-Annex I Parties. Annex 1 parties, those which were the driving force of the Copenhagen Accord, consist of “Industrialized countries that were members of the OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development) in 1992, plus countries with economies in transition (the EIT Parties), including the Russian Federation, the Baltic States, and several Central and Eastern European States.)⁶ Non Annex I Parties are:

mostly developing countries...recognized by the Convention as being especially vulnerable to the adverse impacts of climate change, including countries with low-lying coastal areas and those prone to desertification and drought. Others (such as countries that rely heavily on income from fossil fuel production and commerce) feel more vulnerable to the potential economic impacts of climate change response measures. The Convention emphasizes activities that promise to answer the special needs and concerns of these vulnerable countries, such as investment, insurance and technology transfer. The 49 Parties classified as least developed countries (LDCs) by the United Nations are given special consideration under the Convention on account of their limited capacity to respond to climate change and adapt to its adverse effects. Parties are urged to take full account of the special situation of LDCs when considering funding and technology-transfer activities.⁷

Many of these non-Annex I parties felt that the Copenhagen Accord was a means for the Annex I nations to avoid making any commitments to their own emissions reduction targets, or mitigation and adaptation funding plans within the most affected nations. This tension between the Annex I and non-Annex Parties came to a head during the conference when the African

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change 2013.

⁷ Ibid.

nations staged a boycott to demonstrate their unfair treatment in the negotiation process.⁸

Despite this boycott and tension surrounding the adoption of the Accord as the final act of the Copenhagen conference, 186 countries signed onto the Accord.⁹ Despite protests that the document was ineffective, and favored the developed nations, it became the main accomplishment of the Copenhagen conference.

Although there are often accusations that UN conferences are media events, rather than effective policy meetings, there was a surprising lack of media coverage of this most recent UNFCCC event.¹⁰ In general, the media has a negative track record in its portrayal of climate change. This issue receives little coverage, with a study by the National Science Board determining that “less than two percent of all traditional news stories are devoted to the environment, and global warming captures just a small minority of this coverage.”¹¹ When the media does report on climate change, the coverage focuses on the persistence of climate skeptics, despite overwhelming scientific consensus regarding the reality of man-made climate change.¹² Climate science is portrayed as a contentious issue, with the focus on debate in the scientific community, or on political conflict within the United States.¹³

One event where the media focused on climate change as a debatable issue was the “Climategate” scandal of 2009. “Climategate” refers to a set of emails by climate scientists, many of whom were affiliated with the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, in which it appeared that they were manipulating their data. ¹⁴ While it was later demonstrated that the

⁸ Pan-African Climate Justice Alliance 2009.

⁹ US Climate Action Network 2009.

¹⁰ Fomerand, Jacques. *UN Conferences: Media Events or Genuine Diplomacy?* 1996

¹¹ National Science Board. (2012).

¹² Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change [IPCC]. (2007). Summary for policymakers.

¹³ Boykoff and Boykoff. Climate Change and Journalistic Norms: A case-Study of US Mass Media Coverage 2007.

¹⁴ Gagnier, Daniel. *Climategate: Bad Science, Red Herring, or Politician and Media Football?* 2010

“tricks” being referred to in the emails were referring to tools to demonstrate changes in the data, not manipulating the data itself in any way, this did not prevent the media from claiming that these emails were proof of problems in the climate science community and a legitimate reason to give voice to climate skeptics.¹⁵ The media portrayal of this issue was used by many American politicians who dispute climate change, such as:

The Alaskan governor Sarah Palin, in the Washington Post on 9 December, attacked the emailers as a "highly politicised scientific circle" who "manipulated data to 'hide the decline' in global temperatures". She was joined by the Republican senator James Inhofe of Oklahoma – who has for years used his chairmanship of the Environment and Public Works Committee to campaign against climate scientists and to dismiss anthropogenic global warming as "the greatest hoax ever perpetrated on the American people". During the Copenhagen climate conference, which he attended on a Senate delegation, he referred to the Jones's "hide the decline" quote and said: "Of course, he means hide the decline in temperatures."¹⁶

American policymakers who were opposed to climate change were quick to utilize the “Climategate” scandal to argue their position against climate science. It is also notable that the chair of the Environment and Public Works Committee was a climate change denier, despite the overwhelming scientific consensus. This scandal had a notable effect on American perceptions of climate change, being cited for “significant declines in Americans’ climate change beliefs, risk perceptions, and trust in scientists” in studies comparing survey responses between 2008 and 2009, after the scandal broke.¹⁷ Unfortunately, the scandal occurred in 2009 before the Copenhagen conference, tainting the event with renewed vigor from forces, both private and political, which opposed climate change action.

In a media environment where skepticism and conflict are given greater weight than consensus and cooperation, it is possible to create a public and a political system that deny the reality of climate change. This focus on the more contentious aspects of the climate discussion

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Pearce, Fred. *How the 'Climategate' Scandal is Bogus and Based on Climate Skeptics' Lies*. 2010

¹⁷ Leiserowitz, Anthony et. al. *Climategate, Public Opinion, and the Loss of Trust*. 2010

are likely caused by the journalistic norms “which emphasize personalization, dramatization, and novelty, while also adhering to a model of ‘balanced’ reporting, which grants equal time to opposing views, regardless of whether the opposition is in the minority or not.”¹⁸ These journalistic norms, while seen as an ideal way to neutrally present an issue, inevitably favor climate skepticism by giving it an exaggerated platform from which to critique the mainstream consensus.

Despite the norms that mainstream programs obey, in recent years satirical news programs have emerged as a means to challenge the media's discourse. *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report* are two Comedy Central programs which mimic the style of nightly news or cable pundit programs, yet they are able to provide a different viewpoint which challenges and supplements mainstream news. These programs are not “fake news” but they instead serve as “alternative journalism, one enabled by the ongoing collapse of boundaries, not just among news and entertainment or media genres and televisual forms but among discursive domains and the conceptual systems the produce.”¹⁹ *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report* are “oppositional” news programs which are able to critically challenge the “real” news. John Stewart and *The Daily Show* accomplish this task in the guise of a nightly news program, where he serves as the level-headed and seemingly neutral anchor. Colbert instead mirrors his program after cable news pundits, where he serves as an opinionated talking head. He mirrors his persona after Bill O'Reilly, an aggressive personality who has his own “hybrid news and entertainment program,” where he has claimed “the self-appointed title of ‘warrior’... in a simplistic world of heroes and villains fighting over some imagined American way of life.”²⁰ Colbert mimics this personality by

18 Feldman, Lauren. *Cloudy with a Chance of Heat Balls: The Portrayal of Global Warming on The Daily Show and The Colbert Report*. 2013

¹⁹ Baym, G. 2009. Stephen Colbert's Parody of the Postmodern.

²⁰ Ibid.

creating a persona who is less concerned about the facts and more concerned with what feels true. While many of the statements he makes on his program seem to agree with the pundits he mimics, his “political satire is the art of juxtaposition between apparently incompatible propositions... his literal language always placed in juxtaposition with its implied meaning.”²¹ Colbert’s performance has more layers than Stewart’s, and leaves a risk that the satirical nature of his message can be missed in favor of his stated, literal ideas. Both programs have the freedom to critique the facets of the “real” news which limit essential discourse on significant, contentious issues.

These satirical programs have become an integral part of the media, creating informed viewers and discussing significant policy issues. In fact a Pew Research Center Study found that Jon Stewart, the host of *The Daily Show*, is considered the most trusted man in news. In terms of climate change coverage, *The Daily Show* is frequently cited as providing greater coverage than the mainstream press. Another Pew study found that in 2007, *The Daily Show* featured twice the story coverage of climate change as the mainstream press.²² The same study found that *The Daily Show* devoted proportionally more coverage to global warming than mainstream news outlets. In fact, global warming ranked among the top five most-covered stories on *The Daily Show*.²³ Not only does this program have more coverage of these issues, but “as a likely result of the relative prominence of global warming coverage on *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report*, the programs’ regular viewers report paying more attention to the issue than infrequent viewers.”²⁴ With an informed viewership and a significant quantity of coverage of climate change, it is vital to examine how these satirical programs are presenting the issue of climate

²¹ Ibid.

²² Pew Research Center 2007

²³ Project for Excellence in Journalism 2008

²⁴(Feldman, Leiserowitz, & Maibach, 2011).

change. If the mainstream media is ignoring the possibility of international climate change cooperation, instead focusing on climate skepticism and domestic political disagreement, it is possible that the satirical programs might present American audiences with a different perspective on international climate cooperation.

Objectives

This study has a number of research objectives, all directed toward the goal of examining media discourse on international climate change policy. The first objective is to determine how frequently *The Daily Show* and *Colbert Report* focus on international aspects of climate change. In order to examine the focus of these clips, it is necessary to identify the framing and content of the clips which are identified as focusing on an international topic. A close examination of some of the more substantive clips, specifically those focusing on the 2009 UNFCCC Copenhagen conference, will serve to clarify the messages and targets of humor in these segments, with the goal of identifying the messages that audiences could perceive from these clips.

In order to compare *The Daily Show* and *Colbert Report's* coverage with that of mainstream media, there were two goals of this study. The first was to identify the quantity of mainstream coverage of UNFCCC conferences, creating a timeline of media interest in international climate policy conferences. The second goal was to compare the framing, content, and messages of a selection of mainstream media clips to those of *The Daily Show* and *Colbert Report* clips discussing the same issue. Many of the clips chosen were those featured as segments within the satirical programs; this method allowed for the chance to compare the intended messages of these programs with the statements made about them by Stewart and Colbert. This comparison between satirical and mainstream programming serves to demonstrate any difference in coverage or message between the types of programs, and also demonstrates if the media

outlets themselves, rather than the issues being discussed, are the target of satirical humor.

Methods

In order to find relevant program clips from *The Daily Show* and *Colbert Report*, both shows' sites were searched using the description tag “global warming.” These websites both use the tag “global warming” rather than “climate change” despite whichever term is used within the program itself. Every program segment which was pulled from this search, with the exception of “exclusive content” which had been created for the web, was included in the analysis. The date range for these clips was from January 1999 to April 30, 2012 for *The Daily Show*, and October 2005 until April 30, 2012 for the *Colbert Report*. The total number of clips examined for this part of the project was 81 video segments from *The Daily Show*, and 102 from *The Colbert Report*. These clips were all of those that featured climate change coverage in general, and were examined for a project which aimed to quantify all coverage of climate change on the show.²⁵ From within this larger sample, 13 clips from *The Daily Show* and 20 from *The Colbert Report* were identified as containing some mention of an international issue or event. In order to capture the focus of this international coverage, these clips were coded according to whether or not they discussed: Foreign country action on climate, foreign country impacted by climate, United States involvement in an international story/event, international meeting, and United Nations stories. These categories of framing, which were not mutually exclusive, provided a general overview of what international issues were being reported on by these programs.

In order to identify mainstream media clips for comparison with the satirical programs, clips were selected from the TV News section of the Internet Archive. The internet Archive collects and preserves television news, including “350,000 news programs collected over 3 years from national U.S. networks and stations... the archive is updated with new broadcasts 24 hours

²⁵ Feldman 2013.

after they are aired.”²⁶ By first performing a search for the term “climate conference,” a timeline of overall media coverage of these events was revealed. The term “climate conference” gave clearer results relating to multiple UNFCCC events rather than alternative phrases or searching for the individual conferences. This method allowed for the creation of a comparative timeline of overall media coverage for each UNFCCC climate conference from Copenhagen in 2009 to Doha in 2012.

The climate conferences were chosen as a unit of analysis due to the in-depth coverage of these conferences, particularly the Copenhagen conference in 2009, received on both *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report*. Colbert had a segment of his program dedicated to the conference the week before it began, which contained both a monologue and an interview. Stewart had an equally lengthy clip which synthesized the events of the conference the following week, which he discussed in a monologue. A clear spike in media coverage leading up to the 2009 conference demonstrated that this conference was the subject of significant media coverage, and not just of these satirical programs.

In this study, it was vital to not only understand the quantity of mainstream media coverage, but also to analyze the messages about the climate conferences being portrayed by mainstream news programs. Thus, a second Archive.org search was performed to identify clips using the phrase “Copenhagen Climate Conference.” This phrase takes into account that *The Daily Show* and *Colbert Report* clips that were analyzed for content and messages were both focused on this conference. A random selection of clips from this search was viewed, to gain an understanding of the overall media climate surrounding this conference. Channel specific searches were performed for MSNBC, CNN, and Fox from the date range of December 1, 2009 to December 31, 2009. 3 clips were selected for each channel, with the goal of viewing

²⁶ <http://archive.org/details/tv>

programming which occurred before the conference (to view speculation on the event) and during the conference (to view analysis.)

Coding Results

In terms of overall content focused on international issues, 20 clips, representing 23.5% of the total segments discussing climate change on *The Colbert Report*, and 13 clips, or 22% of *The Daily Show's* climate change segments, were found to contain some mention of an international event or story. Of the five specific sub-variables analyzed, the following frequencies demonstrate which international climate change topics were most frequently covered by these programs.

Table 1: International Variable Coverage on *The Daily Show*.

Variable	Frequency	Percentage of Overall Coverage
International Action	8	9.8%
US Related Issue	5	6.1%
International Impact	4	4.9%
United Nations	5	6.1%
International Meeting	0	0.0%

Table 2: International Variable Coverage on *The Colbert Report*

Variable	Frequency	Percentage of Overall Coverage
International Action	10	9.8%
US Related Issue	10	9.8%
International Impact	7	6.8%
United Nations	3	2.9%
International Meeting	3	2.9%

The most commonly reported type of international event was action taken by a foreign country to address climate change. Because clips could be coded for multiple variables, many of the clips featured discussions of international action, in terms of US action (or inaction.) There was significant overlap between “international action” and “international- US involvement” during the coding process, which reveals that in general these programs may focus on international issues which have some influence on the US.

An example of a clip discussing international action is “Smokin’ Pole- The Quest for Arctic Riches- Canada & China” featured on *The Colbert Report* June 14, 2010. “Smokin’ Pole” is the phrase used on the program to discuss any issues surrounding the melting of the polar ice caps. In this particular segment, Colbert first discusses Canadian findings of ancient artifacts revealed by the melting ice. He then discusses the fact that “China is lobbying for a permanent observer status with the Arctic Council” and also declaring their interest in Antarctica, despite not bordering either region.²⁷ China revealed its creation of a new ice-breaking ship and their interest in gaining access to the newly opening Arctic trade routes. The “Smokin’ Pole” type

27 <http://www.colbertnation.com/the-colbert-report-videos/312498/june-14-2010/smokin--pole---the-quest-for-arctic-riches>

clips are interesting in that they focus on the economic benefits caused by climate change which states are competing over, rather than focusing on the environmental degradation associated with climate change.

A prime example of international impact, without a United States focus, is exemplified in Jon Stewart's interview with former President Mohamed Nasheed of the Maldives from April 2, 2012. Nasheed discussed political turmoil in the country, but also discussed the plight of many small island nations, and other coastal regions that are already being negatively impacted (and are projected to face further damage) as climate change continues. Nasheed notes, "climate change is an issues that is happening now, we have 16 islands that need relocation, we have water contamination issues, we have fishing problems, and coral bleaching issues. There are a whole host of things that are happening now, and people have to take note of that."²⁸ Nasheed provides urgency to an issue that is frequently discussed as a hypothetical consequence of global warming. He shows that many smaller nations are already suffering the consequences of climate change while larger powers are unable to reach any binding international agreements.

Despite the infrequency of occurrences, the clips focusing on international meetings at the UNFCCC, such as "Something is Melting in Denmark- Dan Esty" from *The Colbert Report* and "World of Warcraft" from *The Daily Show* are both significant clips due to the length of time each dedicates to discussing international cooperation at the 2009 UNFCCC Conference in Copenhagen. *The Colbert Show* clip is 6:40 in length; *The Daily Show* clip is 8 minutes in length. For shows that are generally around 22 minutes in length, this is a significant portion of the program to dedicate to a single issue. A more in-depth analysis of these clips revealed what issues and messages were being portrayed to audiences regarding the Copenhagen conference.

Copenhagen Coverage on *Colbert Report*

28 <http://www.thedailyshow.com/watch/mon-april-2-2012/mohamed-nasheed>

The most in-depth coverage of the UNFCCC Copenhagen convention on the *Colbert Report* occurred in the segment “Something is Melting in Denmark- Dan Esty.” This clip aired November 30, 2009 and is comprised of a 3 minute monologue by Colbert, followed by a 3 minute interview with guest Professor Dan Esty. Esty had been a negotiator for the 1992 Kyoto protocol, and was brought onto the show to give his expertise on UN climate negotiation at the conferences.

This clip begins with Colbert stating, “Of course, the other big news- global warming is a farce.” Right away, the clip opens with an explicit statement challenging the veracity of climate change. Colbert goes on to introduce the issue of Climategate, explaining it as “hundreds of emails that were stolen from the world's top climate scientists... who wrote that he was 'using statistical tricks in order to hide the decline in global temperatures.' Folks, these emails are the smoking gun that proves smoking guns don't cause global warming.”²⁹ At this point in the clip, Colbert has merely introduced the issue of Climategate, and says to his audience that these emails serve as proof against the reality of climate change. Colbert is presenting an exaggerated form of the argument that “Climategate” was proof that climate change was a false phenomenon, which was being exaggerated by scientists and certain politicians.³⁰ There was a belief when these emails were leaked that they demonstrated a clear problem with the overall science of climate change.

Later, during his interview with Dan Esty, Colbert raises the issue of Climategate again, and the problems it demonstrated in terms of scientific ethics and reporting. From their discussion:

Colbert: These emails mean that global warming is nothing to worry about....

29 <http://www.colbertnation.com/the-colbert-report-videos/256924/november-30-2009/something-is-melting-in-denmark---dan-esty>

30 <http://mediamatters.org/blog/2013/04/12/new-study-shows-once-again-how-climategate-email/193611>

Esty: Not quite so fast Steven.

C: These guys are tricking the data, and fudging results, and hiding the decline of global warming. How is that not a scandal?

E: I think what they tried to do is to simplify a story...

C: By leaving out the facts?

E: The truth is the facts still remain.. but there are some things that we are more uncertain about. How fast climate change might occur, where it might occur, how big it might be. So the fudging of the data was not the right thing to do.

C: It was the wrong thing to do.

E: But it was simplifying a story because they thought that the public wouldn't get it, and the media would oversimplify in the other way.

C: What do you mean that we would oversimplify the other way?

E: It just might have happened.

C: Well now they're really given me something to really oversimplify- they lied, global warming not real. And I'm disappointed because I threw my lot in with global warming. I believe in the free market, and when Al Gore's movie made money, I was convinced.³¹

Colbert is able to demonstrate the main problem with the Climategate scandal, namely, that it was not the place of the scientists involved to attempt to modify or simplify their data for mainstream consumption. The manipulation of the data is unethical for scientists. Although Esty claims that there were good intentions behind the act, "Climategate" made climate scientists appear untrustworthy. Despite Esty's claims of good intentions to be clear, is unethical for a scientists. The air of secrecy surrounding these emails gave credence to climate skeptics and those that believed all of climate science in general was a hoax and a scam. Even in his persona as someone who would truly believe that these emails disprove climate science, Colbert is able to demonstrate the danger of the intellectual and scientific community not being clear with the public regarding their findings; intellectual elitism creates an opening for climate skepticism on unscientific grounds.

After explicitly challenging climate scientists and the reality of climate change, Colbert goes on to discuss the UNFCCC Copenhagen conference, which was to occur the

31 <http://www.colbertnation.com/the-colbert-report-videos/256924/november-30-2009/something-is-melting-in-denmark---dan-esty>

following weekend. In his monologue, he explains, “the UN climate change conference will start in Copenhagen, Denmark where president Obama and 64 other world leaders will try to do what the UN has never done before- accomplish something.”³² Colbert portrays the UN as an ineffective organization, worthy of ridicule. This is despite his guest Esty's optimism regarding the UNFCCC conference process, and Copenhagen in particular, as demonstrated by the following exchange:

Colbert: What will Obama do? What can he bring to the table?

Esty: He is going to bring a real change in spirit. Remember where we were a year ago.

C: Change in spirit? So, nothing. What's a change in spirit? That and \$4.25 will get you a latte.

E: Fair enough. We don't have our act together in this country. Congress hasn't passed legislation, so he can't come with a climate change action plan which is what the rest of the world had hoped for. So there will be disappointment.

Colbert demonstrates an overall disbelief that anything worthwhile will be accomplished at Copenhagen. Esty acknowledges that despite the presence of Obama and other world leaders, Copenhagen was not the conference that was going to create a post-Kyoto agreement. Instead, he focuses on the idea that this conference will “commit to further scheduled negotiations, the issues that will be taken up ... commit to bringing all of the countries of the world together.” This interview demonstrates that even those who were involved with the UN negotiation process were not optimistic about any concrete results coming from the Copenhagen round. While the conference did lead to the creation of the Copenhagen Accord, this agreement was nonbinding, and the general opinion of the international community was that this conference was a wasted opportunity.³³

Copenhagen had the potential to be a significant conference due to the change in presidency in the United States. In the past, George W. Bush had opposed the Kyoto protocol

³² Ibid.

³³ <http://www.urengo.com/page/287/Outcomes-of-Copenhagen-Climate-Conference.aspx>

because he felt it was unfair to US interests, specifically economic concerns.³⁴ Colbert shows how this policy has removed the discussion of international climate accords from the US discussion of climate change. He reminds his audience of the Kyoto Protocol:

Colbert: Now sure, there have been climate summits before- remember Kyoto? Me neither. Thanks to George W. Bush, he pulled out of the Kyoto climate treaty, a move that his own head of the EPA described like this '... flipping the bird, frankly, to the rest of the world.' Fun fact, if you pollute enough, the birds flip themselves."

Colbert's mention of Kyoto is an exaggeration of the idea that the American public is not familiar with the Kyoto protocol, due to the previous government's opposition to international agreements. Esty as a guest represented environmentalists and others who were optimistic that Obama would drive US involvement with the UN process.

While some groups were optimistic Obama would increase US involvement with the UN, for others this was their greatest fear. Colbert featured clips of Sean Hannity and Glenn Beck during his monologue, where both hosts stated their belief that Obama was going to Copenhagen to sign away US sovereignty. Colbert mocked this idea that the US could give away their sovereignty, not because the idea itself is ridiculous, but because "they're going to take our sovereignty away. I assume from the Chinese, 'cause I think we hocked it last year for rent money."³⁵ Colbert is able to mock the idea of US sovereignty as something that can be given away, specifically something that will be given away to the UN, and only in terms of a climate issue, rather than economics or politics. Later in the interview with Esty, Colbert raises this idea of lost sovereignty with his guest.

Colbert: He's going to surrender US sovereignty, so some court over in Denmark gets to say whether I get to light a barbecue fire.

Esty: Here's the problem- greenhouse gases don't recognize sovereignty either. So if we don't work with others, they won't work with us. And the pollution comes to us.

34 George W. Bush 2001. <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=45811>

35 <http://www.colbertnation.com/the-colbert-report-videos/256924/november-30-2009/something-is-melting-in-denmark---dan-esty>

C: So you admit that we will lose our sovereignty?

E: I don't think that's quite the way to put it.

C: That's the way I just put it. That's the way Glenn Beck put it, that's the way Sean Hannity put it. That's three. Three times makes it true.

E: And thank goodness these guys aren't negotiating for us.

While Colbert facetiously claims that Hannity and Beck are the source of policy and truth on the issue of US international climate relations, Esty is able to point out that the TV hosts Hannity and Beck are not sources of policy, likely for the best if international cooperation is ever to occur on this issue.

Copenhagen Coverage on *The Daily Show*

The Daily Show focused its coverage of the UNFCCC 2009 conference in Copenhagen in an 8 minute segment titled “World of Warcraft” which aired on December 14, 2009. Unlike the Colbert clip above, *The Daily Show's* coverage occurred after the Copenhagen conference, and was able to examine the events of the conference, as well as coverage of the conference, rather than having to speculate on what would occur. This later coverage gave Jon Stewart specific examples of problems and ridiculous situations that arose during the conference.

The first issue that arose during the conference which Stewart discusses is the boycott of the conference proceedings by the African nations. At first, he portrays this boycott as a positive action by the African nations to gain a voice and respect in the UN debates. However, after showing a clip which revealed the boycott only lasted about an hour, Stewart says:

Stewart: An hour and a half, I don't know if that's a boycott, that might have just been lunch. But the hour long boycott is indicative of the confusing complexity of this issue of global warming. The African nations suffer the most environmental damage in climate change scenarios, yet strict emissions controls may hinder industrialization of this very underdeveloped region.³⁶

Stewart begins by mocking the boycott, but then goes on to provide a surprisingly clear

36 <http://www.thedailyshow.com/watch/mon-december-14-2009/world-of-warcraft>

statement discussing why these states may feel the need to boycott in the first place. This treatment of the issue goes beyond pointing out the ridiculously short nature to reveal the challenges to these nations in trying to participate fairly in the UN process.

While Stewart discussed the nuances behind the African boycott, he was less understanding with some other questionable UN behavior. Specifically, the UN used 1200 limousines during the course of the conference; because this was more limos than existed in Denmark, many had to be imported from Germany for the event. Stewart rightly pointed out the hypocrisy of this occurring at an event intended to benefit the climate. His frustration is clear when he exclaims, “for fuck's sake! They're importing limo's to a climate summit... 1200 limos is pretty cavalier for the world's most committed environmentalists.”³⁷ Seeing Stewart visibly confounded by the behavior of the climate conference participants makes it clear to the audience that this counter-intuitive behavior is shocking and worthy of ridicule.

Stewart not only challenges the actions of the UN members at the conference, but also directs much of his ire at the coverage of this event by other media outlets. Specifically, the fact that other media outlets give equal coverage to climate skeptics despite overwhelming scientific consensus, as well as the fact that some media personalities themselves play the role of a climate skeptic draws Stewart's criticism. His criticism begins with CNN's coverage of the climate conference in Copenhagen, where they are interviewing “Climate Change Skeptic” Lord Christopher Monckton, who claims that the climate conference is a waste of time and money.³⁸ Stewart is quick to point out that while Lord Christopher Monckton isn't a scientist per se, he is the third Viscount of Brenchley. Stewart's tone (and affected British accent) in this segment are mocking of the fact that this minor lord is being interviewed as an official climate

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid.

skeptic, and given equal coverage (at least in terms of deference from the media) as a legitimate scientific source. It is also notable during CNN's interview with Lord Monckton that their banner features a reminder of the earlier Climategate email scandal.³⁹ This media outlet was quick to remind viewers of the scandal surrounding legitimate climate science, most likely to make the issue of scientific consensus appear to be more contentious.

Other programs during the climate conference featured interviews or clips of US politicians, such as Senator James Inhofe (R-OK), Sarah Palin, and Representative Ted Poe all claiming that climate change is either a hoax or a scam. Once again, these policymakers are not scientific authorities on the issue. Stewart first mocks the notion of climate scientists entering this field for the high pay (as expressed by Sarah Palin):

Stewart: I am so sick, of fat cat scientists, with their easy, double-blind study money. [high-pitched voice] 'Oh, I study global weather patterns. My shirts are so expensive they need their pockets protected.' So yes, on one hand 90-95 percent of the scientific community believes global warming is real and that we are causing it. But, on the other hand, it gets cold in winter. And scientists are paid.

Stewart is quick to show a list of a number of organizations that believe in man-made climate change, including NASA, the UN, the American Medical Association, and the National Academies of Science from 32 countries including the United States. He quips, "that's certainly stronger than the 4 out of 5 dentists recommend sugarless gum benchmark, that as you know, is our scientific standard. But that doesn't mean that the one guy who recommends sugared gum can't be interviewed on the TV about global warming."⁴⁰ Stewart is able to clearly tell the audience that there is overwhelming scientific consensus regarding this issue, and that the media's continued acknowledgment of fringe disbelievers is a factor of their coverage practices, rather than a necessity of a discourse between equally supported sides.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

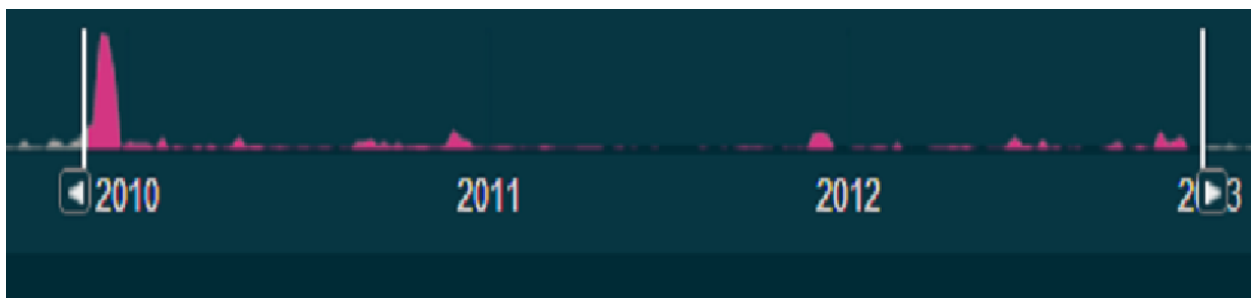
Not only do the media report on climate skepticism, but media personalities themselves often express their climate skepticism as though it were factual information. It seems as though climate change is an issue where editorializing is an accepted practice. Stewart reports on a new iceberg off of the coast of Western Australia, and argues that this is anecdotal evidence for climate change. He then features a clip of Sean Hannity presenting his own anecdotal evidence against climate change, that he “doesn't believe in global warming... because it snowed in Houston.” Stewart offers a rebuttal to Hannity's evidence that snow in Houston is an argument against climate change, by first seeming to agree with the statement:

Stewart: Global warming is not happening because it snowed in Houston. And, they elected a lesbian mayor. Wait, I know what happened. I guess Hell really did freeze over. And how could that happen if global warming is real?

To Stewart, the idea that global warming is not occurring because of weather patterns is as ridiculous as the notion of electing a lesbian mayor having an impact on the weather. Stewart's message to his audience is that normal weather patterns (that it gets cold in winter) are not a valid argument against climate change.

Media Coverage of Climate Conferences

Figure 1- “Climate Conference” Media Frequency⁴¹



This frequency timeline obtained from archive.org demonstrates how media interest in the UN climate conference has decreased significantly after the Copenhagen conference in 2009.

41. <http://archive.org/details/tv?q=climate+conference&time=20091129-20121231>

At its peak, there were 203 unique broadcasts focusing on the Copenhagen conference on December 3, 2009. Later conferences, including the most recent conference in Doha, have only peaked with 34 broadcasts. The significant drop in coverage from Copenhagen to the later conferences demonstrates the media's lack of interest in this issue, which decreases the information being distributed to the public.

Mainstream Media Messages

By comparing the messages portrayed in *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report* with randomly selected clips from the same time, the goal of this portion of the study was to view the overall media discourse, and not simply the media messages that the satirical programs chose to respond to. The clips chosen by *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report* to analyze all had strong, negative messages about the climate conference. Media personalities such as Glenn Beck and Sean Hannity were featured claiming that the Copenhagen conference was going to cause the United States (through President Obama) to sign its sovereignty away.⁴² Another Fox News contributor, Laura Ingraham, argued that the climate conference “isn’t about climate change, it isn’t about polar bears, this is about a concerted global effort to reduce the standard of living of all Americans. Bring us down, so the rest of these countries can float up.”⁴³ This is an incredibly strong, negative statement about the goals of international climate cooperation.

MSNBC's coverage, particularly that of their anchor Rachel Maddow, served as a counter-point to the coverage of the Fox news personalities. Maddow, like Hannity and Beck, has the tendency to put her own opinion into her broadcasts. However, her opinions fall more in line with those of Stewart and Colbert, where she openly mocks climate deniers. On December 7th, she began her show by stating that the UN climate “summit kicks off in Copenhagen, and

42 <http://www.colbertnation.com/the-colbert-report-videos/256924/november-30-2009/something-is-melting-in-denmark---dan-esty>

43 <http://www.thedailyshow.com/watch/mon-december-14-2009/world-of-warmcraft>

America is well-represented by 'kook-enders' and former Bush administration officials all set to deny the whole problem exists.”⁴⁴ This coverage draws attention to the problems the Bush administration caused in the international climate negotiation process, and also gives Maddow's audience a pessimistic view of the conference.

Randomly selected clips from major cable news had less severe messages about the conference, but were still overall negative, conflict-oriented, or dismissive of the conference. On a December 18th edition of *The Situation Room*, Wolf Blitzer introduced his segment on the climate conference by saying, “there have been deep divisions between the rich nations and the poor nations, and discord between China and the United States, all of which could potentially scuttle a deal that President Obama flew all the way to Copenhagen for.”⁴⁵ This clip immediately focuses on the international tensions at the conference, and the potential that these conflicts have to derail international efforts to create a climate agreement. On that same date, MSNBC focused on the fact that President Obama was staying late at the conference trying to “broker a last-minute deal with China.”⁴⁶ The clip discussed the efforts of the President to create a deal, but portrayed China as a major roadblock to cooperation. The coverage portrays the president as being inconvenienced by the negotiation process. By focusing on the lateness of the negotiations and referring to the process as “nail-biting” this coverage is attempting to create a sense of drama and tension around the negotiation process.

The impact that “Climategate” would have on the negotiations was a major focus of media coverage of this conference. On multiple Fox news programs throughout the conference, the scandal around the emails was the focus of the discussion. Neil Cavuto, in criticism of US politicians attending the conference, stated, “they're going to an environmental conference where

44 http://archive.org/details/MSNBC_20091208_040000_The_Rachel_Maddow_Show#start/71/end/101

45 http://archive.org/details/CNN_20091218_210000_The_Situation_Room_With_Wolf_Blitzer#start/85/end/115

46 http://archive.org/details/MSNBC_20091218_180000_Andrea_Mitchell_Reports#start/801/end/831

the data is now increasingly being questioned, and now given these “Climategate” emails maybe more from the proponents.”⁴⁷ These programs focused on the email scandal as a legitimate means to disprove climate change science, and as a reason that the United States should not take part in the international negotiation process.

A December 6th CNN clip focused on the potential impact that the “Climategate” emails will have on the deliberation, quoted UK and UN officials who stated that the controversy would not be ignored, but that it would not derail the conference.”⁴⁸ Yet the next day, CNN was reporting on Saudi Arabian delegates arguing that the emails were significant proof of climate change, and were arguing against the conference.⁴⁹ CNN began their discussions of the conference by reminding audiences of the email scandal, and although they introduced the idea as something that would be discussed at the conference without derailing the conference, they immediately brought attention to the conflict that this scandal caused. They ignored any motivation that Saudi Arabia, as an oil producing country, would have in drawing attention to the email scandal. The focus on the emails themselves, and the surrounding scandal, drew attention away from real political and economic motivations that countries might have for opposing climate negotiations, and instead frames it in conflict over the reality of climate change in general.

Discussion

The goal of this study was to examine how *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report* cover the issue of climate change, specifically of international aspects of this issue. It was also a goal of this study to compare how these programs reported on this issue, and how their messages relate to the coverage given by mainstream media. The methods used to meet

47 http://archive.org/details/FOXNEWS_20091216_210000_Your_World_With_Neil_Cavuto#start/983/end/1013

48 http://archive.org/details/CNN_20091207_000000_CNN_Newsroom#start/838/end/868

49 http://archive.org/details/CNN_20091208_010000_Campbell_Brown#start/131/end/161

these objectives were two-fold: quantitative research of both the satirical programs and a general look at the quantity of mainstream media coverage to see the frequency with which climate change is presented with an international frame, and not solely as a US policy issue. After determining that 23.5% of segments discussing climate change on *The Colbert Report* and 22% of segments discussing climate change on *The Daily Show* featured coverage of international issues, it became clear that this frame receives less attention than US focused coverage of climate issues. However, both programs did present in-depth coverage of one specific international event, the UNFCCC Copenhagen conference in 2009. This focus on this event led to a comparison with mainstream coverage of these conferences, both in terms of quantity of coverage and messages being presented by these media outlets. A quantitative analysis showed that mainstream media attention also peaked for the 2009 UNFCCC conference, with none of the conferences in the following years earning even 25% of the coverage of Copenhagen. The overall trend in both mainstream and satirical coverage is decreased coverage of the largest event of international climate change cooperation.

The findings of this research provide mixed results for an understanding of international climate change policy portrayal in *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report*. Both programs mocked climate skepticism and other media's coverage of climate change as a contentious issue that is still open to (viable) debate. The ability of these programs to challenge and reject the mainstream media's obsession with presenting climate skeptics as a viable alternative to the general scientific community grants their audience a better understanding of the accepted reality of the climate change issue. Of course, there is still the potential that audiences can confound this message, a problem more likely with Colbert and his character whose explicitly stated denial of climate change might obscure the implicit

message he is attempting to convey.⁵⁰ However, when the messages of these two shows are taken in conjunction, it seems likely that audiences would perceive the message of accepting the scientific consensus, and rejecting the media's traditions and ploys.

Both programs also challenge the media's frame of climate change as a politically contentious issue, most notably (for the scope of this study) in terms of international cooperation. Colbert seemingly supports the opinion of personalities such as Sean Hannity and Glenn Beck who believe that international cooperation on climate change will lead to the US signing away its sovereignty, while questioning the notion of a country as significantly in debt as the US is to China truly being in possession of its sovereignty. His joke successfully lampoons the idea that sovereignty can be given away. Stewart is also able to challenge the notion that the entire point of these climate negotiations is a plot by the other nations to bring the American people down economically, as expressed by Lauren Ingraham on Fox News. He questions whether this frame of the US being in conflict with the rest of the world (which is trying to scam us economically under the guise of environmentalism), as proposed by both policymakers and media, is being expressed because these groups do not want the US to have to take its part in these international efforts. In these segments, both hosts seem to be challenging the mainstream messages that oppose international cooperation on climate action.

In terms of the quality of coverage, mainstream media focus was on the role of the United States as a negotiator at the conference- whether with a positive look at the driving role the United States played in the creation of the Copenhagen Accord, or a more negative spin on this same event claiming that the international negotiation process was signing away United States sovereignty. Despite the spin (in either direction), the takeaway from viewing

⁵⁰ Jones 2009

mainstream media coverage is that the United States is a leading force at these conferences. An audience of these programs could be lead to believe both that the events of the conference were significant for US and international policy, and that the creation of the Accord was a vital win for the US at this conference.

The focus and message of these programs are in strong contrast with either the coverage on *The Colbert Report*, which focused on how ineffective and meaningless these negotiations would be in terms of a long term agreement, or *The Daily Show*, which did not even mention the Copenhagen Accord despite airing after the conclusion of the conference. An audience of either *The Daily Show* or *The Colbert Report* would not be aware of the creation of the Copenhagen Accord during the UNFCCC conference, and would instead only be aware of the problems that occurred during the conference.

In terms of messages specific to the Copenhagen conference, the take-away for audiences who view these satirical programs become much less clear. Colbert is unapologetic in his critique of the UN as an organization incapable of accomplishing anything. Even his interview guest, who is in favor of the UN process, did not view the Copenhagen conference as an opportunity to create a new, concrete contract. The Daily Show focused on problems which occurred during the conference, including the African boycott and the import of limos for the representatives, and did not even mention the creation of the Copenhagen Accord. For an audience of these programs, it is hard to imagine feeling any optimism, or even interest, about these climate conferences, when there are no concrete results in sight. It is possible that in focusing on the problems and shortcomings of these negotiations, satirical programs are contributing to cynicism regarding international climate cooperation.

This study demonstrates the disparate messages regarding international climate change cooperation both in the mainstream media and satirical programs. While mainstream media focused on the United States' involvement in the creation of the Copenhagen Accord as a significant policy accomplishment (whether as a positive tool for climate cooperation, or the government signing away sovereignty to the international community), both *The Colbert Report* and *The Daily Show* demonstrated problems and inefficiencies with the entire UN negotiation process. While the mainstream media portrayed the US as a significant actor in this process, the satirical programs were able to demonstrate that these negotiations might not be effective tools for international policy creation, and might be inefficient and a waste of time. After the events of Copenhagen and following UNFCCC conferences, the cynical perception of the satirical programs may be a more accurate reflection of the current reality of international climate cooperation.

The messages that media portray about the potential for international climate cooperation, whether it is the conflict frame favored by mainstream media, or the satirical notion that the UN is an ineffective organization, coupled with the overall decline in coverage of these issues, are sure to influence the opinions of their audiences. This disinterest/distrust from the American people and the media will likely have dramatic impacts on the policy of the United States to continue to participate in global efforts to combat climate change.

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