

## **An Investigative Journalist and a Stand-Up Comic Walk Into a Bar:**

### **The Role of Comedy in Public Engagement with Environmental Journalism**

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In the summer of 1962, science journalist Rachel Carson's three-part tome about the ecological and human destruction wrought by toxic pesticides was circulated in *The New Yorker* magazine (Carson, 1962). Later that year, after her reporting series was published as a book, "Silent Spring," President Kennedy created a committee to examine pesticides, and the book became a quick bestseller (Koehn, 2012). Carson's manuscript has been credited with creating the political will that led to the 1970 establishment of the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) by President Nixon (Griswold, 2012). A decade later, under President Reagan, the EPA created the national Superfund program to focus on toxic contamination (Superfund, 2017). The ongoing legacy of the program includes the "community involvement" element to engage with the public (Superfund Community, 2016).

Decades later, the symbiotic role of investigative journalism and public engagement with environmental contamination is well-established and crucial (Guyette, 2015; Clark, 2015; Pitt, 2014; Golden, 2012; Protess et al., 1987). However, despite the critical function of investigative reporting in exposing toxic contamination, American journalism continues to face challenges from the increased competition and economic quandary of the digital-era news business model (Knight Foundation, 2015). Capturing public attention and encouraging involvement are paramount concerns as journalism institutions endeavor to create new collaborative models and work with new storytelling genres to compete for the attention and loyalty of news consumers in

an environment characterized by news and information overload (Jurkowitz et al., 2014).

The purpose of this study was to examine one such experiment undertaken by an investigative journalism project – Dirty Little Secrets, a collaborative investigative reporting project about toxic environmental contamination in New Jersey, home to a disproportionately high amount of toxic contamination (Gonzalez, 2015) – which worked with stand-up comics to translate investigative journalism material into stand-up comedy routines performed in front of live audiences at two hour-long comedy shows in 2016. This article presents a case study about the creative collaborative process of the Dirty Little Secrets journalism-comedy initiative, which was directed by the Center for Investigative Reporting (CIR). We examined audience engagement with the project’s journalistic content as translated into stand-up comedy creative material – that is, the extent to which audience members at the Dirty Little Secrets stand-up comedy shows learned new information, perceived comedians as credible, and expressed interest in getting involved in the issue of local toxic contamination. Additionally, given that the effort brought together two distinct types of professionals – investigative journalists and stand-up comics – we also completed follow-up interviews with three of the participating comedians and one participating investigative journalist to learn how the experience benefitted their work, if at all.

This study contributes to journalism scholarship by presenting a case study of a creative experiment in public engagement; analyzing the extent to which audiences may take journalistic information seriously as delivered through stand-up comedy; and assessing the professional benefits or risks to journalists and comedians who participate in cross-sector collaborations. We argue that journalism institutions can benefit from collaborations with comedians and other creative professionals who make serious work accessible to disparate audiences.

## **Literature Review**

### **Contemporary Challenges for Journalism**

A little more than one decade into the social media era, journalism institutions in the United States continue to face economic and audience challenges. The ongoing search for reliable journalism revenue in the Internet age is crucial, as the funding models of an earlier era have evolved in the digital information economy (Knight Foundation, 2015). Paradoxically, and as a consequence of the digital-era disruption, journalism institutions are innovating with new strategies and approaches (Coll, 2016; Nee, 2013). Investigative journalism organizations are finding success with new models, partnerships and approaches, including the rise of nonprofit journalism (Houston, 2010; McClure, 2010). Within the last decade alone, the number of new nonprofit investigative organizations has increased; the new players include stand-alone operations such as the award-winning ProPublica (Tofel, 2013) and collaborative models like the Center for Investigative Reporting, which often partners with legacy news organizations to produce investigative journalism content (Jurkowitz et al., 2014). In the digital and social media era, capturing public attention in a climate of information overload is complex. Without public engagement, investigative journalism has a limited ability to spotlight vital civic issues that may otherwise go unnoticed.

### **Public Engagement with Journalism**

Underpinning the very foundation of journalistic practice is the notion of a public that is engaged in political, cultural and economic processes. In the United States, early newspapers were founded not to be a check on government power, but instead to be the main method of communication between political parties and their constituents (Hamilton, 2004; Groseclose and Milyo, 2005; Gentzkow, 2006). Between the 1870s and 1920s, this trend began to shift and

independent papers began to spring up across the Eastern seaboard. Hamilton (2004) argues that this was a reflection of changing economics as urban centers grew, providing larger markets to support greater variety in news. This fact, paired with technological advances that reduced the cost of producing newspapers, set the stage for a boom in independent media.

With the advent of digital media in the 1990s and early 2000s, and challenges associated with the shifting economics of news, media companies increasingly began to discuss the needs and challenges with public or audience engagement. An overriding industry assumption posited that, in order to retain audience members, news organizations needed to engage more directly with news consumers (Hamilton, 2004). In the early 2000s, the notion of public engagement often meant going directly to news consumers for content creation. The community journalism and civic journalism movements suggested that audience members could – and in fact should – gather information and potentially create content directly. Outing (2005) laid out “The 11 Layers of Citizen Journalism,” describing a ladder in which the bottom rung is simply the allowance of public comments on news stories, all the way up to the eleventh rung, in which journalism becomes its own “wiki” and readers are both the content creators and the editors. Mayer (2011) described three types of engagement that also follow a continuum: outreach, conversation and collaboration.

More recently, practitioners and scholars have suggested that journalists should ask more questions, rather than ask for comments (Brandel, 2015), listen more (Hardman, 2015), facilitate engagement work directly in communities (Proud, 2015), and include community members throughout the entire reporting process. Batsell (2015) defines this model of engaged journalism as: “the degree to which a news organization actively considers and interacts with its audience in furtherance of its journalistic and financial mission” (p. 7). To our knowledge, no research

provides evidence about whether or not this model increases news consumption.

At present, a method of public engagement in journalistic content through creative entertainment means – such as comedy – has not been examined, although recent scholarship reflects a need for journalism organizations to engage the public through a range of approaches (Nee, 2013). Such innovative creative means would, necessarily, require collaboration between professional journalists and creative professionals – such as comedians – who work within distinct organizational cultures and may not have frequent exposure to each other. Thus, this study endeavors to understand the perspectives of the participating journalists and comedians who worked on the Dirty Little Secrets effort, in order to reveal insights about professional challenges and benefits of cross-sector collaboration.

### **The Role of Comedy in Public Engagement with Civic Issues**

As a mechanism for public engagement with civic issues, contemporary comedy works in several ways. Comedy has been shown to attract audience attention to serious social issues, to remain memorable, to encourage engagement with taboo topics, to encourage public sharing, and to work symbiotically with serious news (Moyer-Gusé et al., 2011; Nabi et al., 2007; Feldman et al., 2011; Baum, 2003). With the premiere of the faux-news satire program genre and its marketplace successes – *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* in the late 1990s and *The Colbert Report* in 2005 – the ability for comedy to engage audiences in complex political and civic issues entered a new era of interest. Humor can help audiences to process serious information (Moyer-Gusé et al., 2011; Nabi et al., 2007) and to make sense of serious news (Young, 2013). Additionally, audiences who seek comedy focused on civic topics do so not only to be entertained, but also to aid in their understanding of serious information (Young, 2013).

Comedy offers a way for audiences to enter into complex civic issues. In a kind of

gateway effect, entertaining or comedic treatment of serious civic issues can help an audience to pay subsequent attention to traditional news media portrayals of those issues (Baum, 2003). As members of the public are exposed to a humorous treatment of a serious issue, they may then pay closer subsequent attention to news on the same topic (Feldman et al., 2011). Thus, comedy serves as a kind of symbiotic information, alongside news, increasing the ability for the public to engage in civic issues (Feldman et al., 2011).

Comedy works in a precise way in terms of message processing – through emotion and affection for the information source. However, a certain degree of cognitive processing does take place as an individual works to appreciate why something is funny, along with the context of the information on which the comedy is based (Blanc and Brigaud, 2014). According to the elaboration likelihood model (ELM) of persuasion, individuals who are motivated to process serious information and news do so through a central route, whereby they focus on the message and its merits (Petty and Cacioppo, 1986). By comparison, shifts in attitude and persuasion take place in a comedy context through heuristic and peripheral cues, such as thinking about the credibility and believability of the information source, affection for the source, and emotional response to the material (Zhang, 1996; Nabi et al., 2007). Within this process, individuals are less likely to counter-argue against information they experience through the comedy, and the audience's perception of credibility about, and affection for, the source, is meaningful (Nabi et al., 2007). In the context of journalism, readers exposed to emotional, personal-testimonial-driven stories have shown greater knowledge gain about the issue compared to those exposed to exclusively hard-facts versions of the same stories (Bas and Grabe, 2015).

However, there is some concern that the public may trivialize such issues when they experience them through comedy, although extant literature is not conclusive on this topic.

Notably, one study examined audience understanding of the serious social issue of teen pregnancy and found that individuals who experienced the issue through a humorous treatment thought the issue was less serious than those who experienced it in a non-comedic way (Moyer-Gusé et al., 2011). However, in a separate study, viewers of a comedy documentary about poverty were not more likely than viewers of a serious journalistic documentary to view the core issues as trivial (Author Citation).

Given this unsettled territory, we sought to understand whether or not audiences who experienced the Dirty Little Secrets comedy stand-up shows were able to learn and take toxic contamination facts seriously when they are delivered through comedy. We also endeavored to learn whether or not comedy might have exposed the audience to new information about local toxic contamination, and the degree to which audience members saw the comedians as credible sources of information. Finally, given the journalism industry's struggle to develop new methods for audience engagement, we aimed to reveal and analyze a collaborative process that paired the strengths of investigative journalism (fact-based, unbiased information) with those of stand-up comedians (humor, credibility and likeability).

### **Case Study: Investigative Journalism and Toxic Contamination in New Jersey**

As of 2010, New Jersey contained the greatest number of Superfund sites – toxic contamination areas – in the country (Murray, 2010). In 2015, almost 9 in 10 (89%) New Jersey residents resided within one mile of a site known to be contaminated with toxic chemicals (Gonzalez, 2015). From 2010 to 2015 alone, investigative reporting in New Jersey exposed toxic contamination related to high levels of mercury, chemical poisoning from a DuPont plant, buried Agent Orange, and the disproportionate environmental danger posed to poor communities (Gonzalez, 2015).

Given the challenge of public engagement with journalism, along with New Jersey's unique toxic contamination scenario, a group of New-Jersey-area journalism institutions combined efforts in 2015 with two local universities and a national investigative journalism organization, the Center for Investigative Reporting (CIR), to create a reporting collaborative that became Dirty Little Secrets, a "collaborative investigative reporting project on the local impacts of New Jersey's toxic legacy" (About: Dirty Little Secrets, n.d.). CIR initiated the project, designed to accomplish the following: "Building on the innovative storytelling and engagement practices CIR has pioneered, we'll help New Jersey's media ecosystem deploy creative solutions that articulate key problems in local communities and identify ways to address them" (Goins, 2015b).

The project included eight local news partners – WHYY, WNYC, WBGO, NJ Spotlight, NJTV, NJ Spark, New Brunswick Today, and Jersey Shore Hurricane News – along with the Rutgers Department of Journalism and Media Studies and the Center for Cooperative Media at Montclair State University (Goins, 2015a). The project was funded by a grant to CIR from the Geraldine R. Dodge Foundation (About: Dirty Little Secrets, n.d.). Dirty Little Secrets officially launched in April 2015 with a convening that brought together community members, activists, nonprofits and journalists, to discuss challenges facing New Jersey and to explore areas where investigative reporting and deep community engagement could potentially have a measurable impact. According to interviews with CIR staff, the group decided that environmental issues would be the primary topic. Over the course of a year, the collaborative Dirty Little Secrets journalism partners published 15 investigative toxic contamination stories that were shared with their own audiences through their own platforms and through the Dirty Little Secrets Collection on Medium.com (Goins, 2015a; Dirty Little Secrets, n.d.).

In 2016, the partners convening a design session to brainstorm ideas for community engagement with the project's journalistic content. After observing the potential power of comedy to engage audiences in serious civic issues, the CIR team, together with WFMU, a local radio station in Jersey City, New Jersey, launched a new experiment in order to engage with the public through humor. In the summer of 2016, the Dirty Little Secrets journalism project leaders worked to translate highlights of their reporting to a group of stand-up comedians.

In July 2016, WFMU and CIR hosted a competition for local comedians to produce hilarious – and factually accurate – stand-up routines focused on the project's environmental contamination reporting; this first show featured 14 original comedian routines. The second comedy show, the Toxic Comedy World Tour (September 2016), was comprised of five professional comedians' original five-minute routines, all of which included factual information translated from the published investigative reporting stories. The show ended with a panel discussion that included the comics, the CIR community engagement director, and a WNYC investigative reporter.

To inspire the creation of original stand-up comedy routines based on Dirty Little Secret investigative stories, two project directors at the Center for Investigative Reporting (CIR) curated the 15 toxic contamination investigative journalism stories, highlighted key factual information, and convened a day-long workshop on August 1, 2016, with the five stand-up comedians. During the workshop, CIR project directors briefed the comedians verbally about the key facts and information included in the reporting. The comedians then worked individually for approximately one month in order to write and practice their new stand-up comedy routines. Notably, the comedians were given creative freedom to produce their material following the workshop. The five comedians' routines differed in editorial tone, humor approach and material,

although all included facts and information from the toxic contamination investigative reporting completed in 2016 for Dirty Little Secrets.

### **Research Questions**

From the Dirty Little Secrets case study, our research questions focused on audience understanding of journalistic content through comedy, as well as an investigation of the professional collaboration itself. We derived these questions from our understanding of existing evidence about comedy's potential as a public engagement mechanism, along with gaps in the literature about creative models for journalism engagement.

RQ1: Can a stand-up comedy interpretation of investigative journalism content increase public engagement, in terms of awareness and objective knowledge?

RQ2: Does an audience take investigative journalism content seriously if it is experienced through comedy content?

RQ3: Does an audience express interest in taking individual citizen action on toxic contamination after experiencing serious factual information through comedy?

RQ4: What are the benefits of cross-sector collaboration between investigative journalists and comedians, within the context of public engagement?

### **Methods**

To present a detailed case study of the collaboration, we interviewed the project leader, and we reviewed the online primary project materials. To assess comedy audience response to journalistic content translated through stand-up comedy, we facilitated a post-viewing survey with the audience of two live stand-up comedy shows that took place in July and September 2016. The surveys were completed on paper by audience members after they watched the hour-long stand-up comedy shows; audience members were not told about the surveys prior to the

show. Finally, to ascertain the professional experience of the cross-sector collaboration, we also facilitated interviews with three of the participating comedians and one lead participating investigative journalist in the months following the September 2016 comedy show. All interviews were conducted by phone by at least one of the study authors; each one lasted approximately 30 minutes, and questions focused on their experiences with the professional collaboration.

### **Comedy Content**

**Comedian #1.** Tabitha Viadurri, an amateur comic from New Jersey, was the winner of the July comedy show. In her routine, she introduced her “sister,” a puppet, who was, according to Viadurri, a growth in her side born from contamination in New Jersey’s Passaic River.

**Comedian #2.** Gregory Joseph, an African-American professional comic also from New Jersey, is a regular stand-up comedian at WFMU live events. He performed a stand-up comedy routine that included the fact that 95% of New Jersey’s African-American population lives within a mile of a contaminated site.

**Comedian #3.** Aparna Nancherla, a professional comic based in New York, New York, who has appeared on television shows such as *Master of None*, *Love*, *Inside Amy Schumer*, and *Crashing*, focused on creating new TV shows based in New Jersey, based on famous shows set in NYC. Her jokes used information about illegal dumping in New Jersey and pollution of the Passaic River.

**Comedian #4.** Jo Firestone, a well-known comic based in New York, New York, is a regular comic on WFMU and a writer for shows including *The Tonight Show Starring Jimmy Fallon*. For her stand-up routine, she distributed copies of an “angry letter” to send to Chris Christie, the governor of New Jersey. The “Mad Libs”-style letter focused on exposure of

children in New Jersey to lead, demanding the government take action.

**Comedian #5.** Dave Hill, a professional comedian and host of *The Goddamn Dave Hill Show* on WFMU, based his stand-up routine on adult erotic short stories, which used environmental contamination and the health effects as comic elements, particularly the fact that lead poisoning has affected a quarter-million children in New Jersey since 2000.

### **Survey Sample**

The live studio audiences for the two stand-up comedy shows were invited to participate through outreach from the host media organization, WFMU, based in Jersey City. WFMU invited its general audience through on-air and website advertisements, an email newsletter, and its social networks. WFMU facilitates regular live comedy events in its studio.

Approximately 50 people attended the July comedy show, of which 32 completed the post-show survey. More than half of respondents self-identified as female (53%, 44% male), more than three quarters as white (77%), 10% Hispanic/Latino, 10% percent Asian, and 3% Black/African-American. The majority (58%) of respondents were in the 19-34 age group, 29% were between 35 and 49, and 13% were between 50 and 65. All audience members reported completing high school, and 90% of respondents had completed undergraduate or graduate degrees.

At September's Toxic Comedy World Tour, approximately 60 people attended, of which 38 completed surveys. Just over half of the audience (52%) self-identified as women, 42% identified as men, and 6% preferred not to answer this question. Like the July show, the audience was nearly three quarters white (74%). About 7% of the audience self-identified as Black or African American, 7% as Hispanic or Latino/a, and 10% Asian. More than two-thirds (70%) were between the ages of 19 and 34, 21% between 35 and 49, and 9% between ages 50 and 65.

About 97% of respondents had completed undergraduate or graduate degrees.

### **Measurement of Variables**

**Prior Awareness of Issues.** Respondents were asked “Prior to tonight’s show, had you heard about toxic contamination in New Jersey from any of these sources?” Respondents indicated “yes,” “no,” or “don’t know” in response to a list of options that included: NJTV, NJ Spotlight, WNYC, WHYY and ToxicNJ.com.

**Entertainment Value.** Respondents were asked about the extent to which they found the stand-up comedy show as “entertaining” and “informative,” on a scale from 1 “not at all” to 4 “very.” This question was used in a study that examined audience response to a comedy-focused TV program focused on global poverty (Author Citation).

**Assessment of Content and Information Quality.** Also drawing from a recent study that examined audience response to a comedy-focused entertainment program dealing with a social justice topic (Author Citation), respondents were asked to respond, on a scale from 1 “not at all” to 4 “describes well” to what extent the stand-up show can be described as entertaining or boring, including: “made me think differently about an important issue,” “something I would talk about with other people,” “made me want to know & learn more about an important issue,” “preachy and boring,” “taught me something new about an important issue,” and “hilarious.” Additionally, we assessed the potential for message discounting, a possible challenge of comedy, through a question adapted from Nabi et al. (2007): “To what extent do you agree or disagree with the statements about the comedy show?” with responses that included: “The comedy show was intended more to entertain than to persuade.” We also added an additional item, given the focus on translating factual information through entertainment means; respondents were asked to indicate their degree of agreement with the statement, “The comedians used factual information

that was believable.”

**Objective knowledge.** Respondents were provided with a list of three factual statements reflected in the stand-up comedy material, which were translated from the original investigative journalism content, and asked whether the statements were true or not, with response options of “yes,” “no,” or “don’t know.”

**Awareness & public engagement.** Respondents were asked to indicate their degree of agreement or disagreement about statements that reflected their perception of whether or not they were affected by toxic contamination after viewing, and whether or not they could – as individuals – take some kind of action to do something about toxic contamination in New Jersey. For both the scale ranged from 1 “disagree strongly” to 4 “agree strongly.”

**Source credibility and likeability.** Respondents were asked to rate the credibility of each comedian individually, on a scale of 1 “not at all credible” to 4 “very credible.” Similarly, respondents were asked to rate their perceptions of how likeable each comedian was, using the same scale with 1 “not at all likeable” to 4 “very likeable.” Both measures used here – source liking and source credibility – originate from scholarship that examined the extent to which audiences engage with serious social issue information when it is delivered by a stand-up comedian (Nabi et al., 2007).

## Results

### Prior Awareness

On average, across all news sources indicated, more than 60% of respondents after the July show had not heard about the local New Jersey toxic contamination issues, or did not know if they had, prior to the stand-up comedy show. The findings are virtually the same after the September show, with an average of about 60% saying they had not heard about the issue, or did

not know if they had, before attending the comedy event.

### **Entertainment & Information Value**

After the July comedy show, all respondents said they would describe the stand-up comedy show as entertaining and more than half said they found the show to be informative (58%). More than 9 in 10 (94%) said they strongly disagreed with a description of the comedy as “preachy and boring,” and more than two thirds (69%) said they would describe the comedy as “hilarious.” The strong majority of respondents (90%) disagreed with the statement “The comedy was intended to persuade more than entertain,” and 82% disagreed with the statement “The comedy was intended to inform more than entertain.” See Figure 1.

-- Figure 1 about here --

All survey respondents from the September 2016 Toxic Comedy World Tour found the show to be entertaining and informative. About 78% of respondents did not find the show to be “preachy and boring,” and nearly all (97%) would characterize the show as “hilarious.” See Figure 2.

-- Figure 2 about here --

After the September 2016 comedy show, 60% of respondents disagreed with the statement that “The comedy show was intended to persuade more than entertain,” but a higher proportion of respondents agreed with this statement (29%) than at the July show (10%). The audience was split as to whether “The comedy was intended to inform more than entertain.” Half of the respondents strongly agreed (24%) or somewhat agreed (24%) with the statement. When asked how strongly they agreed with the inverse statement, “The comedy was intended to entertain more than to inform,” the audience was again split; nearly half somewhat agreed (31%) or strongly agreed (14%). Nearly two-thirds of respondents strongly agreed with the statement, “The comedians used factual information that was believable.” See Figure 3.

-- Figure 3 about here --

### **Assessment of Content and Information Quality**

After the July 2016 show, more than three-quarters of respondents (77%) reported they would talk about the comedy with other people and more than two-thirds said the comedy made them want to know and learn more about an important issue (70%) and that the comedy taught them something (67%). Respondents were less emphatic about the comedy making them “think differently about an important issue (toxic contamination);” nearly seven percent (7%) said “not at all” and a quarter for agreed strongly (24%). See Figure 4.

-- Figure 4 about here --

A strong majority of respondents (84%) at the September show said that they think differently about toxic contamination after having seen the show. More than 90% said they would talk about the show with others, take action to learn more about the issues in the show, as displayed in Figure 4.

### **Objective Knowledge**

Each comic provided the researchers with one to five facts they planned to include in their routines. These facts were included in the post-show survey in a matrix, asking respondents to indicate the accurate statements. Following the September 2016 show, more than 80% percent of respondents correctly identified the accuracy of the statements, as illustrated in Figure 5.

-- Figure 5 about here --

### **Awareness and Public Engagement**

After the September 2016 show, as shown in Figure 6, more than half of the respondents (54%) said that they agreed that they were currently affected by toxic contamination in New Jersey, and 94% of respondents said they agreed that toxic contamination might affect them in

the future. About 83% said they agreed that they could individually take some kind of action to do something about toxic contamination in their local areas.

-- Figure 6 about here --

### **Source Credibility and Likeability**

Following the July 2016 show, a majority of respondents (61%) said that they found the comics to be credible. No respondents found them to be not at all credible, although 16% found the comics to be only somewhat credible. As shown in Figure 7, after the September 2016 show, respondents overwhelmingly reported they found the comedians to be credible; for three of the comics, roughly two-thirds of respondents said they were very credible. Overall, the respondents rated the comics as highly likeable.

-- Figure 7 about here --

### **Interview: Journalist Experience**

One of the lead participating investigative journalists attended the final stand-up comedy show and participated in a post-show audience question session, together with the comics. An open-ended interview revealed that, while the journalist understood some creative liberties were necessary for the comedy, she found the experiment to be constructive, given audience engagement with contamination topics. On the role of comedy to extend journalism content, she said: “I spend usually months working on a project, and then it’s done...But with this [public engagement through comedy], there were new opportunities to share our stories, get them out to new people. Getting the information out to more people, even if it’s more than one little thing, is the most important thing.” Additionally, she recognized a different group than the usual at serious community journalism events, “I think the audience here was a different audience – it seemed like a younger audience than I usually see.”

The reporter also said that the audience members asked a number of questions about the nuances of the core issue itself – toxic contamination. Although she was not a featured speaker at the show, which was billed and introduced as an entertainment program, she expressed surprise that the majority of the audience questions during the live session following the show were directed at her, rather than at the comedians. For example, audience members asked her questions about toxic contamination such as, “How can I find out if there is an oil tank buried on my property?” and “What do I need to do to get my soil tested for toxic contamination?” The audience also asked detailed questions about the investigative reporting process, and the reporter had the opportunity to share the professional difficulties of trying to get access to EPA documents. Of the experience, the reporter said, “The Q&A gave the audience an opportunity for to get additional information.”

### **Interviews: Comedians’ Experience**

In open-ended interviews with three of the five comedians, they suggested that creating comedy sketches based on news and current events is part of their regular creative process. The main difference, from their perspective, was the importance of ensuring the factual accuracy of each element used from the investigative reporting content. One comedian noted that she writes sketches based on current events about twice a week, but it’s usually focused on giving her personal take on the issue, rather than sharing information. All comedians noted that this is a particularly important moment for what they called educational comedy, like *The Daily Show*, as audiences want to be entertained while they are learning. Despite such recognition, one comedian articulated a learning curve, stating, “I’d never really done an educational comedy set, one where I’d had to convey real information. And it seemed like when I was talking to other comedians about it we felt more bound to the information [than in our typical process].”

Importantly, interviews revealed that comedians understood their role in the comedy show was to be both entertaining and informative, and that the latter did not detract from their creative process. Comedians said they felt responsible for accurately conveying information; said one: “I was nervous just making sure that the facts were accurate. Some of this stuff is just complex, and I was worried I was going to mess that up or be inaccurate.” One comedian said the comedians said amongst themselves that were “relieved” that the investigative reporter joined them on stage for the post-show question session to answer audience queries. “We’re not the experts – they are. We just had fun learning and finding a way to make things that really aren’t funny, funny.”

### **Discussion**

As U.S. journalism organizations continue to experiment with new models to engage the public in serious civic issues, entrepreneurial thinking about creative approaches is valuable. In such a climate, journalism collaborations and innovations from news organizations are worth including in research. This study sought to explore audience understanding of serious investigative journalism content as translated into stand-up comedy in order to understand whether or not this creative strategy might increase the public’s understanding of, and potential engagement with, a serious local issue – in this case, environmental contamination. Survey results confirm that a live viewing audience that is both entertained and informed by a stand-up comedy show in which they perceive the comedians as credible can correctly identify factual information and acquire new knowledge. Support for these audience results are amplified by the audience engagement during the post-show question session – that is, audience members asked for additional information and endeavored to more deeply understand the complicated toxic contamination issues explored through the comedy.

Additionally, after experiencing the journalistic content translated through comedy, most audience members indicated they believed toxic contamination would affect them in the future. Further, they indicated they would be willing to take an active role in the challenge. Comedy was not seen as a deterrent to learning serious information or conveying the urgency of a community problem with serious implications. Thus, this study supplements existing scholarship that found comedy may reduce the audience's perception of issue severity (Moyer-Gusé et al., 2011), and confirms new findings – that comedy may not always reduce a perception of issue severity for audiences (Author Citation). Comedy, therefore, may be an effective way to engage audiences with serious journalistic information and facts.

Importantly, utilizing creative approaches such as theater and comedy to engage audiences in serious journalistic content about civic issues requires organizational commitment and trust. Experimenting with limited, contained experiences that honor the organizational and professional values of both creative talent and journalists may be the path for future innovation. Interviews with the participating investigative journalist and comedians revealed that both understood the unique contribution from the other, although they benefitted from the symbiosis. The participating investigative reporter recognized the ability to engage directly with a different audience about serious issues outside the usual journalism norms. Additionally, she pointed out that the comedy audience might encourage engagement with individuals who might not otherwise be exposed to the results of her serious reporting, a direct observation also bolstered by survey findings, which showed the majority of the comedy show attendees had not heard about the New Jersey toxic contamination issue beforehand. The comedians recognized the value of learning serious factual information to include in topical comedy, but may have felt creatively hampered, given the stand-up comedian's usual artistic license. It's worth noting that both

professionals – journalist and comedians – stressed the importance of an audience engagement session that included “the expert” (the reporter), in order to engage fully in a more serious conversation after attention has been captured by entertainment.

But comedy is not a panacea or a substitute for serious investigative journalism. To pit entertainment and comedy against journalistic material would be counterproductive, and indeed, it misses the objective of this work. Comedy is not well-understood in this precise context, and yet, existing research points to precisely this kind of potentially positive relationship between serious civic information, the public, and news (Baum, 2003; Feldman et al., 2011). Moreover, the process of collaboration among journalists and comedians was perceived as a positive experience on the part of all participants; the comedians said they would be open to future projects building upon this experience, and the reporter said she was so encouraged by the collaboration that she would like to turn all her projects into comedy.

Potential value notwithstanding, the present examination is limited in important ways. First, the study did not employ an experimental design strategy that allowed researchers to compare audience understanding of the core journalistic content with the translated comedy content; such an approach would be valuable for a broader understanding of serious content delivered in a serious way, and the potentially symbiotic relationship with comedy. Next, the small sample sizes for the live audience prevented more advanced statistical modeling and conclusions; future research might employ a recruited-audience experimental design. And finally, given limited resources, this study examined individuals’ responses at one point in time.

The present study may be intriguing for journalistic organizations to consider within the contemporary conversation about engaging local audiences in civic issues of importance – and collaborating with creative professionals. If, as prior research has shown, individuals may pay

closer attention to news after experiencing issues through more entertaining means first (Baum, 2003; Feldman et al., 2011), then the long-term value for journalistic content about serious issues of community importance is evident. Additionally, journalism scholars might endeavor to build upon this examination with in-depth interviews with journalists and creative professionals engaged in similar future collaborative experiences, not only after the fact, but before and during the creative process itself. Such research would reveal more about the challenges of cross-sector collaboration, even if the end result is positive for the participating professionals. Given the lack of extant scholarly literature that connects creative models for journalism public engagement with a deeper understanding of the content produced by such work – and whether or not creative models improve public engagement in the first place – building upon this work would bring a substantial contribution.

As journalism organizations continue to innovate and bring members of the public together for live experiences, building upon Dirty Little Secrets' model and the present study may yield valuable insights for future work. Facilitating research that examines both immediate and long-term audience engagement with journalistic content, the creative executions of such material, and the collaborative experiences of disparate professionals working together for a public interest goal, may be a worthwhile future endeavor.

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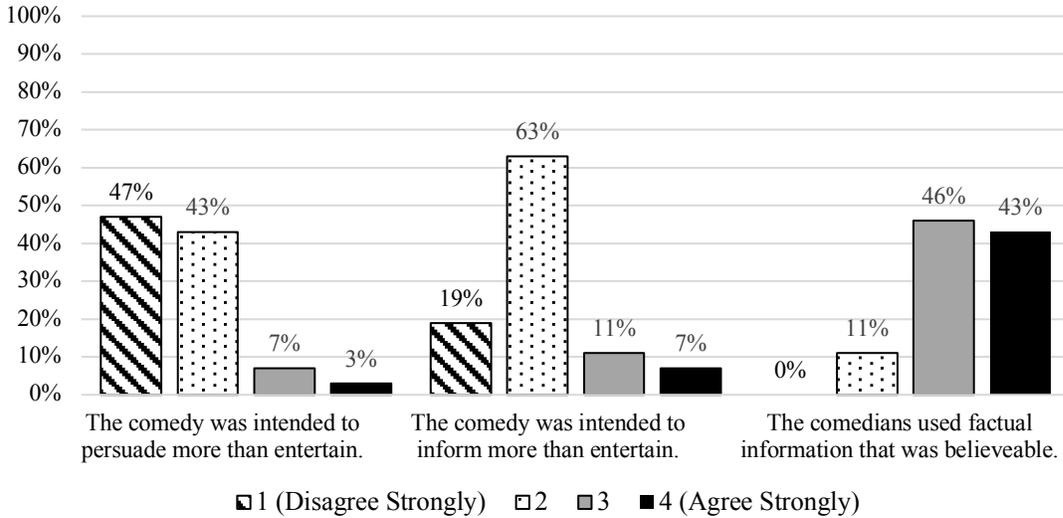
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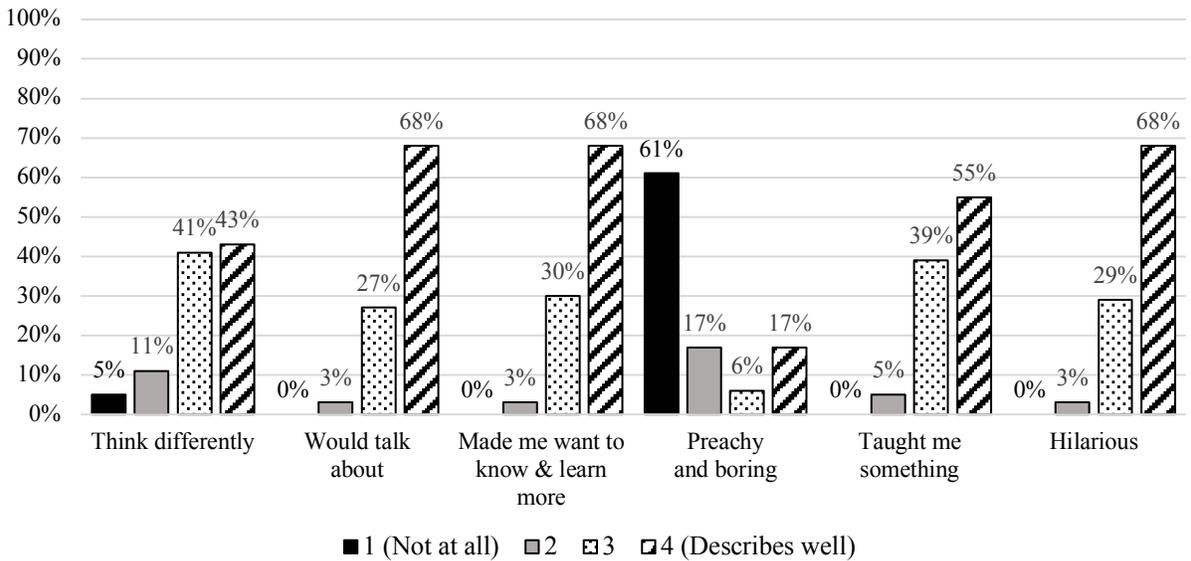
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Figures

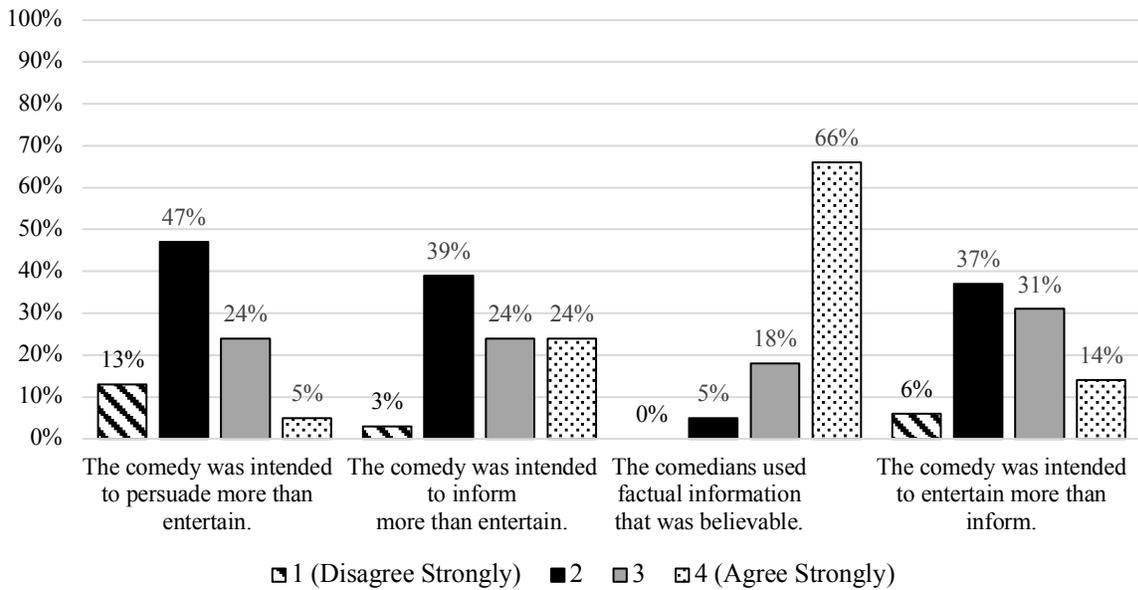
**Figure 1: Participant Perceptions About the Comedy Show's Goals**  
(July 2016, N=32)



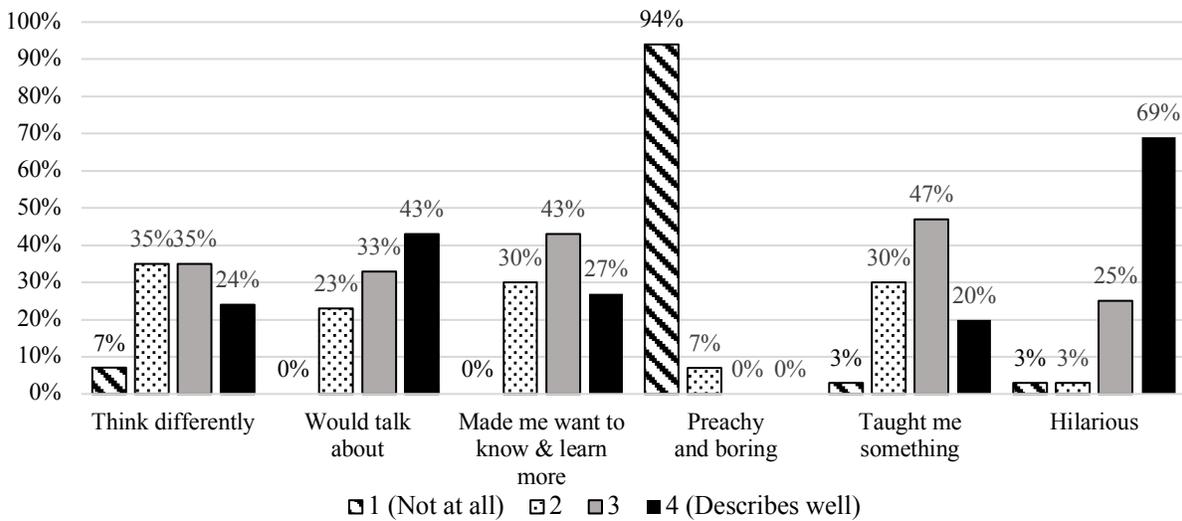
**Figure 2: Participant Reactions to the Comedy Show**  
(September 2016, N=38)



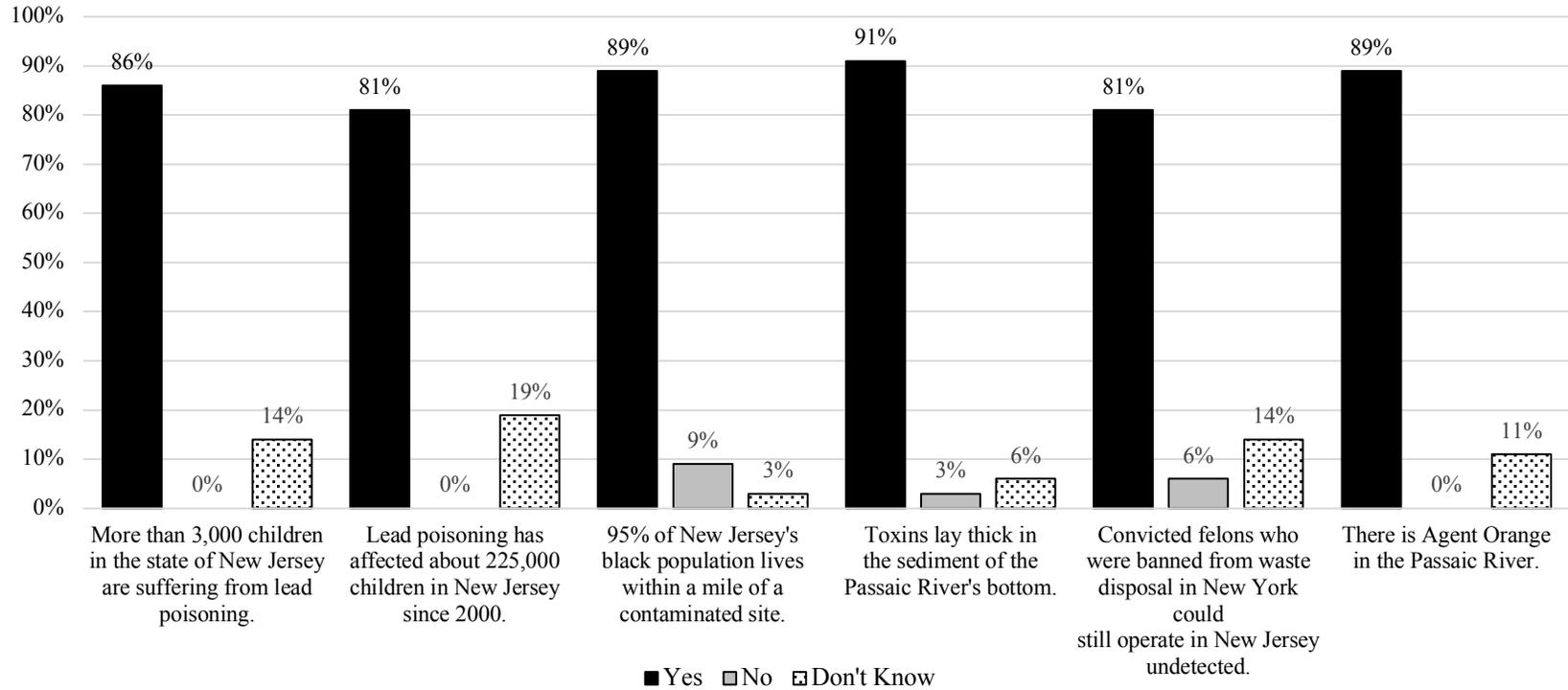
**Figure 3: Participant Perceptions About the Comedy Show's Goals**  
(September 2016, N=38)



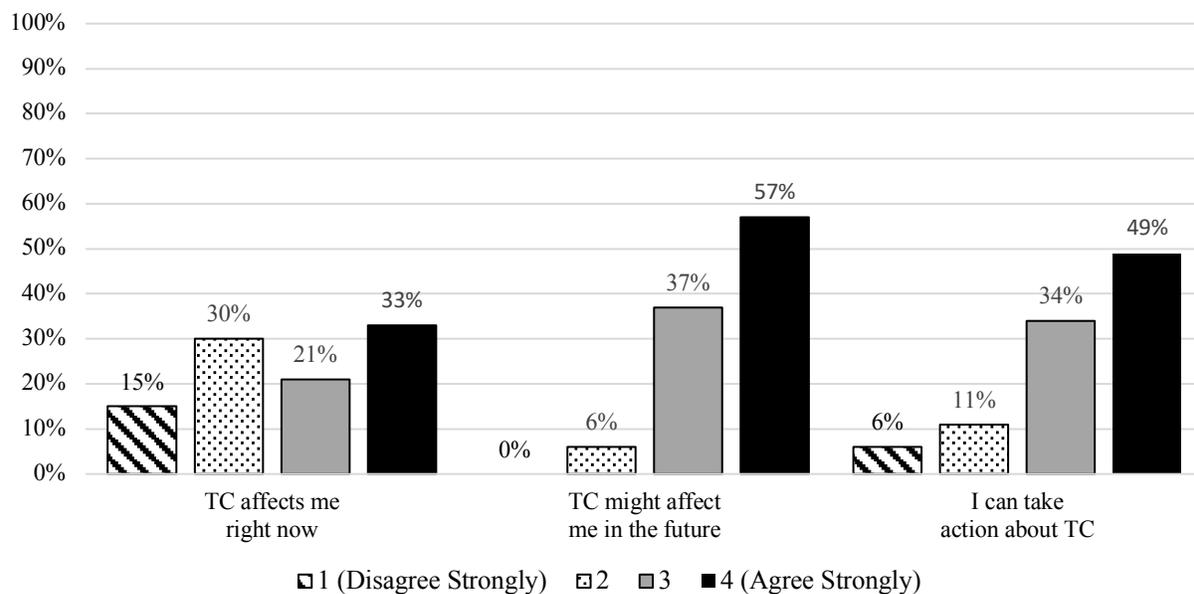
**Figure 4: Participant Reactions to the Comedy Show** (July 2016, N=32)



**Figure 5: Accuracy of Statements About Toxic Contamination (September 2016, N=38)**



**Figure 6: Participant Post-Comedy Show Beliefs and Actions in Relation to Toxic Contamination (TC) (September 2016, N=38)**



**Figure 7: Comedian Credibility (September 2016, N=38)**

