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Politician Seeking Voter: How Interviews on Entertainment Talk Shows Affect Trust in Politicians

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During election campaigns, politicians regularly feature on entertainment talk shows in which they are typically approached in uncritical and positive manners. To test how such appearances affect trust in politicians, we conducted an online experiment with a Dutch adult sample in which participants were randomly allocated to see an entertainment talk show interview, a current affairs program interview with the same politician, or a control condition without exposure. Findings demonstrate that exposure to the talk show interview affected participants' trust in politicians. Moreover, this effect was strongly moderated by political knowledge. Trust in politicians was positively affected by talk show exposure among individuals with low political knowledge, but negatively for those with the most political knowledge.

Keywords: talk show, effects, political trust, experiment, infotainment

The relationship between mass media and politics has changed considerably over the past decades. Among many other changes, it has become common for prominent politicians to appear in popular talk shows. Such appearances are attractive for the media (Baym, 2007), and also are of strategic importance to politicians' campaign strategies (Clayman, 2004; Van Zoonen & Holtz-Bacha, 2000): Arguably, politicians are presented more positively in these shows than in traditional news programs (Baum, 2005; Baym, 2013; Williams & Delli Carpini, 2011). This study addressed the possible consequences of politicians' appearances on entertainment talk shows for peoples' trust in politicians.

Given an increasing fragmentation of the media environment, many citizens have tuned out from the current affairs news media (Prior, 2007). Many people avoid "hard news" media outlets, and instead turn to infotainment programming (Moy, Xenos, & Hess, 2005). When political information is packaged as entertainment, however, even those not interested in politics may tune in, and thereby unintentionally learn about politics (Baum & Jamison, 2006; Prior, 2003) or participate in public debate (Van Zoonen et

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al., 2007). The distinction between entertainment programs and traditional news has thus become increasingly blurred, in terms of both their contents and their societal role (Williams & Delli Carpini, 2011).

Politicians have responded to this development by trying to reach potential voters via entertainment-oriented outlets, including entertainment talk shows (Baum, 2005; Clayman & Heritage, 2002; Holbert, 2005), thereby bypassing the “watchdogs” and “gatekeepers” of traditional news institutions (Baum, 2012; Moy, Xenos, & Hess, 2006). Because such appearances regularly focus on personal affairs rather than hard news topics and rely on friendly styles of interviewing (Baum, 2005; Baym, 2013; Lauerbach, 2010), exposure to interviews with politicians on entertainment talk shows could influence how trustworthy audiences perceive politicians to be. As assessments of politicians’ competence and integrity play a considerable role in evaluations of politicians and voting behavior (Levi & Stoker, 2000; Miller, Wattenberg, & Malanchuk, 1986), the effect of talk show appearances on trust in politicians may have consequences for the functioning of democracy (Baum & Jamison, 2013). Thus far, however, this relationship has received little scrutiny.

Prior research on the effects of politicians’ appearances on entertainment talk shows has relied almost exclusively on cross-sectional designs and self-reported measures, which affects assessments of causality. Furthermore, these studies examined voting behavior (Baum, 2005; Baum & Jamison, 2006; Moy et al., 2005; Taniguchi, 2011) and learning about politics (Brewer & Cao, 2006; Chaffee, Zhao, & Leshner, 1994; Parkin, 2010; Prior, 2003), but the effect on political trust was largely unexplored (except Moy et al., 2006; Tsfati, Tukachinsky, & Peri, 2009).

To better understand the consequences of interviews with politicians on entertainment talk shows, we measured political trust in an online experiment with a sample of Dutch adults. The effect of exposure to an entertainment talk show interview was compared with exposure to a current affairs interview or seeing no interview at all. At the outset, it is important to note that our conclusions cannot per se be generalized to other kinds of talk shows. After all, entertainment talk shows provide content very different from parody or satire-oriented shows (Baum & Jamison, 2013; Baym, 2013), such as *The Daily Show*, or so-called “trash” talk shows, such as *Jerry Springer* (Rössler & Brosius, 2001).

Distinguishing Interviews on Talk Shows From Those on Current Affairs Programs

Entertainment talk shows depend on the charisma and personality of their host and mainly receive celebrity guests in front of a live audience (Jones, 2009). During election campaigns, these shows regularly feature politicians who are mainly being interviewed about personal affairs and are expected to speak from a personal perspective (Van Zoonen & Holtz-Bacha, 2000). Thereby, this genre relates to the wider trend of political personalization (e.g., Adam & Maier, 2010; Van Aelst, Sheafer, & Stanyer, 2012). Considering talk show interviews with politicians specifically (Van Zoonen, 2000), we can distinguish two dimensions of personalization: first, a shift in attention toward the ideas, capacities, and proposals of individual politicians instead of political parties, referred to as *individualization*; second, an increase in attention for politicians as private individuals with a focus on their personal lives, interests, and experiences, labeled *privatization* (Van Aelst et al., 2012).

Personalization, however, does not necessarily imply a loss of substantive information (Baym, 2007): Political issues feature in most entertainment talk show interviews with politicians, although less prominently than in political interviews on current affairs programs (Baum, 2005). On talk shows, politicians can expose politically relevant personal characteristics, such as honesty or perseverance, and there is time to also discuss political issues and ideas (Baym, 2013; Farnsworth & Lichter, 2003; Holbert, 2005). The extent to which the latter is possible depends on how firmly talk show hosts force their political guests to stay within the personal discourse (Van Zoonen & Holtz-Bacha, 2000). Moreover, politicians in traditional news interviews are frequently interrupted before completing their sentence (Rendle-Short, 2007; Voltmer & Brants, 2011), thus enforcing comparable limitations over the discussion of political ideas.

Interviewers of current affairs programs pursue goals different from those of entertainment talk shows, which arguably leads to different content (Baym, 2013). To be a watchdog, serve the public interest (Voltmer & Brants, 2011), and aspire neutralism (Clayman & Heritage, 2002), interviewers on current affairs programs aim at presenting politicians' ideas and perspectives on relevant political issues, while simultaneously holding politicians accountable for their actions, questioning their motivations, and challenging their plans (Baym, 2013; Voltmer & Brants, 2011). This results in argumentative interrogation and an antagonistic atmosphere. The traditional political interview, as found in, for example, current affairs programs, has also been described as "a battleground between two warriors" (Voltmer & Brants, 2011, p. 137) or "a ritualized swordplay" (Clayman & Heritage, 2002, p. 342).

Talk show hosts, by contrast, mainly attempt to entertain their audience (Lauerbach, 2007). Therefore, the tone of conversations is lighter, and interviews on such shows regularly turn out to be rather uncritical (Baym, 2013): Talk show hosts are relatively friendly and positive toward politicians (Baum, 2005), giving long, uninterrupted speaking time (Farnsworth & Lichter, 2003), and confirming, elaborating on, and dramatizing stories, so interviewees will keep telling anecdotes (Lauerbach, 2007) and the feel-good atmosphere is maintained (Jones, 2009).

Traditional political interviews, by contrast, normally forgo any display of sociability (Baym, 2013). Interviewers on current affairs programs scarcely use response tokens as *mm hmm*, *really*, or *I see* that show an acknowledgement of what the speaker is saying (Clayman & Heritage, 2002). Rather than being understanding and friendly, such interviewers often (a) ask interruptive questions that are prefaced by the contrarian contraction *but*, emphasizing opposing perspectives (Baym, 2013; Rendle-Short, 2007); (b) repeat questions and thereby press for more information than the politician would like to communicate (Clayman & Heritage, 2002); and (c) ask questions of a rather closed nature that leave the interviewed politician little freedom in the response (Baym, 2013; Voltmer & Brants, 2011).

Entertainment talk shows thus offer easier ways of self-promotion for politicians relative to traditional political interviews on current affairs programs (Holtz-Bacha, 2004). Yet, an inherent danger of being interviewed on talk shows is that politicians not always succeed in merging their personal and political attributes (Taniguchi, 2011). When the latter outstrips the former, politicians might be perceived as cold and impersonal by the talk show audience (Van Zoonen & Holtz-Bacha, 2000). If, by contrast, the personal side is emphasized too much, this could damage their professional image (Hart, 1999). Talk show

hosts and political guests, however, most often cooperate symbiotically: Talk show hosts create interesting stories, and politicians communicate a positive image of themselves (Baum, 2005; Eriksson, 2010; Lauerbach, 2010). To achieve these goals, it is common to make arrangements beforehand about topics that will and will not be discussed, so sensitive matters are avoided and politicians can prepare themselves (Eriksson, 2010; Lauerbach, 2007). This is less common on current affairs programs (Voltmer & Brants, 2011). It should be noted that the description of the interview genres above is a general one and does not uniformly apply.

The Effect of Entertainment Talk Show Interviews on Trust in Politicians

Peoples' trust in politicians is composed of perceptions of both competence and morality (Levi & Stoker, 2000). It has been demonstrated, based on cross-sectional data, that watching talk shows positively relates to trust in political parties, trust in government (Tsfati et al., 2009), and the likeability of individual political candidates (Baum, 2005). Furthermore, exposure to entertainment talk show interviews with politicians is positively correlated with voting for these politicians (Baum, 2005; Taniguchi, 2011). Arguably, these effects are caused because political guests are given the opportunity to portray themselves in a favorable light on talk shows (e.g., Farnsworth & Lichter, 2003; Holtz-Bacha, 2004; Lauerbach, 2010) and more so than in interviews on traditional news programs (e.g., Baym, 2013; Voltmer & Brants, 2011).

Politicians' appearances on entertainment talk shows have been shown to prime both a caring personal image (Moy et al., 2006) and a policy-oriented professional image (Parkin, 2010), eventually increasing the likelihood of being elected (Taniguchi, 2007). Yet, no research has empirically established a causal relationship between watching entertainment talk show interviews with politicians and trusting politicians. Theorizing about talk show effects on attitudes and opinions is limited, particularly when it comes to trust as an outcome variable. Consequently, we made use of several well-known theories from different fields to contextualize this genre and eventually formulate our hypothesis.

Studies, mainly in psychology, have demonstrated that people "form more positive impressions of others who are willing to share personal information about themselves, compared with others who are less open" (Collins & Miller, 1994, p. 459). This effect of self-disclosure has been demonstrated in personal interactions, but it does not necessarily involve personal interaction (Collins & Miller, 1994). It also has been established for recipients who simply read about or observed other people disclosing information about themselves. This is very similar to watching an entertainment talk show interview in which the private persona behind the politician is showcased (Van Zoonen, 2000). The positive effect of self-disclosure has been shown to be especially strong when positive information is revealed (Dalto, Ajzen, & Kaplan, 1979), which often is the case in entertainment talk shows.

Moreover, it has been demonstrated that showing some self-directed humor, which regularly is the case in entertainment talk show interviews, evokes the perception of being "more human," promoting identification and putting the politician in a more favorable light (Baumgartner, Morris, & Coleman, 2015; Becker & Haller, 2014). These content characteristics—personal and positive information, self-disclosure,

and humor—are less likely to be seen in political interviews on current affairs programs because of their interruptive, combative, and adversarial nature (e.g., Rendle-Short, 2007).

In addition, framing research has shown that emphasizing particular aspects in a text makes these aspects more noticeable, meaningful, or memorable in recipients' interpretations (e.g., Chong & Druckman, 2007). They become more accessible and applicable, therefore, influencing people's attitudes congruent with the framing of the issue (Nelson, Oxley, & Clawson, 1997). Valence framing is a particularly relevant concept for the current study (De Vreese & Boomgaarden, 2003): Emphasizing positive, neutral, or negative aspects causes evaluations that are congruent with the tone of media content (Schuck & De Vreese, 2006). The positive portrayal of politicians on talk shows relative to traditional news programs will thus positively affect people's evaluations of politicians and, therefore, potentially also how much they are trusted. With the disapproval, exposed mistrust, and challenging nature of current affairs programs, the focus is more on a negative than on a positive portrayal of politicians, which should lead to less trust.

With regard to another infotainment genre, political satire, it has been found that effects of jokes directed at political candidates spillover to general evaluations of political objects (Baumgartner, 2013). Similarly, we expected that exposure to politicians' interview appearances on entertainment talk shows vis-à-vis current affairs programs would positively affect the trust people have in politicians generally, beyond trust in the featured politician specifically.

Following exemplification theory (Zillmann & Brosius, 2000), we know that when people are exposed to an "exemplar," they tend to adjust their perceptions of the topic that has been exemplified: Seeing exemplars causes the belief that these are more common than they really are (Zillmann & Brosius, 2000). The appearances of frequent guests in "trash" talk shows (e.g., tattooed persons or runaway teens), for example, positively affect viewers' perceptions of how common these kinds of people are (Davis & Mares, 1998; Rössler & Brosius, 2001). Seeing a caring, friendly, and seemingly reliable politician on a talk show may therefore also evoke the perception that many or even most politicians are friendly and reliable too. Accordingly, exposure to an interview with a politician on an entertainment talk show is likely to have a positive effect on the trust people have in politicians generally, particularly when compared with seeing politicians on traditional news programs in which interviewees normally are put on the defensive (Baym, 2013).

That said, scholars increasingly acknowledge that media effects are not equal for all citizens (McLeod, Kosicki, & McLeod, 2009). Often, media effects are conditional on individual differences, which determine the susceptibility to the influence of media content (Valkenburg & Peter, 2013). Political knowledge stands out as a moderator of the effects of political entertainment genres (e.g., Baum, 2003). Regarding late-night comedy talk shows, for example, it has been demonstrated that although highly educated citizens acquire more knowledge (Cao, 2008), their political attitudes remain unaffected (Young, 2004, 2006). By contrast, citizens with little political knowledge shift their attitudes relatively easily with the content of such talk shows (Young, 2004) when they are primed with satirized traits of candidates (Young, 2006).

Cognitive structures of less knowledgeable individuals are relatively less developed, which makes it hard for them to resist the positive information contained in entertainment talk show interviews featuring politicians; hence, they will be more susceptible to any persuasive influence. In contrast, the political thoughts of highly knowledgeable citizens are well organized. Therefore, new information can effectively be interpreted but at the same time be resisted if it is not in line with existing views (Cao, 2008; Young, 2006). Moreover, knowledgeable people have been shown to counterargue political messages relatively more often (Taber, Cann, & Kucsova, 2009); therefore, exposure to talk show interviews featuring politicians may even be counterproductive and thus may negatively affect the trust in politicians among the highly knowledgeable.

Entertainment talk shows mainly attract audiences that, on average, are young, less educated, not interested in politics, and do not closely follow the news (Baum, 2005; Moy et al., 2005). Following the reasoning above, the political trust of these people in particular will be positively affected by talk show episodes featuring politicians. First, as talk show interviews with politicians may be among the few sources of political information for many talk show viewers, they can only rely on little initial knowledge to withstand the positive portrayal of politicians in these shows (Baum, 2005; Zaller, 1992). People with more political knowledge, by contrast, are less likely to change their opinions after seeing such an interview because they have more information available (e.g., negative or issue-related information) to base their evaluations on and are better able to counterargue the positive portrayal (Taber et al., 2009).

Second, people's motivation and ability predict the extent to which they resist or accept the information they are exposed to (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). As people have more political knowledge, they are better able and probably more motivated to carefully process a talk show interview that features a politician. This careful processing increases the likelihood that politically irrelevant or superficial information, as contained in talk shows, is withstood or even counterargued (Bolsen, Druckman, & Cook, 2014). This eventually may impact the trust in politicians negatively. People lacking political knowledge, by contrast, most likely heuristically process talk shows featuring politicians; therefore, they will be more accepting of the presented positive peripheral cues. They, for example, base their evaluations on the positive mood in entertainment talk shows (see, e.g., Matthes & Rauchfleisch, 2013).

In addition, previous studies have found that when interviews with politicians are too personal or too weakly linked with politics, it is unlikely that opinions toward the featured politician will be positively affected (Taniguchi, 2011; Van Zoonen & Holtz-Bacha, 2000). In such interviews, people miss the link between the politicians' private persona and their professional qualities as a politician. It is plausible that people with high levels of political knowledge more readily judge talk show interviews as being weakly linked to politics than less politically knowledgeable people, which will negatively affect their trust. Moreover, the trust in politicians of highly knowledgeable citizens may be negatively impacted even more if they see politicians in talk show programs talking about personal topics because they could consider this to be inappropriate (e.g., Collins & Miller, 1994).

Interviews on a traditional news program, on the other hand, also involve certain risks because of the high pressure to briefly respond to complex questions, which leads to situations in which politicians are confronted with two unattractive choices (Bull, 2000): giving a simplified answer that makes the

politician appear incompetent or giving the “full answer” that may make the politician appear devious as it is often impossible to not be long-winded and circuitous. Political sophisticates are better equipped to understand these choices and the situation politicians are confronted with than those with little political knowledge. In contrast, less informed viewers may not understand this and see only the incompetence or deviousness, which would negatively affect their trust in politicians.

Moreover, the trust of political sophisticates may decrease by seeing politicians appearing on entertainment talk shows and speaking about topics other than politics because they might evaluate such talk show appearances in the context of campaign strategies, just as journalists do (Edy & Snidow, 2011). Thinking of politicians in such strategic terms is likely to cause cynical responses (e.g., Cappella & Jamieson, 1996) and may arouse psychological reactance. Being aware of any persuasive attempts triggers a motivation to reassert one’s independence against such political influence (Brehm & Brehm, 1981).

For the reasons described above, we expected political knowledge to moderate the causal relationship between exposure to an interview with a politician on an entertainment talk show and political trust in the following manner:

Hypothesis 1: The effect of exposure to an interview with a politician on an entertainment talk show compared with exposure to an interview with a politician on a current affairs program is conditional on viewers’ political knowledge, such that (a) political interviews on entertainment talk shows will positively affect the trust in politicians among people with low levels of political knowledge, (b) but it will negatively affect the trust in politicians of people who have high levels of political knowledge.

Method

An online experiment was conducted in May 2011. The experiment employed a between-subjects design with three conditions. Participants were randomly assigned to the experimental “entertainment talk show” condition ($n = 71$), the “current affairs program” condition ($n = 80$), or the control condition ($n = 122$).¹ Participants were recruited via a student survey pool, advertisements in two local magazines and a local news website, and social networks on which a hyperlink to the experiment was provided. The age of participants ranged from 18 to 70 years ($M = 30.6$ years, $SD = 12.2$) and 57.1% were women. Their educational level was relatively high as 55.3% were currently attending university or had attended university in the past.

¹The control condition had more participants because people assigned to this condition did not face the technological difficulties of playing a video in the online questionnaire. Randomization was, nevertheless, successful for all of the following characteristics: age, gender, education, political knowledge, and political participation.

Stimulus Materials

In the entertainment talk show condition, participants were exposed to a shortened version (6 minutes, 50 seconds) of an interview with Elco Brinkman. Brinkman was the leader of the Christian Democrats (CDA) in the Senate at the time of the study. The interview originated from the Dutch morning talk show *KoffieMax* on the public broadcasting channel Nederland 1 on February 25, 2011. This program is an entertainment talk show somewhat comparable to *The Oprah Winfrey Show*, although more down-to-earth and much less exuberant.

Typical for an entertainment talk show, the host of this program did not have any intention of being critical toward her guest. Instead, she was friendly, introduced him enthusiastically, implicitly acknowledged what he said with many "ohs" and "yeahs," and did not start any of her rather open questions with a "but"; neither did she interrupt Brinkman or restate questions. Thereby, she succeeded in setting a positive atmosphere and creating an amusing conversation, fitting all of the descriptions of entertainment talk shows. Moreover, all elements that Van Aelst et al. (2012) distinguished as characteristics of political privatization were discussed: family, leisure time, upbringing, and past life.

The video clip started with Brinkman skipping rope. Subsequently, the host asked Brinkman how he usually relaxes in his leisure time. Brinkman answered by talking about his grandchildren and how he wants them to grow up. This was followed by addressing how Brinkman coped with cancer and how the disease influenced his view on life. The interview ended with talk about his wife and garden. Table 1 shows three quotes that are characteristic of this interview and how these compare with the interview of the current affairs program condition.

The video in the other experimental condition, the current affairs program, showed a shortened version (7 minutes, 47 seconds) of an interview with Brinkman on the current affairs program *AltijdWat*. This current affairs program was broadcast on primetime by the public broadcaster Nederland 2 on March 2, 2011, shortly after his appearance on *KoffieMax*. *AltijdWat* is somewhat comparable to *Meet the Press*, but is much less institutionalized and has less of an official reputation.

In contrast to the talk show interview, Brinkman was introduced professionally, questioned critically, and was asked more about political matters. The interviewer commenced more than half of the questions with *maar*, which is the Dutch equivalent of *but*, interrupted the politician frequently, and asked rather closed questions that were of a negative or critical direction. At the same time, the interviewer confronted Brinkman with older statements and did not show much acknowledgment of what Brinkman was saying by not using any response tokens. Nevertheless, various aspects of this interview were similar to the interview with Brinkman on the entertainment talk show (see Table 1), for example, the question and answer about why Brinkman wanted to return to politics after his fight against cancer. This interview also discussed how he coped with the disease and how this influenced him as a politician. Apart from that, the interviewer raised some substantive issues, such as the relevance of his party for the country. Brinkman responded by speaking about reliability, stability, and taking responsibility. The interviewer critically reacted to this and spoke about the party becoming less popular.

Table 1. Examples of Questions by Interviewer (Q) and Answers by Brinkman (A) in the Stimuli.

Entertainment talk show quotes	Current affairs program quotes
<p>Q: "You seem to be a very serious man. How do you relax?"</p> <p>A: "With my grandchildren, that is very easy. . . . They cheer you up so much. They are on an expedition within life. . . . They make you remember your own childhood."</p>	<p>"But, I see that you really mean it. And you react grim. But. . . ."</p> <p>"That is because I really pursue these goals. I can also just play with my grandchildren. But I believe people should not just stay on the sideline and say 'everything should be different.' No; I choose to make my hands dirty."</p>
<p>Q: "You have been out of politics for 15 years. . . . You survived cancer twice. How did that change your view on life?"</p> <p>A: "First of all, you get it and do not choose to get it. So, you absolutely want to fight for the chance to survive. That is a very different experience than walking around in hospitals as an administrator."</p>	<p>"Twice, you were diagnosed with cancer. . . . Did your disease change you as a politician? As an administrator?"</p> <p>"You are only focused on one thing: How quickly can I get out of this situation. Not so much about how quick your hair grows back or about when your saliva is not troubling anymore, but rather how quick can you come back to the normal people. . . . Yes, it changed me. Now you really know how real life works."</p>
<p>Q: "Let us take a look into your garden [shows video clip taped in Brinkman's garden]. I think this is so nice!"</p> <p>A: "I can really enjoy it. The real life occurs in the garden together with my wife. There you can really feel and smell these flowers. We have a rather small garden, but I really like to put as much as possible in there. Because I love colors, but it is already so full."</p>	<p>"Are you not afraid that, with another electoral loss, your name in the history books will not be so good? . . . Or do you not care so much about that?"</p> <p>"Look around you, spring is coming. Everything is growing. You see; here mud, dirty grass, that is a little bit like the situation of the country at this moment. But at the same time you see the promise of spring. With the [Christian Democrats], it will just go like those flowers that are popping up now. We are going up."</p>

Note. The interviews to which participants were exposed can be found online. *KoffieMax*: <http://vimeo.com/36281933> and *AltijdWat*: <http://vimeo.com/36281839>.

Manipulation checks confirmed that the interview with Brinkman on the entertainment talk show was perceived as more entertaining, $t(149) = 12.25$, $p < .001$, and less critical, $t(149) = -10.97$, $p < .001$, than the interview on the current affairs program. In the control condition, participants were not exposed to any video materials. This condition was used as a baseline comparison tapping people's trust in politicians without forced media exposure.

Measures

Dependent variable. The dependent variable “trust in politicians” was measured with 10 statements about issues such as promise keeping, honesty, and being self-interested, and referred to politicians in general. Participants assessed the competence and integrity of politicians with these statements on 7-point disagree–agree Likert-type scales. The Appendix shows the complete list of statements that was used to measure trust in politicians.

Mokken scale analysis showed that these items together formed a strong and reliable scale measuring trust in politicians ($H = .43$, $\alpha = .87$).² To ease interpretation, the index variable indicating trust was transformed to range from 0 (least trust) to 100 (most trust; $M = 59.29$, $SD = 17.40$).

Moderator variable. Political knowledge was measured with nine multiple-choice questions about the parties that formed the government; names, functions, and parties of politicians; the number of ministers in Parliament; and a news fact about a politician. The number of correct answers was added and formed a strong and reliable Mokken scale ($H = .33$, $\alpha = .67$; $M = 5.32$, $SD = 2.09$).

Political knowledge scores were mean-centered to ease interpretation of the interaction analyses. Subsequently, the political knowledge scale was multiplied by the dummy variables that represented the experimental conditions to which participants were assigned. Hence, the moderated effect of exposure to entertainment talk shows due to an interaction with political knowledge could be analyzed.

Results

To test the hypotheses, we conducted bootstrapped ordinary least squares regression analyses with the current affairs program condition and the control condition as dummy variables and the entertainment talk show condition as the reference category.³ Table 2 shows the regression coefficients that predict the level of trust in politicians in these two conditions relative to the entertainment talk show condition. The first set of columns shows the main effects, and the second set of columns shows the interaction effects with political knowledge.

²The goodness of fit of a Mokken scale is assessed by its Loevinger’s coefficient of homogeneity, H . H values above .30 indicate satisfactory fit (Van Schuur, 2003). Mokken scale analysis was used because assumptions of principal component analysis often unjustifiably lead to overestimating the number of latent dimensions for scales of more than eight items. Mokken scaling is an alternative method grounded in item response theory that does not suffer from this weakness (for more details, see Van der Eijk & Rose, 2015; Van Schuur, 2003).

³ Findings are based on 10,000 bootstrap samples to take into account that the data showed some nonnormality in the distribution of the residuals, which effectively can be dealt with in this way. Reported confidence intervals are bias-corrected.

**Table 2. Regression Models Predicting Trust in Politicians
in the Conditions vis-à-vis the Entertainment Talk Show Condition.**

Variable	Main effects			Moderated effects		
	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>b</i> *	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>b</i> *
Constant	59.92	2.03		60.07	1.92	
Current affairs program	-2.36	2.60	-0.06	-2.57	2.55	-0.07
Control condition	0.14	2.59	0.00	0.02	2.55	0.00
Political knowledge	1.71	0.46	0.21*	-0.28	0.83	-0.03
Current Affairs × Political Knowledge				3.06	1.05	0.21*
Control Condition × Political Knowledge				2.34	1.19	0.18*
Participants (<i>n</i>)	273			273		
Variance accounted for (<i>R</i> ²)	.05			.07		

Note. The entertainment talk show condition is the reference category. Cells contain ordinary least squares unstandardized (*b*) and standardized (*b**) regression coefficients with bootstrapped standard errors (*SE*).

**p* < .05 (two-tailed).

The first analysis including only main effects showed no overall effects of exposure to the entertainment talk show when compared with the current affairs program, $b = -2.39$, 95% CI [-7.41, 2.78], and the control condition, $b = -0.13$, 95% CI [-5.00, 4.95]. This means that across the board trust in politicians was not affected by the interview to which people were exposed. Political knowledge, however, had a significant effect, $b = 1.71$, 95% CI [0.82, 2.60]: Trust in politicians generally rises as people have more political knowledge. This trend is also easy to observe in the graphs of the control condition for different knowledge levels in Figure 1 (light, dotted bars).

To investigate whether there was differential susceptibility to the effects of entertainment talk shows for different levels of political knowledge as hypothesized, we conducted a regression analysis including interaction effects representing the moderating influence of political knowledge. As the second column of Table 2 shows, significant findings were yielded for both interaction terms comparing exposure to the talk show with either the current affairs program or the control condition.⁴ Figure 1 visualizes the interaction effects to ease interpretation.

⁴ Interaction term of exposure to the current affairs program: $b = 3.06$, 95% CI [1.10, 5.25]. Interaction effect of the control condition with individuals' political knowledge: $b = 2.34$, 95% CI [0.15, 4.78].

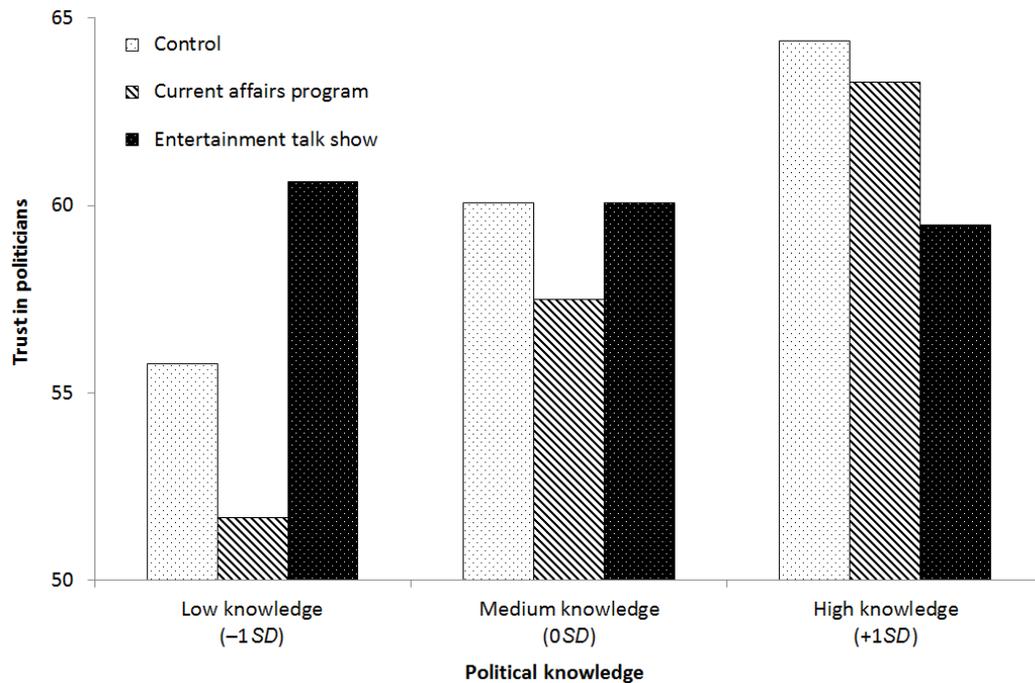


Figure 1. Level of trust in politicians (scale: 0–100) in the control condition, the current affairs program condition, and the entertainment talk show condition for people with a low (–1 SD), average, or high level (+1 SD) of political knowledge.

Generally, exposure to the current affairs program led to similar levels of trust as not being exposed to an interview in the control condition. Although for those with low levels of political knowledge, the trust level seemed to decrease when they were exposed to the current affairs program, this difference did not reach statistical significance. Exposure to the current affairs program, thus, had no effect on political trust when compared with seeing no interview.

The effect of exposure to the entertainment talk show interview compared with exposure to the current affairs program and compared with no exposure in the control condition, as hypothesized, was significant (see Table 1). People with little political knowledge had more trust in politicians after they were exposed to the entertainment talk show interview than after exposure to the interview on the current affairs program (see left side of Figure 1). Using the Johnson–Neyman technique with heteroscedasticity-consistent standard errors in Hayes’s (2013) modeling tool *Process*, we established that this positive effect of seeing the entertainment talk show was significant for people who answered fewer than 5 of the nine knowledge questions correctly; the critical value was 4.78, which is equal to –0.25 standard deviations. This also means that compared with viewing the entertainment talk show (but also the control condition), exposure to the current affairs program lowered trust among people with low and average knowledge levels. This altogether confirms Hypothesis 1a.

Similarly, Figure 1 shows that for those with a low level of political knowledge, higher trust levels were found when they were exposed to the entertainment talk show compared with when they saw nothing in the control condition. The Johnson–Neyman statistic (Hayes, 2013) indicates that this positive effect was significant for people with knowledge scores below 2.24 (equal to $-1.47 SD$). This comparison of no exposure versus exposure to the entertainment talk show condition, thus, once again provides evidence that supports Hypothesis 1a.

The opposite happened with people who had the most political knowledge (see right side of Figure 1). They tended to trust politicians the least after having been exposed to the entertainment talk show. The Johnson–Neyman technique showed that the trust level of participants with knowledge scores above 8.68 (equal to $1.61 SD$), all nine questions answered correctly, was significantly affected in a negative manner by exposure to the interview on the entertainment talk show compared with the interview on the current affairs program. The highly informed viewers, thus, trusted politicians more after exposure to the interview on the traditional news program. Hence, Hypothesis 1b was also supported.

In addition, Figure 1 shows that exposure to the entertainment talk show interview led to lower levels of trust in politicians compared with assignment to the control condition among people with high levels of political knowledge. The Johnson–Neyman statistic for this effect reached borderline statistical significance ($p = .055$ at the maximum knowledge score, which equals $1.76 SD$).

Altogether, the findings show that there is not one main effect of exposure to the talk show interview vis-à-vis the current affairs program or the control condition. Effects were conditional on political knowledge levels. Talk show viewing decreased political trust among the more informed viewers, but increased trust for those with lower levels of political knowledge.

Discussion

This study demonstrates how appearances of politicians on entertainment talk shows affect citizens' trust in political actors. Seeing a politician on an entertainment talk show yields greater trust in politicians among people with little political knowledge: The low political sophisticates tend to generalize the positive portrayal of one politician in an entertainment talk show to politicians generally. When politicians expand their campaigns to include appearances on entertainment talk shows, they most likely benefit from increases in trust among potential voters because talk show viewers are traditionally lower in political knowledge than other audiences (Baum, 2005; Moy et al., 2005). Politicians can therefore assume that, overall, the effects on trust will be rather positive, not negative like we find among the more knowledgeable viewers who are less likely to follow these shows and obtain information from other sources.

Our findings, therefore, provide strong support for the assumption that the overwhelmingly positive way of interviewing on entertainment talk shows (e.g., Eriksson, 2010; Lauerbach, 2007; Schütz, 1995) may indeed be an effective tool of self-promotion for politicians aiming at citizens who are not very interested in politics. The entertainment talk show interview has been shown to positively affect the trust of people who are not very knowledgeable of politics, probably because they do not have much other

information on which to base their opinions and are neither able nor motivated to counterargue the positive information transmitted by entertainment talk shows (Baum, 2005).

Trust of people who knew the most about politics, by contrast, was negatively impacted by exposure to the entertainment talk show compared with watching the current affairs program or not being exposed to an interview at all. Political sophisticates probably counterargued the overwhelmingly positive information (Bolsen et al., 2014) or evaluated the interview and the politician's performance as being too weakly linked to what these viewers think they should be talking about: politics (Van Zoonen & Holtz-Bacha, 2000). Highly knowledgeable citizens may be disappointed by seeing politicians dumbing down rather than entering a substantial political discourse, probably considering the self-disclosure inappropriate (e.g., Collins & Miller, 1994). Alternatively, they may consider talk show appearances as just another campaigning strategy (Edy & Snidow, 2011), which explains the negative effect on trust in politicians among politically knowledgeable citizens for whom politics is arguably about policy and ideology.

Using stimuli from the "real world" strengthens the external validity of this study's findings, but at the same time forces us to be careful in drawing too strong conclusions as the internal validity was affected by the use of originally broadcasted video materials. After all, both videos differed on more aspects than only the genre, topics being addressed, and the style of interviewing, because fragments originated from programs with a different interviewer, studio setting, context, and so on and may possibly have influenced the results as well. These characteristics are also inherently related to the genre, however (Baym, 2013).

Moreover, because the findings were based on one video clip per condition, it is not entirely certain whether the effects can be generalized. To strengthen the validity and not rely on one program-politician combination, future studies may consider exposing participants to multiple interview segments of various politicians on either talk shows or current affairs programs and then measure the trust in these specific politicians as a proxy for the trust in politicians generally. Employing stimuli that are produced with the help of actors, so that the content can be kept similar across conditions, could increase the internal validity of such a study. The internal validity of the control condition could also be improved in future studies by having participants watch a video on an unrelated topic, so the act of video viewing is kept parallel to the two treatments conditions.

Because the current study had to speculate about the mechanisms behind the effects in the absence of literature on the topic, more research is needed on possible mediators to explain in greater detail how exposure to interviews on entertainment talk shows affects trust in politicians. Relevant factors that could help in better understanding the investigated effect are, for example, changes in knowledge levels regarding the displayed politician and the way in which the video clip is processed. The latter could be operationalized with a thought-listing task directly placed after stimulus exposure that could, among other responses, expose counterarguing and reactance. Moreover, novel approaches in media effects research, such as physiological measurements and implicit association tests, allow investigating whether emotional arousal explains why and to whom effects occur. Furthermore, because the strongest effects were found for people with little political knowledge, a question open for future studies is how long the effect on political trust persists. For that purpose, it would be interesting to have multiple waves in future

experimental designs. In sum, employing more stringent manipulation of stimuli and measuring possible mediating factors would lead to more concrete theorizing about the effects found here.

The politician who featured in our stimuli was the leader of a political party, CDA, that is located in the center-right of the Dutch left–right spectrum of political parties and became the third most popular party in the election that followed these interviews.⁵ A question open to future research is whether and how the effects would have been different for politicians who were either more well known (e.g., prime minister candidates), relatively unknown (leaders of small parties, independent candidates, or local politicians), or belong to political parties with a stronger left-wing or right-wing identity.

Finally, the experiment relied on a convenience sample. As we were primarily interested in the causal mechanisms that are put in motion by exposure to interviews with politicians on entertainment talk shows, this was not problematic. However, it is very likely that political knowledge within the overall Dutch population varies more than in our sample. Repeating the experiment with a representative sample could demonstrate how the effects would work for people with higher or lower levels of political knowledge, and it would reveal for what share of the population the positive and negative effects are likely to occur. Moreover, to allow for a cleaner investigation of the moderating impact of political knowledge, knowledge could be manipulated as an additional factor in the experimental design. A random selection of participants could be provided with factual information about the politician who is being interviewed and the topics that are addressed in the video clip, for example, before stimulus exposure.

The findings of this study have implications for the current debate about the impact of infotainment for society and democracy. Although serious interviews can sometimes be found on entertainment talk shows, and light-hearted interviews are not totally uncommon in traditional news programs, it normally is the other way around, with politicians being much friendlier and less critically approached on talk shows. As exposure to entertainment talk shows featuring politicians positively influences the image of politicians among people with relatively low political knowledge levels, these programs potentially play an important role in shaping a positive public opinion toward politics. Because these people are, not incidentally, also the target audience of these shows (Baum, 2005; Van Zoonen & Holtz-Bacha, 2000), the consequences for society should not be underestimated. For some, these findings may justify concerns about the strategic use of entertainment programming by politicians to appear “nicer” and garner support from viewers who are less resistant to such tactics (e.g., Hart, 1999; Postman, 1986). More optimistic accounts, however, would consider that by hitting the talk show circuit, political candidates may benefit the functioning of democracy generally by engendering political trust (Baym, 2007; Levi & Stoker, 2000).

⁵CDA received about 15% of the votes, compared with 20% that were cast for the winning party.

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Appendix
Items in the Mokken Scale Measuring Trust in Politicians.

Item	Mean	H_i
Politicians usually keep their promises	3.63	.43
Politicians are only interested in my vote and not my opinion (recoded)	3.64	.43
Politicians are honest	3.87	.46
Politicians have lost contact with society (recoded)	3.90	.43
Politicians have the right solutions for the problems in the Netherlands	3.92	.40
Politicians waste taxes (recoded)	3.96	.38
Politicians are reliable	4.04	.46
Politicians do not do enough for people like me (recoded)	4.20	.37
Politicians are primarily focused on their own interests and not society's (recoded)	4.38	.44
Most politicians are competent people who know what to do	4.51	.47
Overall		.43

Note. H_i -values indicate the Loevinger's scalability coefficient of homogeneity, H_i , for every individual item i in latent the scale measuring trust in politicians.