

***The Daily Show* and the Reinvention of Political Journalism**

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There appears to be a crisis in broadcast journalism. In quantitative terms, there is more of it than ever before, but to most critics, its quality has degraded over the past 15 or 20 years (e.g. Frank, 1991). Like most mainstream journalism in the contemporary age of megamedia (Alger, 1998), television news has shifted from a professional model to a commercial frame (Hallin, 2000), from understanding journalism as a public service to conceptualizing it as a for-profit enterprise. In an earlier time, broadcast journalists saw their profession as a mission, one which played a central role in the democratic process (Cohen, 1997). In its ideal, news was supposed to be a *searchlight* -- a light of public inquiry and political accountability, dedicated to providing citizens the informational resources they needed to participate in a political public sphere. By contrast, today's television news, absorbed into the portfolios of the giant media conglomerates, has become a *floodlight* -- a hyper-mediated, theatrical light of exposure, a commodity packaged to sell (Baym, 2003).

The authoritative nightly news of an earlier era has been fractured, replaced by a variety of programming strategies ranging from the latest version of network "news lite" to local news happy talk and 24-hour cable news punditry. In the increasingly competitive battle for market shares, some of the basic principles of good journalism -- independence, inquiry, and verification -- are all too often sacrificed to meet the ever-increasing demand for eye-catching content (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 1999). Driven by market pressures, the erosion of journalism-as-public-inquiry has only hastened in the post-September 11 environment, in which most of commercial news media outlets aligned themselves soundly with the national power structure -- the White House and the apparatus of state security (Hutcheson et al., 2004).

To complicate the matter, the public appears to be growing continuously more dissatisfied with its broadcast news alternatives. According to a 2002 Pew Research Center study, the audiences for most forms of television news fell considerably between 1993 and 2002, with the audience for nightly network news down 46%, network news magazines down 54%, local tv news down 26%, and CNN down 28%. Not surprisingly, the sharpest decline came among 18-24 year olds, but the Pew data also reveal a generation gap across the ages. Among 18-29 year olds, only 40% reported watching television news at all in the previous day, a number that climbs to only 52% among 30-49 year olds. These trends come into even greater focus in the Pew Center's 2004 study on election coverage. The study shows that even in the four years between the 2000 and 2004 presidential campaigns, 18-29 year olds are increasingly turning

away from mainstream sources of broadcast news, with only 23 % saying they “regularly learn something” from network news (compared to 39 % in 2000), 29 % from local news (compared to 42 % in 2000), and 37 % from cable news (compared to 38 % in 2000). It would appear, then, that as the population ages, mainstream broadcast news is facing a difficult future.

In the midst of this narrative of decline, however, young people are increasingly turning to another form of news and campaign information -- late-night television and comedy shows. The 2004 Pew survey found that 21 % of people ages 18-29 say they regularly learn about news and politics from comedy shows such as *Saturday Night Live*, and 13% report learning from late-night talk shows such as NBC’s *Tonight Show* with Jay Leno and CBS’s *Late Night* with David Letterman. Among the programs regularly cited as a rising source of political information is Comedy Central’s mock news program *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*. With the post-September 11 passing of ABC’s *Politically Incorrect*, *The Daily Show* has risen to the cutting edge of the genre. Its unique blending of insightful coverage of topical political news with an entertainment-oriented talk show format has resonated with a substantial audience. Comedy Central estimates the daily audience at around 2 million people (S. Albani, personal communication, May 3, 2004). The show is also gaining a following outside of the United States. In Canada, some 500,000 people watch the show each evening (CBC, 2004). Further, a weekly compilation of the show’s highlights is assembled by and aired on CNN-International, with a world-wide audience of 160 million people (Douglas, 2003).

The show’s host, actor and comedian Jon Stewart, and his co-producers label their work as “fake news,” and insist that their agenda simply is “to make people laugh” (S. Albani, personal communication, May 3, 2004). The label of “fake” news has provided the primary frame for conversations about the show, both in popular and academic circles. That moniker, however, fails to acknowledge the increasingly central role the show is playing in the domain of serious political communication. The program recently won a Peabody award and was also nominated as one of television’s best newscasts by the TV Critics Association (CBC, 2004). *Newsday* recently named Stewart as the single most important newscaster in the country (Gay, 2004). Further, the show’s nightly interview segment features a continual stream of members of the national political, legislative, and journalistic establishment. Senator John Edwards chose *The Daily Show* as the media venue from which officially to announce his candidacy for the 2004 Democratic presidential nomination. Bill Moyers, the dean of American public service

television news, may be correct in his assertion that “you simply can’t understand American politics in the new millennium without *The Daily Show*” (NOW, 2003).

The label of “fake news” is further problematic on a deeper level. Any notion of “fake” depends upon an equal conception of a “real.” Fake news necessitates assumptions about some kind of *authentic* or *legitimate* set of news practices; ideals that one rarely hears articulated today nor necessarily sees as evident in our current historical moment. “News,” like “such other enthralling abstractions as love and truth,” Roshco (1975) once wrote, is more easily pursued than defined, a problem exacerbated by the lack of any codified professional parameters. To work as a journalist requires no formal education, no entrance examination, no oversight by a professional guild (Schudson, 1978). Governed not by formal by-laws, news is defined and constrained by a set of cultural practices, informal and often implicit agreements about proper conduct, style, and form. Those practices, however, are in flux; increasingly multiple, debatable, and open for reconsideration. Never a window to the world or a mirror on society, contemporary news has become a fractured prism, one which is reconstituted and redefined continuously.

In his interview with Jon Stewart, Bill Moyers wonders if *The Daily Show* is “an old form of comedy” or a “new kind of journalism” (NOW, 2003). The suspicion here is that it is both -- something of the former and much of the latter. Seen against a backdrop of declining audiences, boundary contestation, and textual exploration (e.g. Bishop, 2004), *The Daily Show* can be understood as an experiment in the journalistic. As I will argue here, it is a unique intersection of comedy, late-night entertainment, news, and public affairs discussion that potentially has much to teach us about the possibilities of broadcast journalism in the 21st century. To better understand those possibilities, I first locate *The Daily Show* within an evolving media environment defined by the twin forces of multiplicity and integration. I then turn to a textual analysis of the program itself. Based on a daily review of the show for three months in the spring and summer of 2004, I offer a close reading of the three primary programmatic elements - its daily news segment, parody reports, and studio interviews -- and then consider the implications for journalistic practice and political discourse. I conclude that *The Daily Show* can be better understood, not as “fake news,” but as an alternative journalism, one that uses satire to interrogate power, parody to deconstruct contemporary news, and dialogue to enact a model of deliberative democracy.

The Daily Show is a product of emerging arrangements in the media environment, or what Neuman (1996) has called the “infrastructure” of political communication. We can identify three interrelated, yet distinct, structural transformations, to borrow Habermas’ phrase; developments on the levels of the technological, economic, and cultural, which have over the past two decades redrawn the boundaries of journalism and the public sphere (see also Bennett and Entman, 2001). In terms of technology, the continuing expansion of cable television and satellite delivery systems has resulted in the ever-increasing multiplicity of channels. Similarly, the speed at which information can be transmitted continues to increase. As we saw in the recent war in Iraq, broadcasters can now transmit instantly from anywhere in the world. So too does the Internet provide nearly instantaneous global linkages not just to text, but to high-resolution images and increasingly video as well. At the same time, the emergence of digital, hand-held, and computer-based video and editing systems has fundamentally lowered the threshold to production, both in terms of required capital and technical skills. Together, these developments have created an easily accessible and relatively unconstrainable information environment, expanding the boundaries of the public sphere, McNair (2000) notes, to a “communicative space of infinite size” (p. 40).

Of course the increasing multiplicity of media outlets has been countered by the increasing consolidation of ownership (McChesney, 1999). Outside of the Internet, most distribution channels have become the province of a few giant media firms, including Viacom, which owns Comedy central. Paralleling the trend toward technological convergence, Viacom and other media conglomerates are integrated, both vertically and horizontally, structured to share resources, personnel, and approaches to content across what were once distinct media outlets and genres (see Murdock, 1990). As has been well-discussed, conglomeration has been accompanied by commodification, the reconceptualization of all media content not as public service but as products packaged for profit, and of the audience not as citizens but as consumers. At the same time, however, media companies are pursuing strategies of market segmentation, largely abandoning the one-size-fits-all model of earlier network programming in favor of narrowly-targeted, demographic-based appeals (Gandy, 2001).

Finally, these trends have been complemented by the wider breakdown in contemporary culture of traditional boundaries and social structures. In an age of de-centering, of postmodern skepticism toward authority and authoritative languages, the media environment has become

defined by blurred borders. The metaphoric walls between news, sales, and marketing have dissolved (Underwood, 1993), as have any clear distinctions between the public and private spheres, public affairs and popular culture, and news and entertainment (Bennett & Entman, 2001; Delli Carpini & Williams, 2001; McNair, 2000). Delli Carpini and Williams suggest that current media organization and practice both reflect and contribute to the obscuring of traditional boundaries as the divisions among media types, ownership, and, perhaps most importantly, genres become increasingly porous. They further suggest that the dissolution of such borders is in part a recognition of the arbitrary nature of those distinctions and a challenge to the structures of political and social power upon which those borders ultimately depend.

This is not simply the move toward “infotainment,” although the fundamental blurring of news and entertainment -- a conflation that cuts both ways -- is certainly a constituent element. Rather, it is a more profound phenomenon of *discursive* integration, a way of speaking about, understanding, and acting within the world defined by the permeability of form and the fluidity of content. Discourses of news, politics, entertainment, and marketing have grown deeply inseparable; the languages, styles, and practices of each have lost their distinctiveness and are being remolded and melded into previously unthought combinations. For some, this is a narrative of crisis, but the contemporary media environment also contains the potential for a worthwhile rethinking of discursive styles and standards that occasionally opens spaces for significant innovation.

The Daily Show is the epitome of discursively integrated media, a seamless blending of comedy, entertainment talk, news, and public affairs discussion. Its hybrid nature is evident from its opening moments. The show begins each night with a full-screen graphic of the date, an American flag, and the globe, accompanied by a music track serious in tone and resembling that which is usually associated with a network newscast. An unseen announcer then pronounces the date, followed by “From Comedy Central’s world news headquarters in New York, this is *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*.” The initial emphasis on the date borrows a technique from broadcast journalism that seeks textual authority through a claim to immediacy (see Baym, 2000, pp. 99-100). The phrase “world news headquarters in New York” similarly contains obvious connotations, invoking the power and prestige of the New York-based national news. The connotation, however, is quickly complicated as the graphic gives way to a live camera shot

that swings though the studio, a technique of fast motion more common to entertainment than to news. At the same time, the audio cuts to a decidedly more upbeat, rock-and-roll soundtrack, while the studio audience cheers in the background.

From the start, then, the program interweaves at least two levels of discourse, borrowing equally from traditions of authoritative nightly news and the entertainment talk show. While the open may suggest that a discourse of entertainment supercedes a discourse or news, the two are placed not in binary opposition, but in complementary arrangements. The show functions as *both* entertainment *and* news, simultaneously pop culture and public affairs. Its format is built on the traditional structure of late night talk shows such as Leno's *Tonight Show* and Letterman's *Late Night*, which move from the host's introductory monologue to sketch comedy, and conclude with the desk-and-couch interview with noted personalities (see Timberg, 2002). In contrast to its predecessors, however, the program's content focuses almost entirely on current events and public affairs. In place of the traditional comedic monologue, the first section presents a satirical examination of the day's top news stories. This acute and often biting look at the day's news is followed by *The Daily Show's* version of sketch comedy: parody news reports in which the show's cast of comedians play the part of television news reporters and analysts. These are followed by the in-studio interview, a nightly segment often featuring national journalists, politicians, and other representatives of the political communication establishment.

Each of these three primary production elements represents a complex blending of entertainment and news that renders *The Daily Show* difficult to pigeon-hole. Its hybrid combinations defy simple generic taxonomies as well as reductionist labels such as "fake news." It undoubtedly is comedy -- often entertaining and at times absurd -- but it is also an informative examination of both current events and media practices, as well as a forum for the discussion of substantive public affairs. I now turn to an examination of each of those specific elements, arguing that *The Daily Show* invites us to reconsider journalistic conventions in an age of media multiplicity and discursive integration.

The first of the program's three major content elements -- the satire news update -- represents a significant development in the genre of comedic news. Its lineage can be traced to the introductory monologue common to the late-night talk show since the 1950's (Timberg, 2002). Still readily apparent on shows such as Letterman and Leno, the host generally refers

briefly to current events and the latest headlines and then follows with the punch-line. While the politically oriented one-liner uses the news for its inspiration, its focus usually falls on the personal foibles and character flaws of the primary political actors (Niven et al., 2003). Thus the late-night joke appears to contain little relevance to the sphere of policy and debate, what Bennett and Entman (2001) refer to as the *political* public sphere. *The Daily Show's* approach can also be traced to the more complex style of fake news offered by *Saturday Night Live's* "Weekend Update" segment, a feature on the program from its inception in the mid-1970s. There, one of the cast members plays the role of news anchor, seated at what appears to be a traditional television news set. Here the approach of the late-night monologue is complicated with the addition of visual elements; usually suggestive photographs or newspaper headlines placed in the familiar over-the-shoulder graphic. The "anchor" then offers a brief explanation of the image and then the punch-line. Again, like the one-liners of late-night talk, the focus of the Weekend Update joke rarely falls on substantive political issues, and often turns to the surreal to find its humor.

Both styles of comedic news present "stories" in a rapid-fire fashion, moving (as does most conventional television news) quickly between political references and jokes. This is a version of what Postman (1986) has called the "now this" format of news, in which no topic is placed in a wider context or receives elaboration. Instead, the anchor jumps from story to story, often placing back-to-back stories of wildly different content and significance. In television news, the effect is to reduce the importance of political information to a form of "trivial pursuit" -- political information and knowledge become fodder for quiz shows and trivia games, containing little perceivable real-world importance or relevance. Both the talk show monologue and the fake news Weekend Update mimic this approach, and thus further reduce any sense of engagement with or connection to the political public sphere. Comedic news so practiced would appear to fall outside the frame of legitimate political discourse, and thus scholars of political communication often are surprised (and usually dismayed) when empirical studies reveal that for many people, these forms have become influential sources of political information.

The Daily Show, however, while borrowing from these styles of "fake" news, offers a considerable advancement over them, more deeply melding approaches of news and comedy. To the standard comedic style, *The Daily Show* adds more elements common to news, including video clips, soundbites, and (as will be considered below), complete reporter packages. While in

its daily news update segment, it loosely follows the structure common to *Weekend Update*, *The Daily Show* differs from both its predecessors. While it does at times focus on the trivial aspects of the political domain, it more often tackles national and global issues of unquestioned significance for the political conversation. During the shows examined here, recurrent topics included the Bush administration's war on terrorism, the occupation of Iraq and the Abu Ghraib torture scandal, and the presidential election campaign. In discussing such topics, *The Daily Show* forsakes the "now this" model, often providing single-issue coverage for as long as eight minutes, far longer than the average story on the network news. So too does the segment lace its topics in wider contexts, often providing background information and drawing historical linkages of the sort left undeveloped by most examples of television news.

Soundbites from the primary political actors provide the grist of the segment. Here the format is reminiscent of an earlier style of network news, which was built around soundbites from lawmakers and other political actors (see Baym, 2004). President Bush and his administration earn the main focus of the segment, but considerable attention is also paid to Senate hearings, Congressional testimony and debate, and press conferences with various governmental figures -- material all culled from CSPAN, CNN, Fox News, PBS's *NewsHour*, and other readily available sources. The visuals are complemented with information gained from major newspapers such as the *New York Times*, *USA Today*, and the *Wall Street Journal*, as well as from the show's subscription to the Associated Press (S. Albani, personal communication, May 3, 2004).

The Daily Show is thus enabled by the multiplicity and availability of news and information in a hyper-mediated era. Stewart acknowledges the point during the show's coverage of CIA Director George Tenet's resignation: "Huge breaking news story," Stewart begins, "we're gonna get right to it, because you know when news breaks ... we may not be the first people on the scene, but we've got televisions, we know what's going on" (6/3/04). Stewart's line appears on the surface to be self-deprecating humor, a reminder that the show refuses to take itself seriously. It is also a significant commentary, however, on the sheer volume of informational resources now publicly available, and the decreasing role traditional news sources play in filtering the flow of information. It is possible, *The Daily Show* suggests, to construct a newscast simply by mining the raw material available on the average cable television system.

Drawing on live broadcast coverage of public statements and government proceedings, the content of *The Daily Show* resembles much of the mainstream news media. Insisting on the title of “fake news,” however, *The Daily Show*’s producers routinely violate standard journalistic conventions in important ways. For one, while it covers the same raw material as does the mainstream news, its choices of soundbites turn contemporary conventions on their head. Contemporary practice defines a good quote as a coherent statement of policy or attitude, ideally containing emotion or character, and completed neatly in about eight to 12 seconds. Professional journalists are trained to ignore long, rambling verbal presentations, quotes with poor grammar or misstatements, and of course, soundbites with long pauses or any significant absence of verbal content. In the effort to package eight seconds of speech, that which does not conform to conventional expectations is left on the proverbial cutting room floor. *The Daily Show* however, mines those outtakes for a wealth of informative content.

Consider for example the coverage of Bush’s statement following Tenet’s resignation. The *New York Times* offered the following quote from the president: “I told him I’m sorry he’s leaving. He’s done a superb job on behalf of the American people” (cite). Here, however, is part of *The Daily Show*’s selection:

Bush: George Tenet is uh ... is ... a ... the kind of public service, uh, servant, you like to work with. He has been a, a, um ... a strong and able leader at the agency. He’s been a, uh ... he’s been a strong leader in the war on terror. (6/3/04)

In its coverage of Bush’s statement, the *Times* holds to standard conventions, and in so doing reduces Bush’s sloppy, pause-saturated speech to a tightly constructed 18 words that suggest a clarity of thought and purpose. *The Daily Show*’s, however, reveals a different aspect of Bush’s statement, one which calls into question his focus and perhaps his sincerity. Both the *Times*’ and *The Daily Show*’s versions are “accurate” in the strict sense of the word, but each achieves a markedly different textual effect.

In rejecting the standard conventions of quote selection, *The Daily Show* achieves a critical distance that cannot be said of the *Times*. As Underwood (2001) and others have argued, the mainstream journalist’s reliance on predictable conventions can render them susceptible to manipulation by the professional speech writers and media handlers who seed public information with pre-scripted soundbites and spin (see also Jones, 1995). Especially following September 11, the mainstream news media have been all too eager to amplify the Bush Administration’s

rhetoric without critical challenge (Hutcheson et al., 2004). Enabled by the identity of “fake news,” however, *The Daily Show* is not beholden to conventions that arguably have outlived their usefulness. *The Daily Show*’s refusal to abide by standard practices may offer a measure of resistance to manipulation, a counterbalance to the mutual embrace between press and politics.

A second convention *The Daily Show* freely rejects is the insistence in the mainstream news media, often times insincere, on a dispassionate observation that elides the journalist’s subjectivity. If the insistence on objectivity too easily can become amplification, *The Daily Show* instead engages in subjective interrogation. Consider the treatment of the Bush statement quoted above. Here is how it appeared on air:

Bush: George Tenet is uh ... is ... a . . .

Stewart: Um, a convenient fall guy ... um ... liability to our intelligence operation.

Bush: the kind of public service, uh, servant, you like to work with.

Stewart: I was gonna say that, that was on the tip of my tongue.

Bush: He has been a, a, um ... a . . .

Stewart: Uh, uh, a albatross around the neck of your administration, an albatross.

Bush: a strong and able leader at the agency. He’s been a, uh ... he’s been a . . .

Stewart: He’s been around too long. No, that’s not it.

Bush: been a strong leader in the war on terror.

Stewart: No, that’s not it. It’s right here, I don’t know what it is . . .

The humor here obviously lies in Stewart’s interruptions, in his willingness to read Bush’s statement against the grain and confront it with his own reactions and responses. Stewart’s presentation is explicitly situated; he reads the news against a clear subjectivity -- that, as Susan Douglas has noted (2003), of the “outraged individual who, comparing official pronouncements with his own basic common sense, simply cannot believe what he -- and all of us -- are expected to swallow.”

This kind of juxtaposition, between official pronouncements and at least one version of basic common sense, is the primary strategy of *The Daily Show*’s news updates. Juxtaposition further is a basic principle of the genre of political satire, which pits the “presumptions and pretensions of the politicians” against the “intuitions and instincts of the commonplace” (Street, 2001, 69). Like all satire, *The Daily Show* thus is *dialogic* in the Bakhtinian sense, the playing of multiple voices against each other in a discursive exchange that forces the original statement into contrasting and revealing contexts (see Griffin, 1994). By contrast, conventional news is *monologic*, which as Bakhtin argues of all monologic discourses, “pretends to possess a ready-

made truth.” The juxtaposition of satire, however, represent a “searching for truth through dialogical interaction” (Quoted in Griffin, 1994, 42). Unlike traditional news, which claims an epistemological certainty, satire is a discourse of *inquiry*, a rhetoric of challenge that seeks through the asking of unanswered questions to clarify the underlying morality of a situation.

This is well-illustrated by *The Daily Show*'s coverage of the Iraqi prisoner abuse scandal. Says Stewart on the May 6 program, the revelation of torture is “difficult for all of us to wrap our heads around. Clearly this is a time for our defense secretary to speak clearly and honestly to the American people about these egregious instances of torture.” A soundbite from Donald Rumsfeld follows:

Rumsfeld: Uh, I think that ... uh (scratches his head) ... I'm not a lawyer, my impression is that what has been charged thus far is abuse, which I believe, technically, is different from torture (audience groans), and therefore I'm not gonna address the torture word.
Stewart: I'm also not a lawyer, so I don't know, technically, if you're *human*, but as a fake news person, I can tell you, what we've been reading about in the newspapers, the pictures we've been seeing ... it's f---ing torture.

Stewart's response is distinctly subjective (“*I can tell you*”), an approach he suggests he is allowed to pursue because he is not a journalist, but a “fake news person.” Conventions of objectivity would disallow comment here: while traditional journalists can reiterate Rumsfeld's troubling quote in hopes it will “speak for itself,” they cannot engage with it as does Stewart. He uses satire here to challenge it with an explicit statement of morality, suggesting overtly that both the incidences of torture and Rumsfeld's obfuscation, his refusal to speak “honestly and clearly,” are fundamental violations of human decency.

Another telling moment can be found in *The Daily Show*'s coverage of the 9/11 Commission report that the Bush Administration was wrong in its insistence on a connection between Iraq and al-Quaida, which in the absence of weapons of mass destruction, became the primary justification for the invasion of Iraq. On the June 21 program we see a recent clip of a CNBC interview with Vice President Cheney, who aggressively insists, much to the interviewer's surprise, that he “absolutely never said” that the alleged meeting between 9/11 hijacker Mohammed Atta and an agent of the Iraqi government had been “pretty well confirmed.” From there we return to Stewart, who merely scratches his chin in puzzlement. A replay immediately follows of Cheney on NBC's *Meet the Press* in which he says, word for

word, that the meeting had been “pretty well confirmed.” With Cheney’s blatant lie thus exposed, Stewart follows simply by saying, “Mr. Vice President, your pants are on fire.”

The Daily Show’s satire news can be understood, therefore, as a discourse of inquiry that seeks to penetrate a political communication system that Stewart himself suggests has become “purposefully obtuse” (Schlosser, 2003). In an age in which few power holders are willing to speak clearly and honestly, *The Daily Show* uses humor as the license to confront political dissembling and misinformation, and to demand a measure of accountability. In so doing, the program is attempting to revive a spirit of critical inquiry, of the press an agent of public interrogation that holds leadership accountable to the public will that largely has been abdicated by the post-September 11 news media. In the rush to get on air, in the competition for ratings, and in the professional need to avoid alienating oneself from the halls of power, a journalism of supervision and accountability has been replaced by one of conformity and complicity. As Griffin (1994) argues, it is in such times that that satire most readily appears:

It is the limitation on free inquiry and dissent that provokes one to irony -- and to satire. If open challenge to orthodoxy is freely permitted, then writers will take the most direct route and debate the ideas and characters of political leaders openly in newspapers, protected by guarantees of free speech. It is difficult, or unnecessary, to satirize our political leaders when the newspapers are filled with open attacks on their integrity and intelligence. But if open challenge is not permitted, writers will turn to irony, indirection, innuendo, allegory, fable --to the fictions of satire. (139)

With its discourse of inquiry, *The Daily Show* thus may be better understood, not as “fake” news, but as a new form of critical journalism, one which uses satire to achieve that which the mainstream press is no longer willing to pursue.

The Daily Show’s discourse of inquiry also regularly turns its questioning eye on the content of the news media, of the “real” news that too often arguably fails its democratic function. A recurring topic is the American news media’s unwillingness to ask tough questions. On the May 11 program, the show finds ammunition from a British press conference following Tony Blair’s meeting with a representative of the Chinese government in which a reporter asks the prime minister:

Who are we to talk to the Chinese about human rights, when we are an active member of a coalition which has detained, without trial, without access to lawyers, in often inhumane, and we now know degrading conditions, both in Iraq and in other places in the world. What right do we, then, have to question the Chinese about human rights?

Before Blair can answer, we cut back to Stewart who says:

Dude, where can we get a reporter like that? Seriously, you know what I was wondering? England, I'm just throwing this out there, let me ask you this. We'll trade you one Aaron Brown, two Brit Humes, and a Van Susteren, and I'm not talking about the *old* Van Sustryn, I'm talking about the *new* Van Susteren. (5/11/04)

Stewart here refers of course to the anchors of CNN and Fox News, and to the lawyer-turned-TV-news-personality Greta Van Susteren, who dyed her hair and underwent plastic surgery upon moving from CNN to Fox. With humor such as this, *The Daily Show* lambastes the news media and especially 24-hour cable news, suggesting that the latter avoids most issues of substance and serves primarily as a vehicle for political spin.

If the news updates provide a venue for explicit criticism of the media, such criticism functions more implicitly in *The Daily Show's* second primary element -- its parody news reports. Again advancing a format originated on late night talk shows, the parody news reports take the place of the familiar element of sketch comedy. In these, the show's cast of comedians play the role of news reporter alongside Stewart's role of anchor. Often they appear on set with Stewart or in a pretend "live" shot, standing in front of a chroma-key background said to be the scene of the big story. In these, they offer mock versions of the instant analysis common to contemporary news. They also often appear in pre-produced news packages, here literally traveling around the country to cover stories of real and sometimes substantive issues drawn from the domain of political public affairs. Presidential politics are a recurrent subject, as are various legislative initiatives in state governments around the country. These range from the serious, such as the political appeal of Ralph Nader among college students or a California initiative to lower the legal voting age to 14, to the bizarre, such as a Louisiana proposal to ban low-riding pants or a South Carolina initiative to require a person to receive 300 hours of training to legally braid hair.

As with the news update segment, these parodic news stories operate on multiple layers. On one, they clearly publicize the political and legislative process, and thus illustrate a defining feature of discursive integration. While much political news has been recrafted in the form of entertainment, so too has traditional entertainment increased its political content. At the same time, these stories often confront the more inane aspects of the legislative system and can be argued to be a form of boundary control -- exposing the egregious side of lawmaking that for so

many suggest the system has grown irrelevant. On a third level, the parody pieces mock the very genre of television news. To be sure, while the topics can be serious, the “reporters” are anything but. Their performances are always silly, sometimes off-the-wall, and in some moments completely absurd. There is an undeniable sense of frivolity here, a feel of Bakhtinian carnival, a festival of rejoicing in ridicule.

Bakhtin argued that the carnival was characterized by a sense of play, but play as a form of political resistance (Dentith, 2000). So too can the parody stories be characterized both by a sense of play and an understanding that the form of news itself is *in play*. Derrida (19xx) has suggested that the notion of play characterizes all language use; that meanings, styles, traditions, and forms are always subject to slippage, to a continual process of dislodging and redefinition. Parody is such a dislodging. To borrow another phrase from Derrida, it is a “writing under erasure,” a form that simultaneously reinvokes the styles and standards of its pre-text, and calls those conventions into question. Parody’s “act of erasure” is a moment of criticism, one that “disfigures its pre-texts in various ways that seek to guide our re-evaluation or reconfiguration of them” (Dentith, 2000, p. 16). While the goal of *The Daily Show’s* news parody may be to generate a laugh, its deeper thrust is subversion, an attack on the pretensions and conventions of news in a way that seeks to deconstruct the very paradigm of journalistic authority.

All parody, Dentith suggests, “mocks the pretensions of authoritative discourse” (p. 20). The ultimate target of *The Daily Show’s* parody pieces, then, may be the myth of the contemporary journalist as a credentialed professional who commands some specialized ability to determine the truth of a situation. A common target is the tenuous claim to expertise so often made by broadcast journalists. *The Daily Show’s* reporters claim a constantly changing list of praise-worthy titles, including “senior Baghdad bureau chief,” “senior election/terrorism correspondent,” and “senior vice-presidential historian.” Each one emphasizes the point that in the contemporary media environment, expertise is a conferred, rather than an earned status, that one becomes an expert by being on television, and not the reverse (Kovach and Rosensteil, 1999).

Claiming imagined credentials, *The Daily Show’s* reporters delight in self-celebration. Their stories often are more about themselves than about the subject matter. Says reporter Samantha Bee, pretending to report live from Kabul, Afghanistan, where she was sent to cover a real fundraiser for John Kerry held by aid workers there: “It was real exciting. After flying into

Karachi by single-engine piper, my translator Hafuz and I traveled by mule-back over the Khyber pass and through the mine-filled Tora Bora range before arriving at the Kerry fundraiser” (6/29/04). Bee here calls into relief the current trend in broadcast news to celebrate the reporter as the central actor in the story (Baym. 2003). Similarly, *The Daily Show*'s reporters take the mainstream media to task for its privileging of speculation over confirmed fact. As the news media pondered at length who Kerry would pick as his vice presidential candidate, so too did reporter Rob Corddry appear several times to discuss the potential choices. On the day Kerry names Edwards, Corddry literally holds his hands to his ears to avoid hearing the name. He then explains in a serious tone: “As a journalist, my job is to speculate wildly about these things. I can't let that responsibility be compromised by the facts” (7/16/04).

Indeed, it is the relationship between broadcast journalism and fact that is most challenged here. For Bakhtin, the carnival represented a debunking of practices and standards of official language, and a testimony to the relativity of all discursive forms (Dentith, 2000). The parody of *The Daily Show* celebrates its artificiality, its constructedness, and at times its own irrelevance. In so doing it exposes the artifice and irrelevance of much that passes for news on contemporary television. Emphasizing that the comedian is *playing the role* of reporter, the suggestion thus becomes that all reporters (even the “real” ones) are “playing the role,” and have no more access to truth than do the comedians on *The Daily Show*. The parody stories thus can be understood as cautionary tales, ones that ask us to be skeptical of anyone who would insist on “the way it is,” and remind us that there can be alternatives. Lurking beneath the inanity, therefore, is an underlying call for a reconceptualization and a reinvention of broadcast journalism.

If the news parody pieces expose the absurdities of much contemporary news practice, the daily interview segment that follows offers an alternative model of public affairs programming. Running as long as 10 minutes, the studio interview at times provides more than half the show's content. While it is modeled in the tradition of the late night talk show celebrity interview, *The Daily Show*'s discussion segment differs from its predecessors in important ways. While the guests are, at times, pop culture performers and personalities, rarely, if ever, are they true mass market celebrities. The show tends to avoid the blockbuster film stars and superstar recording acts who comprise the stock-and-trade of the major network late night talk programs.

Instead, it offers a steady stream of politicians, national journalists, and commentators. Among the political figures who appeared on the program during the period under analysis here are Senator John McCain, Presidential candidate Ralph Nader, Bush-Cheney campaign director Ken Mehlman, Democratic National Committee Chair Terry McAuliffe, the former Gore-Lieberman campaign director Donna Brazille, former Labor Secretary Robert Reich, and former New York Governor Mario Cuomo. Among journalists and commentators who have appeared on the show are *New York Times* columnists Thomas Friedman and David Brooks, the *Weekly Standard's* Bill Kristol, NBC's Tim Russert, CNN's Wolf Blitzer, *Newsweek's* Michael Isikoff, filmmaker Michael Moore, political satirist Calvin Trillin, comedian-turned-political commentator Janeane Garofalo, and Al-Jazeera journalist Hassan Ibrahim.

In further contrast to the traditional late night talk show, Stewart's approach is neither entertainment-oriented nor overly accommodating. The interviews reject a focus on personality and fluff, steering clear of tales from childhood or other endearing anecdotes that are the familiar fare elsewhere. Like the rest of the program, *The Daily Show's* interviews are a hybrid form that blends the late-night format with a seriousness of sensibility and a willingness to tackle difficult issues. "It's not Tim Russert nipping at your heels," producer Stewart Bailey told the Canadian Broadcasting Company, but neither do interviewees get a "free ride" (CBC, 2004). Instead, Stewart engages his guests in a level-headed discussion of significant public affairs. Speaking of the war in Iraq during his interview of May 10, Sen. McCain leans toward Stewart and in a somber voice says "Jon, *this* is serious." McCain's comment makes clear that while Stewart's witty interruptions and responses inject a certain levity to the tone, the discussion segment can be characterized by an equal seriousness of content and purpose.

Stewart's interviews are likewise distinct from the politically-oriented talk shows common to cable news such as CNN's *Crossfire* or MSNBC's *Hardball*, which have transformed political discussion into a packaged form of shallow verbal combat. Stewart himself has expressed disdain for such programs, telling Bill Moyers:

The whole idea that political discourse has degenerated into shows that have to be entitled *Crossfire* and *Hardball*, and you know, "I'm Gonna Beat Your Ass" or whatever they're calling them these days is mind-boggling. *Crossfire*, especially, is completely an apropos name. It's what innocent bystanders are caught in when gangs are fighting. And it just boggles my mind that that's given a half hour a day. I don't understand how issues can be dissected from the left and from the right as though . . . even cartoon characters have more than left and right. (NOW, 2003)

In place of both the reductionist polemics of right versus left and the endless reiteration of overly simplistic campaign spin, Stewart's interviews pursue thoughtful discussions of national problems. The goal of the discussions is not the tearing down of the "other" side (although Stewart never hides his own political preferences) nor some banal prediction of the shape of things to come, but rather, and importantly, a reaching of collective solutions.

The interviews are characterized by a spirit of civility and exchange. The segment becomes an exercise in constructive dialogue, an effort through discussion to gain greater insight and understanding into the major issues of the times and their potential solutions. *The Daily Show's* conversation is informed over by time by a variety of perspectives. While the program clearly advocates a left-leaning politics, its guests articulate a wide range of arguments and understandings, some often in direct contrast to Stewart's own sensibilities. Further, the interviews bring a measure of historical and intellectual context to the conversation. In contrast to most mediated political discourse, discussion of American political history and references to thinkers such as Marx, Chomsky, or Zinn, who are ignored by the mainstream media, are not unusual.

According to producer Stuart Bailey, the goal is to connect to an ongoing national conversation, to make the show's content relevant to a wider political discussion (CBC, 2004). It is noteworthy here that most of the guests appear on the show to promote their own work, be it a recently released book, a documentary, a new radio show, and so on. In this regard Stewart is happy to play along -- he begins and ends each segment with an overt pitch for the product. Obviously, the interview here is a marketing device, as is *The Daily Show* to be sure, but it is also the circulation of ideas and argument. The products the guests promote are themselves most always books focusing on the political and social landscape or other forms of political information and commentary. The interview segment provides a portal into this wider exchange of discourse. That is to say it functions as an opening to or an extension of a public sphere in the Habermasian (1989) sense -- a forum in which citizens can gather to discuss issues of public concern.

At its core, *The Daily Show* advocates a theory of deliberative democracy, the notion that only open dialogue among citizens can provide the legitimate foundation for governance (Bohman and Rehg, 1997). A theory of deliberative democracy can be distinguished from a

market theory of political practice, which begins from an assumption that the polity is comprised of instrumentally rational individuals who enter the political debate with fully-formed preferences, intent on maximizing their own self-interest. In such an economic theory of democracy, politics is seen as conflict between divergent interests, while political discourse becomes competition that at best can produce functional compromises (see Elster, 1997). It is this logic that appears to underlie political discussion programs such as *Crossfire* or *Hardball* and their “You’re wrong, I’m not” model of political conversation. Such shows reduce, or perhaps debase, political discourse to a zero-sum game, an unreflexive contest in which only one side can win.

In contrast to a market or instrumental understanding of democracy, a theory of deliberative democracy as expressed on *The Daily Show* understands the political system ideally to be comprised of individuals engaged in reasoned discussion, a cooperative discourse that seeks to reach a consensual notion of the common good (see Habermas, 1996). It is a *dialogical* notion of democracy, one that “requires citizens to go beyond private self-interest of the ‘market’ and orient themselves to public interests of the ‘forum’” (Bohman and Rehg, 1997, p. xiv). The forum provides the central metaphor of deliberative democracy, which depends *in the first instance*, on active deliberation among citizens. In this model, dialogue is the locus of democracy, the public process through which citizens determine their preferences and define the public will.

For Habermas and other advocates of a deliberative democracy, reasoned conversation is the defining feature of a democratic system, a feature clearly lacking in much of the reactionary, frenzied, and often unintelligible 24-hour news media. It is this shortcoming of the mainstream news media and politicians alike that motivates *The Daily Show*’s interview segments, and much of the program’s criticism of contemporary political communication practices. One sees this well-expressed in Stewart’s interview with former Treasury Secretary Robert Reich, who pleads for what he describes as a return to reason in political argument. “Irrationality rules the day,” Reich insists, “but reason is in the wings.” Before Stewart can respond, the audience bursts into applause, at which point Stewart leans toward Reich and says: “By the way, the people clamoring for reason? You hear that? You don’t see that too often” (6/14/04). One does, however, see examples of reasoned conversation regularly in *The Daily Show*’s interview segment.

In its endorsement of deliberative democracy and its celebration of reasoned conversation, *The Daily Show* does run the risk of cultural exclusivity. As Benhabib (1996) and other political theorists have argued, the glaring weakness in a theory of discursive democracy is its reliance on a universal conception of the public good and a singular conception of *reason*. In a multicultural society, a plurality of perspectives and a multiplicity of reasons pose a significant challenge to the ideals of dialogic democracy. *The Daily Show* is, it must be acknowledged, a product of privilege, as most satire historically has been (see Griffin, 1994). It is a discourse generated from within the wider cultural power structure. Indeed, clad in his dark blue suit each night, Stewart very much resembles a younger version of his “real” counterparts on the network news. So too are most of the guests and nearly all of the cast white men who speak from a relatively limited cultural framework and articulate a narrow understanding of reasonableness.

While cultural pluralism poses challenges to a theory of deliberative democracy, it does not necessarily render its ideals irrelevant or impossible. Thus, while it could benefit from greater cultural diversity, *The Daily Show* still represents an important experiment in journalism, one that contains much significance for the ongoing redefinition of news. Its blending of news and satire confronts a system of political communication that largely has degenerated into soundbites and spin with critical inquiry. Its use of parody unmasks the artifice and absurdity in much contemporary news practices while its interview segments endorse and enact a deliberative model of democracy based on civility of exchange, complexity of argument, and the goal of mutual understanding.

Both the increasing commercial success and the political significance of *The Daily Show* are due to its hybrid form, its willingness to blend once-distinct discourses into previously unimagined combinations. Comedy provides its initial appeal, humor assembles the audience. In an age when young people increasingly are abandoning sources of traditional news, *The Daily Show* is attracting many of them with its initial discourse of entertainment. But comedy also provides the method to engage in serious political criticism; the label of “fake news” enables *The Daily Show* to say that which the traditional journalist cannot. So too does categorization as comedy grant it immunity from accusations that it violates journalistic standards. Never claiming to be news, it can hardly be charged with being illegitimate journalism, either by the political structure it interrogates or the news media it threatens.

The Daily Show is indeed a threat to the mainstream news media. While the latter have responded to the continual hemorrhaging of audiences with various versions of news lite, happy talk, or political punditry, *The Daily Show* is pursuing a different path. In a time when most media have turned to shallow infotainment to try to ensure ratings points, *The Daily Show* is offering instead a version of *news that entertains*. Entertainment here must be understood as a doubly articulated concept. On one hand, it means to interest, to amuse, to give one pleasure. Entertainment can also mean, however, to engage with and to consider. *The Daily Show* teaches us that that which gives pleasure need not necessarily divert and distract one from significant issues. In an age of discursive integration, it is possible to be entertaining in the sense of both amusement and serious thought.

So too is it possible for a television newscast to be both profitable and substantive, an argument Stewart himself has made. “For some reason, people think that solid, good, in-depth all equals dull, low ratings, low profitability,” he argues. “I don’t think that’s the case. I think you can make really exciting, interesting television news that could become the medium of record for reasonable, moderate people” (Schlosser, 2003). It is indeed possible, and as news audiences increasingly come of age in a discursively integrated world, it may be absolutely necessary. Graber (2001) has argued that political news must begin to meet the needs of “21st-century Americans” who generally find “the abominable quality of the content and presentation of much of the televised news . . . neither salient nor attractive” (445-6). The perceived political apathy of younger Americans, she argues, may be due less to their own intellectual shortcomings than to the poor quality and apparent irrelevance of contemporary broadcast news. The increasing success of *The Daily Show* gives weight to that argument.

The suggestion here is not that *The Daily Show* itself should become *the* news of record, the 21st century, discursively integrated version of Walter Cronkite’s CBS Evening News. The program is a product of a specific historical moment, fueled both by the post-September 11 dissuasion of open inquiry and the particular talents of its current host. Whether its specific approach can withstand the test of time certainly remains to be seen. The greater significance of *The Daily Show*, however, lies in its willingness to experiment, in its opening of a door to a world of discursive possibilities. *The Daily Show* thus offers a lesson in the possible to which all students of journalism, political communication, and public discourse would be wise to pay attention.

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