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The Daily Show: Discursive Integration and the Reinvention of Political Journalism

GEOFFREY BAYM

The boundaries between news and entertainment, and between public affairs and pop culture, have become difficult if not impossible to discern. At the intersection of those borders sits The Daily Show with Jon Stewart, a hybrid blend of comedy, news, and political conversation that is difficult to pigeon hole. Although the program often is dismissed as being “fake” news, its significance for political communication may run much deeper. This study first locates The Daily Show within an emerging media environment defined by the forces of technological multiplication, economic consolidation, and discursive integration, a landscape in which “real” news is becoming increasingly harder to identify or define. It then offers an interpretive reading of the program that understands the show not as “fake news,” but as an experiment in journalism. It argues that the show uses techniques drawn from genres of news, comedy, and television talk to revive a journalism of critical inquiry and advance a model of deliberative democracy. Given the increasing popularity of the program, this essay concludes that The Daily Show has much to teach us about the possibilities of political journalism in the 21st century.

Keywords broadcast journalism, *The Daily Show*, discursive integration, news and entertainment, Jon Stewart

There appears to be a crisis in broadcast journalism. In quantitative terms, there is more of it than ever before, but many would suggest its quality has degraded in recent years. The once-authoritative nightly news 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 often sacrificed to meet the 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 commercial news media outlets aligned themselves soundly with the White House and the apparatus of state security (Hutcheson et al., 2004).

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To complicate the matter, the public appears to be growing 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 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 greater focus in the Pew Center's 2004 study on election coverage. This study shows that even in the 4 years between the 2000 and 2004 presidential campaigns, 18–29-year-olds increasingly turned 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 faces a difficult future.

In the midst of this narrative of decline, however, young people are 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 Show* 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 comedy, late-night entertainment, news, and public affairs discussion has resonated with a substantial audience. For the 2004 calendar year, Comedy Central estimates the nightly audience for the show's first run at 1.2 million people, with another 800,000 tuning in to one of the program's subsequent repeats (S. Albani, personal communication, February 24, 2005). National Annenberg Election Survey (NAES) (2004) research has found that 40% of the audience is between the ages of 18 and 29, but perhaps surprisingly, the show also attracts an older audience, with 27% above the age of 44. The NAES data further reveal that the audience is more educated, follows the news more regularly, and is more politically knowledgeable than the general population.

The show's host, 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, is problematic on two levels. For one, it fails to acknowledge the increasingly central role the show is playing in the domain of serious political communication. The program has won a Peabody Award and also was nominated as one of television's best newscasts by the TV Critics Association (CBC, 2004). At the start of the 2004 presidential campaign, *Newsday* named Stewart as the single most important newscaster in the country (Gay, 2004). Further, the show's nightly interview segment regularly features members of the national political, legislative, and journalistic establishment. Senator John Edwards chose *The Daily Show* as the media venue from which 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*” (PBS, 2003).

The label of “fake news” also has a deeper problem. Any notion of “fake” depends upon an equal conception of “real.” Fake news necessitates assumptions about some kind of *authentic* or *legitimate* set of news practices, ideals that one rarely hears articulated or necessarily sees as evident today. In the absence of any codified set of professional guidelines, a standardized entrance examination, or a supervisory guild, news instead is defined and constrained by a set of cultural practices, informal and often implicit agreements about proper conduct, style, and form that today are in flux, increasingly multiple, debatable, and open for reconsideration. Thus, in his interview with Jon Stewart, Bill Moyers asks if *The Daily Show* is “an old form of comedy” or a “new kind of journalism” (PBS, 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, one that this study will argue has much to teach us about the possibilities of political journalism in the 21st century.

To better understand these possibilities, this essay first locates *The Daily Show* within an evolving media environment defined by the forces of multiplicity, consolidation, and integration. It then turns to a textual analysis of the program itself, examining its coverage of the 2004 presidential campaign. Based on a daily review of the show from early May through election day, it offers a close reading of the three primary programmatic elements—the daily news segment, parody reports, and studio interviews—and then considers the implications for journalistic practice and political discourse. It concludes 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 critique 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, developments on the levels of the technological, economic, and cultural, that are redrawing the boundaries of journalism and the public sphere (see also Bennett & Entman, 2001). In terms of technology, the continuing expansion of cable television and satellite delivery systems has resulted in an ever-increasing number of channels. Similarly, the speed at which information can be transmitted continues to increase. As we saw in the recent Iraq war, broadcasters now can 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 video. At the same time, the emergence of hand-held and computer-based video and editing systems fundamentally is lowering the threshold to production, in terms of both required capital and technical skills. Together, these developments are creating an easily accessible and relatively unconstrainable information environment, expanding the boundaries of the public sphere to a “communicative space of infinite size” (McNair, 2000, p. 40).

Of course, the multiplication of media outlets has been countered by the 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 vertically and horizontally integrated, structured to share resources, personnel, and approaches to content across what were once distinct media outlets (see Murdock, 1990). 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 cultural diversity, the media environment has become defined by blurred borders. The metaphoric wall between the editorial and business sides of news has dissolved (Underwood, 1993), as have any clear distinctions between the public and private spheres, public affairs and popular culture, and information 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 important, 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—certainly is 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 and practices of each have lost their distinctiveness and are being melded into previously unimagined combinations. Although some may see this as a dangerous turn in the realm of political communication, it also can be seen as a rethinking of discursive styles and standards that may be opening spaces for significant innovation.

The Daily Show

The Daily Show is the epitome of such discursively integrated media. 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 suggestive of 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. 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, quickly is complicated as the graphic gives way to a live camera shot that swings through 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 live 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. Although the open may suggest that a discourse of entertainment supersedes a discourse of 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 familiar structure of late-night talk shows such as Leno’s *Tonight Show* and Letterman’s *Late Show*, which move from the

host's introductory monologue to sketch comedy and conclude with the desk-and-couch interviews with noted personalities (see Timberg, 2002). *The Daily Show* reworks each of these production elements, however, blending humor with a serious concern for current events in ways that render the program 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 politics and media practices, as well as a forum for the discussion of substantive public affairs. This study now turns to an examination of each of these specific elements, arguing that *The Daily Show* invites us to reconsider journalistic conventions in an age of media multiplicity and discursive integration.

Interrogating Power

The first of the program's three major content elements—the satire news update—represents a significant development in the genre of comedic news, building on the introductory monologue common to the late-night talk show since the 1950s. Still readily apparent on shows such as Letterman and Leno, the host makes brief references to current events to set up a punch-line. Although 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 also can be traced to the more complex style of fake news offered by *Saturday Night Live's* "Weekend Update" segment, a feature on that 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. The segment complicates the late-night monologue with the addition of visual elements, usually suggestive photographs or newspaper headlines placed in an over-the-shoulder graphic. The "anchor" 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 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 perhaps 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 considered below) complete reporter

packages. The satire news segment does at times focus on the trivial aspects of the political domain, but it more often tackles national and global issues of unquestioned significance. During the shows examined here, recurrent topics included American foreign policy and the Bush administration's war on terrorism, the occupation of Iraq and the Abu Ghraib torture scandal, the search for weapons of mass destruction and the failure of prewar intelligence, and the presidential election campaigns of both candidates, including the party conventions and debates. In discussing such topics, *The Daily Show* forsakes the "now this" model, often providing single-issue coverage for as long as 8 minutes. The segment also places its topics in wider contexts, often providing background information and drawing historical linkages of the sort uncommon to 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 built around soundbites from lawmakers and other political actors (Baym, 2004). President Bush and his administration earn the main focus of the segment, but considerable attention also is paid to Senate hearings, Congressional debate, and press conferences with various governmental figures. This material is culled from CSPAN, 24-hour cable news, 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*.

The Daily Show thus is 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 in early June: "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 also is significant commentary, however, on the 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. Empowered by the title of "fake news," however, *The Daily Show* routinely violates 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. The unwritten rules of journalism define a good quote as a coherent statement of policy or attitude, ideally containing emotion or character and completed neatly in about 8 to 12 seconds. Professional journalists are trained to ignore long, rambling verbal presentations; quotes with poor grammar or misstatements; and soundbites with long pauses or any significant absence of verbal content. In the effort to package 8 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 the coverage of Bush's statement following Tenet's resignation. ABC's *World News Tonight* offered the following soundbite from the president: "I told him I'm sorry he's leaving. He's done a superb job on behalf of the American people" (6/3/04). On the CBS *Evening News*, the only soundbite from Bush showed him proclaiming "He's strong, he's resolute, and I will miss him" (6/3/04). 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 their coverage of Bush's statement, the network newscasts hold to standard conventions, and in so doing reduce Bush's sloppy, pause-saturated speech to a tightly constructed set of words that suggest clarity of thought and purpose. *The Daily Show*, however, reveals a different aspect of Bush's statement, one that calls into question his focus and perhaps his sincerity. Both 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 networks. Mainstream journalism's reliance on predictable conventions can render it susceptible to manipulation by the professional speech writers and media handlers who seed public information with pre-scripted sound-bites and spin (Jones, 1995; Underwood, 2001). The Bush administration, especially, has been remarkably adept at playing to journalistic conventions in ways that limit inquiry and encourage the news media to amplify the administration's rhetoric without critical challenge (Fritz et al., 2004). As "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 mainstream news media's insistence, at least in name, 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, an 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 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 speaks with the voice, as Douglas (2003) has noted, 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 Stewart’s version of common sense, is the primary strategy of *The Daily Show*’s news updates. Juxtaposition also 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, p. 69). Like all satire, *The Daily Show* is *dialogic* in the Bakhtinian sense, the playing of multiple voices against each other in a discursive exchange that forces the original statement into revealing contexts (see Griffin, 1994).

One can see the strategy of dialogic confrontation in a lengthy but revealing example from the July 13 program. The day after the Senate had released its report documenting the breakdown in the prewar intelligence, Bush gave a 32-minute speech addressing the war in Iraq in which, as Stewart notes, he “used a particular phrase eight times.” This exchange then follows:

Bush: Because America and our coalition helped to end the violent regime of Saddam Hussein, and because we’re helping to raise a peaceful democracy in its place, the American people are safer.

Stewart: [surprised and enthusiastic] Oh! Oh good! We’re, we’re, we’re safer! That’s why we did this, because American is safer! [changes tone] Granted, some have said that Iraq now is a bigger breeding ground for anti-American groups, and even Tom Ridge has said that Al-Qaida plans on attacking us before the election, uh, so, some might think we’re . . . *less safe* . . . but . . .

Bush: The American people are safer.

Stewart: Oh! So, uh, well he said it again! That was his second time. So, you know, the thing is, even Bush’s own State Department released a report that, once that report was *de-f***ed* up, it said that there were more terrorist attacks last year than at almost any point since it’s been tracked.

At this point, a clock superimposed on the screen while Bush is talking tracks the time from which his soundbites were drawn.

Bush: [11:37 a.m.] And the American people are safer.

Stewart: [hanging head] Oh, oh, OK. But let me ask you this, just for schnicks between the two of us . . . what criteria are you using to prove that? I mean what evidence is there other than you saying it?

Bush: [11:39] The American people are safer.

Bush: [11:43] And the American people are safer.

Bush: [11:45] The American people are safer.

Bush: [11:47] And the American people . . . are safer.

Stewart: [After a moment of silence] So basically, what it comes down to is this, the Bush administration’s strategy to fight terrorism is . . . *repetition*. [pause] You know what, give us one final “America is safer,” and this time, give it a flourish that says “stop questioning me about any of this.”

Bush: [11:50, with his finger pointing] And America and the world are safer.

Stewart: Boom! Nicely done.

The treatment of Bush's speech functions on multiple levels. By emphasizing his *rhetorical* strategy of repetition, it lays bare Bush's clear attempt to plant the soundbite "the American people are safer" in that day's news. At the same time, Bush's one-sided, singular-voiced presentation is reworked into dialogue ("let me ask you this, just for schnicks between the two of us"), his certainty forced into critical exchange. Stewart speaks as interlocutor, confronting the president with counterargument and suggesting he lacks both the factual evidence and logical criteria to support his claim. Here Stewart engages in *undermining* humor (Paletz, 2002, p. 13), challenging not just the legitimacy of the president's statement but the wider authority upon which it relies. Finally, Stewart shifts to the voice of choreographer ("this time, give it a flourish") to make the point that Bush's speech is more theatrical spectacle than it is reasoned argument, designed ultimately to shut down avenues of inquiry ("stop questioning me") rather than inform the public.

In contrast to *The Daily Show's* dialogue, conventional news is *monologic*, pretending to "possess a ready-made truth" (Griffin, 1994, p. 42). Satire instead represents a searching for truth through the process of dialogical interaction. 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. The show's coverage of the Iraqi prisoner abuse scandal is illustrative here. 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: Traditional journalists can reiterate Rumsfeld's troubling quote in hopes it will "speak for itself," but they cannot engage with it as does Stewart. He uses satire to challenge it with a statement of morality, suggesting that both the incidences of torture and Rumsfeld's obfuscation, his refusal to speak "honestly and clearly," are fundamental violations of human decency.

In an age of disconnect between words and actions, *The Daily Show* uses satire to hold the leadership accountable to both. The June 21 program covers the 9/11 Commission report that the Bush administration was wrong in its insistence on a connection between Iraq and Al-Qaida, which in the absence of weapons of mass destruction became the primary justification for the invasion of Iraq. 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 as a discourse of inquiry that seeks to penetrate a political communication system 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 and of the press as an agent of public interrogation that largely has been abdicated by the post-September 11 news media. In the frantic competition for ratings, in the fear of appearing "unpatriotic," and in the professional need to avoid alienation 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 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. (p. 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.

Critiquing News

The Daily Show also interrogates the content of the news media, the "real" news that arguably is failing its democratic function. A recurring topic is the media's interest in the trivial at the expense of the consequential. On the June 28 program, Stewart discusses filmmaker Michael Moore's appearance on CBS's *The Early Show*, in which Moore accuses CBS News of functioning as propaganda for refusing to question the Bush administration's rationale for war. After a contentious exchange, anchor Hannah Storm well-illustrates the "now this" approach: "Up next," she says, "the right bug spray this summer. Deet or no?" From there, we return to a chuckling Stewart, who says "Deet or no. And he says the media won't ask the hard questions."

The consistent critique here is of the American media's refusal to engage in the kind of critical inquiry the May 11 program shows a British journalist pursuing. In a clip from a press conference following Prime Minister Tony Blair's meeting with a representative of the Chinese government, the reporter asks:

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 answers, 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 Susteren, I'm talking about the *new* Van Susteren. (5/11/04)

Stewart 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. Here Van Susteren becomes emblematic of much that is wrong with contemporary news.

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. Building on the sketch comedy format familiar to late-night talk, the show's cast of comedians act as news reporters. 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 appear in pre-produced news packages, here literally traveling around the country to cover real and sometimes substantive stories from the domain of public affairs. During the presidential campaign, these included Rob Corddry on the appeal of Ralph Nader on college campuses, Ed Helms on the "free speech zone" established in Boston for the Democratic convention, Stephen Colbert on the tenuous coalition of interests that make up the Democratic base, and Samantha Bee on the minimal legal restrictions on the "527" groups and the advertising they produce.

Always silly and at times ridiculous, these stories do offer a measure of insight into topics of significance for the political process. Their greater purposes, however, may be to mock the genre of television news itself. *Parody* can be defined as a relatively polemical imitation of a given cultural practice, an aping that simultaneously reinvents and challenges the styles and standards of a particular genre (Dentith, 2000). Parody is a moment of criticism, one that employs exaggeration, often to the point of ludicrousness, to invite its audience to examine, evaluate, and re-situate the genre and its practices. The parody pieces may generate a laugh, but their deeper thrust is subversion, an attack on the conventions and pretensions of television news.

For one, the comedians delight in emphasizing that they are playing the role of reporter, suggesting that many of those who posture as "real" journalists likewise are playing a role. They claim a constantly changing list of praise-worthy titles, including "senior Baghdad bureau chief," "senior election/terrorism correspondent," and "senior vice-presidential historian." Targeting the tenuous claim to expertise broadcast journalists so often make, their revolving credentials emphasize the point that in the contemporary media environment, expertise is a conferred rather than an earned status. Like Van Susteren, one becomes an expert by being on television, rather than the reverse (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 1999). Armed with fake credentials, the reporters pretend to travel the globe to cover the big story. Stretching the point to absurdity, Rob Corddry appears "live" from Vietnam, there to report on the controversy over Kerry's 30-year-old war record. Corddry mocks television news's overuse of the live shot, its insistence that the reporter's physical presence is isomorphic with good journalism. Finally, the comedians indulge in self-celebration, often focusing more on themselves than on the subject matter. Samantha Bee begins a fake report from a real fundraiser for John Kerry held by aid

workers in Afghanistan by telling Stewart: "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 calls into relief the trend in today's theatrical broadcast news to celebrate the reporter as the central actor in the story (Baym, 2003).

Suggesting that too many "journalists" are only playing the role on TV, the parody pieces further critique television news for the simplicity of its informational content. Reporter Ed Helms acts visibly bored as the legal expert he interviews explains to him the finer points of campaign law (8/11/04). Elsewhere, Corrdry asks a California election official to explain, "in a nutshell," the problems facing the state's electoral system. After she gives a thoughtful and lengthy answer, Corrdry responds: "Great. Now can you take that long-ass answer and put it in a nutshell, like I asked you?" (6/14/04). These examples call attention to television news's aversion to factual detail and complexity of argument. So too do the parody pieces expose the media's reliance on conventional frames and stock narratives. Reporting the night before the first presidential debate, Helms reads the *prewritten* story he says he intends to file *after* the debate. Stewart interrupts him, asking "Ed, you've written your story already? In advance?" Helms replies: "Yeah, we all do. We write the narratives in advance based on conventional wisdom, and then whatever happens, we make it fit that story line." When Stewart asks why journalists do this, Helms shrugs his shoulders and suggests "We're lazy?" (9/29/04).

Ultimately, it is this disinterest in fact, the construction of televisual spectacle at the expense of understanding, for which the parody pieces most criticize mainstream television news. As the news media pondered at length who Kerry would pick as his vice presidential candidate, so too did Corrdry appear several times to discuss the potential choices. On the day Kerry selected Edwards, Corrdry 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). Elsewhere, when discussing the "Swift Boat Veterans" attack on Kerry, Corrdry rejects Stewart's suggestion that he has an obligation to determine the factual basis of the allegations. In a highly sarcastic tone, he mocks Stewart's point: "Oh, this allegation is spurious, and upon investigation this claim lacks any basis in reality." Dismissing any responsibility to identify the truth, he explains: "I'm a journalist, Jon. My job is to spend half the time reporting what one side says and half the time reporting the other. A little thing called ob-jec-tivity. You might want to look it up someday" (8/23/04).

The parody pieces ask us to consider just what a reporter's job *should* be. As such, they ultimately play a diagnostic function, identifying much that is wrong with news in its current form. If imitation is the highest form of flattery, *The Daily Show* reminds us we need broadcast journalism. At the same time, it illuminates several contemporary conventions that threaten to render television news irrelevant if not harmful to the democratic process. It asks us to be skeptical of much that passes for news today, but in a time of discursive reinvention, a moment when the conventions of journalism are open to reconsideration, it equally argues that there can, and should, be new alternatives.

Dialogue and Democracy

The daily interview segment that follows offers such an alternative model of public affairs programming. Running as long as 10 minutes, the studio interview can constitute

more than half the show's content. While it is modeled in the tradition of the late-night celebrity interview, the discussion segment differs from its predecessors in important ways. Although the guests at times are the familiar movie stars who frequent the late-night circuit to promote their latest films, more often they are politicians, journalists, or commentators. Of the 78 guests who appeared from May through election day, 50 were from the domains of government, news, or politics. Political figures who appeared on the program included John Kerry, Bill Clinton, Ralph Nader, Dan Bartlett, Ed Gillespie, Terry McAullife, Madeline Albright, John McCain, and Joe Biden, among many others. Journalists and commentators included Thomas Friedman, David Brooks, Maureen Dowd, Bill Kristol, Seymour Hirsch, Michael Isikoff, Tim Russert, Wolf Blitzer, Bob Schieffer, Ted Koppel, and even Al-Jazeera's Hassan Ibrahim.

In further contrast to the traditional late-night talk show, Stewart's approach is neither purely entertainment oriented nor overly accommodating. The interviews may touch on tales from childhood or other endearing anecdotes, but like the rest of the program, they are a hybrid form that blends laughter and pop culture with a willingness to engage with difficult issues. Although Stewart may insist, as he did to Fox's Bill O'Reilly, that "we literally do these interviews so we don't have to write another five minutes of comedy" (10/17/04), he often engages his guests in heady discussions of public affairs. Speaking of the war in Iraq, John McCain leans toward Stewart and in a somber voice says "Jon, *this* is serious" (5/10/04). McCain here acknowledges that while Stewart's witty interruptions and responses inject an obvious levity to the tone, the discussion segment can be characterized by an equal seriousness of content and purpose.

The interviews likewise are 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 trite verbal combat. Stewart himself has expressed disdain for such programs, sarcastically describing the former as a "nuanced public policy show that is named after the stray bullets that hit innocent bystanders in a gang fight" (10/18/04). That comment came the week after Stewart himself appeared as a guest on *Crossfire*. Much to the dismay of the hosts, Stewart took the opportunity to criticize them for "hurting America"—for failing "miserably" to live up to their "responsibility to the public discourse" by offering only theater and "partisan hackery" instead of legitimate debate (CNN, 10/15/04).

In place of reductionist polemics, Stewart's politically oriented 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) or some banal prediction of the shape of things to come, but rather an effort to gain greater understanding of national problems and their potential solutions. During the presidential campaign, recurrent topics included Bush's record in the White House, the occupation of Iraq, and the vitality of the American democratic process. Taken as a whole, the interview segment pursues these topics through a variety of perspectives. Seymour Hirsch minces no words in arguing that the neo-conservatives who drove the invasion of Iraq must be removed from power (9/29/04), but neo-conservative writer Stephen Hayes insists that Iraq *was* in league with Al-Qaida and the invasion was necessary (6/21/04). Comedian and liberal commentator Janeane Garofalo argues that support for Bush is "a character flaw" (5/3/04), but former New York mayor and Democrat Ed Koch explains the reasons he says he will vote *for* Bush (10/18/04). Articulating at times contrasting arguments, the interviews further bring a measure of historical and intellectual context to the conversation. In contrast to most mediated political discourse, discussion of political history and references to thinkers such as Marx, Chomsky, or

Zinn are not unusual. (Indeed, shortly after the election, Howard Zinn himself was a guest on the program.)

It is noteworthy here that like the movie star promoting a new film, the political guests also appear on the show largely to promote their work or their cause. 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 is a marketing device, as is *The Daily Show* to be sure, but it is also the circulation of ideas and argument. The products being promoted usually are some form of political information and commentary—a book, documentary film, television program—and the interview segment provides a portal into this exchange of discourse. Producer Stuart Bailey suggests the goal is to connect to an ongoing national conversation, to make the show's content relevant to a wider political discussion (CBC, 2004). To put it differently, the interviews function as an opening to or an extension of a public sphere in the Habermasian (1989) sense—a forum for the rational-critical discussion of issues of public importance.

Indeed, the well-being of public discourse is a central concern in many of the interviews. Stewart chides DNC Chair Terry McAullife for insulting Bush, and then asks him to explain “the breakdown in civility” that has come to characterize the campaign (6/28/04). Stewart and Bill Clinton have a long discussion about the prevalence of negative campaigning and specifically the Swift Boat attack ads (8/9/04). Speaking of those, John Kerry himself suggests “most Americans would like to have a more intelligent conversation about where the country is going.” To that the live audience shows its approval, bursting into applause. Similarly, Stewart says to RNC Chair Ed Gillespie that “we should have a discussion of the issues” (8/25/04). That point is endorsed by Republican Senator Norm Coleman, who says he hopes the country can “have a civilized debate . . . not about Vietnam, what your wife says, what your wife wears” (8/17/04), and also by McCain, who calls on “the American people” to “demand to change the debate” (9/12/04).

More important than the loss of civility, however, is the marginalization of honesty. Stewart chastises Congressman Henry Bonilla for refusing either to budge from his GOP talking points or to seriously discuss the tenuous factual basis behind them. “All I want,” Stewart tells the congressman, “is an honest discussion” (8/12/04). Likewise, in concluding his interview with John Kerry, Stewart thanks him for “having a normal conversation” (8/24/04). Here “honest” and “normal” are contrasted with the strict adherence to the talking points and partisan spin that comprise the balance of mediated political talk.

At its core, *The Daily Show* advocates a conversational or deliberative theory of democracy—a notion that only open conversation can provide the legitimate foundation for governance (Bohman & Rehg, 1997). A theory of deliberative democracy can be distinguished from a market theory of politics, which begins from the assumption that the polity is comprised of instrumentally rational individuals who enter the 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 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 & Rehg, 1997, p. xiv). The forum provides the central metaphor of deliberative democracy, which depends *in the first instance* on active deliberation among citizens. Dialogue here 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). *The Daily Show*, however, regularly offers a model of and resources for political dialogue and reasoned conversation.

Reinventing Political Journalism

The Daily Show represents an important experiment in journalism, one that contains much significance for the ongoing redefinition of news. Unquestionably, its primary approach is comedy, and much of the show's content is light and, at times, vacuous. Often, however, the silly is interwoven with the serious, resulting in an innovative and potentially powerful form of public information. The blending of news and satire confronts a system of political communication that largely has degenerated into soundbites and spin with critical inquiry. The use of parody unmasks the artifice in much contemporary news practices, while the interview segment endorses and enacts a deliberative model of democracy based on civility of exchange, complexity of argument, and the goal of mutual understanding. Lying just beneath or perhaps imbricated within the laughter is a quite serious demand for fact, accountability, and reason in political discourse.

Both the increasing commercial success and the political significance of *The Daily Show* may be 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* attracts 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, and political punditry, *The Daily Show* pursues a different path. In a time when most media have turned to shallow infotainment to try to ensure ratings points, *The Daily Show* offers instead a version of *news that entertains*. Entertainment

here must be understood as a doubly articulated concept. On one hand, “to entertain” means to interest, to amuse, to give one pleasure. It can also mean, however, to engage with and to consider. *The Daily Show* suggests that that which gives pleasure need not necessarily divert and distract from significant issues. The mainstream news media, however, have been unwilling or unable to learn this lesson. They have tried at times to incorporate the comedy—consider former *Daily Show* comedian Mo Rocca’s inane contribution to CNN’s convention coverage—but have so far failed to grasp the deeper insight that in an age of discursive integration, it is possible to be entertaining in the sense of both amusement and serious thought, and that each one may have the ability to enhance the other.

It also may be 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” (pp. 445–446). 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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