

**“Fake” News versus “Real” News as Sources of
Political Information:
The Daily Show and Postmodern Political
Reality**

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A recurrent claim about young Americans is that they get more of their news about politics and current events from late-night television comedians than they do from the news media. This claim began with a statistic that appeared in a 2000 survey of the electorate conducted by the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, which reported that 47 percent of people under thirty years old were “informed at least occasionally” about the presidential campaign by late-night talk shows.¹ Though there are numerous methodological and interpretive problems raised by this simple yet ultimately flawed statistic, journalists and other critics have nevertheless transformed it into a myth about young people and their news-consumption habits. Regardless of its accuracy, it seemingly explains why young people have increasingly turned away

from traditional outlets of political communication, namely newspapers and television news (Mindich 2005). It also addresses journalistic concerns that audiences are attracted more to entertainment than serious public-affairs reporting, and what's worse, that they may not even be able to distinguish between the two. It also seemingly verifies fears of public ignorance of the political process (Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996), youth disengagement from politics (Buckingham 2000), a declining reading culture (Scheuer 1999), couch potato kids, the entertainmentization of politics (West and Orman 2003), and the cynicism that supposedly grips our society (Hart 1994; Chaloupka 1999).

This chapter begins, then, by examining and questioning this myth. But as with many myths that circulate in society, the critic's ability to refute the accuracy of the myth is not likely to diminish its popularity or widespread circulation. Instead, it may be more effective to show why the basic premise of the myth itself is incorrect. That is, in this instance, the idea that late-night comedic television does not (or cannot) impart important news or information about public affairs and thus, by definition, only traffics in the trivial, inane, or absurd. In this chapter, therefore, I turn the myth on its head by asking: What if the myth is true and young people *are* "getting their news" from popular late-night comedy programs such as *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*? What is it they might learn about politics or current events from this show, and how does that compare with what they might learn about politics were they to watch more respected sources of news such as CNN instead? To begin answering this question, I compare a news item "reported" by *The Daily Show*, a fake news show that parodies a "legitimate" television news broadcast, with the same story as covered by CNN. I follow the Pew Center's lead by examining news reports of the 2004 presidential election, yet from broadcasts much later in the campaign when the viewing public is typically more raptly attuned. I analyze the type of information that is offered in the two reports and how the resulting meanings or "truths" compare.

I argue that even though *The Daily Show* is a fake news show, its faux journalistic style allows the show's writers and host to question, dispel, and critique the manipulative language and symbolizations coming from the presidential campaign while simultaneously opening up deeper truths about politics than that offered by the "objective" reporting of mainstream journalism. By actually showing the high levels of spin and rhetoric produced by the candidates and their campaigns, then offering humorous retorts that cut to the heart of the matter, *The Daily Show* offers its viewers particular (and perhaps more useful) "information" about the campaign that is often missing from "real" journalist reports on the news networks, and hence informs its viewers in ways that mainstream journalism rarely does. Given the extraordinary level of outright distortions, lies, and spin that dominated both the Republican and Democratic campaigns in this election, this chapter concludes that perhaps the postmodern notion that the "fake" is more real than the "real" is not such an unsettling notion when it comes to citizens looking for truth in contemporary political communication on television. And, in turn, perhaps young citizens—if they do indeed get their information from political comedians on television—may not be as misinformed as the current myth suggests.

The Myth of Young People and Knowledge of Public Affairs

In February 2000, the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press reported that 47 percent of people under the age of thirty were "informed at least occasionally" about the campaign or candidates by late-night talk shows (13 percent regularly and 34 percent sometimes). The poll was conducted from 4 to 11 January 2000, before any party primaries had taken place. In January 2004, the Pew center repeated this survey (conducted 19 December 2003 through 4 January 2004), this time asking respondents if they "learned something" from comedy shows. Twenty-one percent of people under the age of thirty reported learning something from programs such as *Saturday Night*

Live and *The Daily Show* (roughly the same number who learned something from the Internet). As the Pew study notes, “For Americans under 30, these comedy shows are now mentioned almost as frequently as newspapers and evening network news programs as regular sources for election news.” Furthermore, the report exclaims, “one out of every two young people (50%) say they at least sometimes learn about the campaign from comedy shows, nearly twice the rate among people age 30–49 (27%) and four times the rate among people 50 and older.”ⁱⁱ

Before taking these statistics at face value, however, we should examine both the questions and the resulting statistics more closely. Certainly political insiders, heavy news readers/ watchers, and political junkies are attuned to news so early in the campaign, for no other reason than to be able to handicap the upcoming horse race. As for the rest of the polity, however, the electoral contests in the small yet important states of Iowa and New Hampshire certainly receive much less of their attention because the party nominee is generally a forgone conclusion by the time most Americans have the opportunity to vote in their state primary election. Hence, for a poll to attempt to measure political knowledge and information about an election so early in the campaign is specious.

What is worse, though, is the wording of the question itself: “informed at least occasionally.” What does it mean to be “informed” about the campaign—knowledge of who is running for office, what their positions are on issues, who is ahead in the race, who has the biggest war chest, what gaffes have occurred to this point, the names of their wives, what type of underwear they prefer? At what level can most any type of nonfiction program—news reports, talk shows, documentaries, stand-up comedy, advertisements—provide *some* of this information? The question doesn’t help us understand the underlying normative assumption of whether the respondent should know the differences between Al Gore’s and Bill Bradley’s positions on Social Security reform, or whether the respondent is simply expected to know their names and that they are running for office. Furthermore, the question asks “at least occasionally.” Does that mean every day, once a week, or once a month, or does it suggest a regular and consistent pattern of consumption? Finally, what

assumptions of intentionality are included here? Does the question seek to identify whether citizens brush up against news, or whether they intentionally turn to certain forms of programming for “information?” The survey results provide no answers to these questions. In short, the response to this question really only tells us two things—that comedians mine current affairs for humorous content, and that different programming types differ in their popularity among different demographic groups. It certainly does *not* measure whether the only or primary source of information about current affairs is obtained by watching late-night comedians on television.

Nevertheless, that hasn’t prevented journalists from using the statistic to develop a full-blown myth about young people and their news consumption habits. For instance, CNN anchor Judy Woodruff began a question to *The Daily Show* host Jon Stewart by stating, “We hear more and more that your show and shows like your show are the places that young people *are getting their news*” (emphasis added).ⁱⁱⁱ Ted Koppel, the anchor for ABC’s late-night news show *Nightline* (a program that directly competes with these entertainment shows), similarly assailed Stewart by noting to his viewers, “A lot of television viewers, more, quite frankly, than I’m comfortable with, *get their news* from the comedy channel on a program called ‘The Daily Show’” (emphasis added).^{iv} And perhaps most egregiously, *Newsday* reporter Verne Gay wrote, “A recent study from the Pew Center found that 8 percent of respondents *learned most everything they knew* about a candidate from shows like The Daily Show and Saturday Night Live” (emphasis added; Gay 2004).

As these quotes suggest, reporters have taken great liberty in revising and expanding what the statistic actually reveals. Yet the results of a campaign knowledge test conducted on over 19,000 citizens in the summer and fall of 2004 by the University of Pennsylvania’s National Annenberg Election Survey did little to temper the myth. The survey reported that “viewers of late-night comedy programs, especially The Daily Show with Jon Stewart on Comedy Central, are more likely to know the issue positions and backgrounds of presidential candidates than people who do not

watch late-night comedy,” noting that *Daily Show* viewers “have higher campaign knowledge than national news viewers and newspaper readers.”^v The survey concludes, “traditional journalists have been voicing increasing concern that if young people are receiving political information from late-night comedy shows like *The Daily Show*, they may not be adequately informed on the issues of the day. This data suggests that these fears may be unsubstantiated.” The survey also points out, however, that “these findings do not show that *The Daily Show* is itself responsible for the higher knowledge among its viewers.”

In summary, journalists and other critics of entertainment television have propagated a myth based on dubious evidence that late-night comedy television programming is a central location for the delivery of news (and, by inference, misinformation and ignorance about politics) for young people, a myth that competing quantitative evidence suggests is incorrect. What neither of these surveys reveals, however, is an assessment of the *content* of these shows—whether they offer viewers anything of value or are relatively meaningless, whether the information provided is accurate and truthful or biased and incorrect, or even how this material compares with other sources of information on public affairs. There is no qualitative assessment, only the assumption that what appears in these formats is not equivalent to that which could be obtained from traditional sources of political information. What follows, then, is an attempt to examine these questions directly, looking at how *The Daily Show* “reports” news and information, and its comparative value in light of reporting available on a more culturally acceptable and respected news source, CNN.

News Reports by *The Daily Show* and CNN

Every weeknight (except Fridays), Comedy Central airs *The Daily Show*, a mock news program and hybrid talk show that parodies television news for the first half of the program, then segues into a more typical talk-show interview between host Jon Stewart and a guest. The first half—the news

segment—mimics the anchor-centered style of television news reporting, where Stewart narrates the day's top stories accompanied by video evidence. The news segment also uses the news convention of the anchor interviewing reporters “on location,” in this instance, with Stewart talking to his faux “senior correspondents,” who pretend to be reporting live via satellite (in front of a background image of, say, Baghdad or the White House). The primary interest of my investigation is this “news” segment of the show.

I examined one week of the program during the late stages of the presidential campaign—4 to 7 October 2004—one week after the first presidential debate. I selected one program during this period as a representative text (Thursday, 7 October) for a close textual analysis. This limited selection allows for an in-depth analysis of the information and commentary provided, as well as a direct comparison with news reports from CNN. While the limited range of texts can be criticized as overly restricted, such a close reading of *The Daily Show* has not been conducted to date. Instead, existing studies have examined a broader range of texts from the program across numerous episodes and months of programming (see, for instance, Jones 2005a; and Baym 2005). Here, though, the intention is to make a direct comparison of two entire news reports on the same event. The selection of a single news report also limits the generalizability of my argument, yet the episode selected for scrutiny is not extraordinary. Rather, it is fairly representative, by my reading, of a typical *Daily Show* broadcast. Furthermore, the intentional circumscribing allows for the close reading of a text that cultural studies has proven to be of value. The episode selected illustrates the type of information provided in typical news reports by both *The Daily Show* and CNN, allowing us to compare not just the variety but also the quality of the reports and conclusions that can be drawn from them. The CNN reports come from three programs, all of which appeared on the same day as *The Daily Show* broadcast: *American Morning* (7 A.M.), *CNN Live Today* (10 A.M.), and *News from CNN* (12 P.M.).^{vi}

CNN began its 7 A.M. broadcast by reporting on Bush's campaign appearances the previous day, as well as the release of the CIA's Iraq Survey Group report investigating the existence of weapons of mass destruction in Iraq. In reporting Bush's campaign stop in Pennsylvania, CNN White House Correspondent Elaine Quijano pointed out that the president made no mention of a new report by the Iraq Survey Group, which found no evidence of stockpiles of weapons of mass destruction in Iraq when the United States invaded in 2003. Still, Mr. Bush is standing by his decision, insisting that after September 11 the country had to assess every potential threat in a new light.

(Video clip of President Bush speaking in Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania): Our nation awakened to an even greater danger, the prospect that terrorists who killed thousands with hijacked airplanes would kill many more with weapons of mass murder. We had to take a hard look at every place where terrorists might get those weapons. One regime stood out, the dictatorship of Saddam Hussein.

During the 10 A.M. report, CNN decided not to continue airing the clip of Bush's speech, instead letting Quijano summarize the president's central point in the statement, as well as note the official White House "reading" of the report, attributed here to "administration officials."

But the president did not mention that new CIA report, which found no weapons of mass destruction in Iraq when the United States invaded in 2003. Instead Mr. Bush repeated his argument that taking Saddam Hussein out of power has made the world safer. Administration officials say they believe the report shows Saddam Hussein was a threat that the United States needed to take seriously. They also say they believe it shows that he had the intent and capability to develop weapons of mass destruction.

By 12 P.M., CNN was simply reporting the release of the report as this: "Bush also defended the war in Iraq, just as the CIA prepares to report that Saddam Hussein did not have weapons of mass destruction or the means to produce them before U.S. troops invaded Iraq."

Jon Stewart also began his broadcast by announcing the release of the CIA report and noting its conclusions:

Everything we've been waiting for happened today. The official CIA report, the Dulfer Report, has come out, the one they've been working on for the past two years. It will be the definitive answer on the weapons of mass destruction programs in Iraq, and as it turns out, not so much. Apparently, there were no weapons of mass destruction in Iraq, and their capabilities have been degraded and they had pretty much stopped trying anything in '98. And both the president and vice president have come out today in response to the findings and said that they clearly justified the invasion of Iraq. Some people look at a glass as half full, while other people look at a glass and say that it's a dragon.

In this segment, Stewart provides roughly the same amount and type of information provided by CNN, but then goes out of his way to establish that despite clear and convincing evidence to the contrary, Bush and Cheney continue their act as either liars or highly delusional people; they see what they want to see. Here Stewart offers not just the facts, but also draws conclusions from those facts. Journalistic adherence to norms of objectivity generally prevents many reporters and anchors from looking across specific events to explicitly point out repeated patterns of deception or misjudgment by politicians and government officials (unless the reporting occurs in investigative or opinion-editorial pieces). *The Daily Show*, as a fake news program, is not limited by such professional constraints. Viewers are thus invited to focus on the most important aspect of this news event—that this is not just another investigation that proves the official reason for invading Iraq was misguided and wrong. Rather, the import is that the Bush Administration repeatedly refuses to admit its mistake.

CNN, on the other hand, simply repeats the administration's position, as is standard journalistic convention. Yet since numerous investigations have produced the same findings (which in the world of science and social science would amount to the establishment of "truth"), why should news media continue to repeat a position that has no basis in fact—just because the

government continues to assert the position? Is that “newsworthy,” and if not, what news value is being fulfilled? Daniel Boorstin contends that assertions such as this amount to “pseudo-events,” a story created by politicians and journalists that has no intrinsic value as a news event *per se*, but is only deemed as such by journalists in the era of “objectivity” (Boorstin 1960). Stewart refuses to play along and, again, ignores the administration’s “reading” or justifications because they have no basis in reality (as determined by the numerous other officials, institutions, and nations that have concluded the same thing).

Stewart then turns his attention to a Bush campaign stop the day before. “Let’s begin tonight on the campaign trail,” he says, while talking over a video clip of President Bush in Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania. Bush is standing in front of a backdrop/banner with the words “A Safer America, A Stronger Economy” adorned over both of his shoulders. “Yesterday, President Bush’s advisors alerted the networks he would be making a major policy speech in Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania. The subject..[*the graphic highlights the slogan “A Safer America”*]~~—no~~, not that. [*The graphic highlights “A Stronger Economy.”*] Uh, wrong again. [*The graphic then shows a crossed-out slogan, superimposing the hand-scrawled message, “Recover from unbelievably poor debate performance.”*]. That’s it! That was the subject. Yes, in the week of his, let’s call it ‘weak’ showing against Senator John Kerry on Thursday, the president and his handlers snookered the cable news networks into giving him one hour of free full-on campaign stop pabulum.”

CNN also covered this campaign stop in all three of its morning broadcasts. For both the 7 A.M. and 10 A.M. reports, Quijano simply referred to two campaign stops (one of which was in Pennsylvania), noting that Bush had “stepped up his attacks” and had come “out swinging hard” against his opponent, “blasting” Kerry and delivering a “blistering assault on Kerry’s record.” The reporter seeks to summarize the tone and substance of the president’s speeches, while characterizing him as on the offensive—exactly what the campaign hopes will be reported. Only the

12 P.M. broadcast noted the campaign's intentions in changing the focus of the speech. Wolf Blitzer introduced the subject by referring to Bush's "attempt to try to reestablish some political momentum," while the correspondent reporting the event pointed out the change in plans: "Well, Wolf, as you know, initially this was a speech that was supposed to focus on medical liability reform. But after President Bush's widely viewed disappointing performance in the first presidential debate, there was a difference in strategy, a change in strategy from the campaign. They changed this to sharp attacks against Senator Kerry and his record on the war on terror, as well as the economy."

CNN's reporting of this event is characterized by three tendencies that political scientists argue is typical of news media's reporting in elections: (1) elections are treated as a sports contest between two combatants (typically horse racing or, in this instance, boxing); (2) the press focuses on the campaign's strategies more than the issues themselves; and (3) the press often parrots the message that political campaigns want them to report, circulating the rhetoric and slogans without intensive scrutiny or criticism (see, for instance, Patterson 1994). [AU: Bibliography says 1993] Stewart also points out the campaign's strategy of deflecting attention from Bush's weak showing in the presidential debates by going on the offensive, but insists on calling attention to the manipulative aspects of the event itself—both the campaign's misleading the press about making a major policy statement (when the presence of the banner itself clearly shows the forethought and planning for this attack speech) and the oral and visual rhetoric that the campaign wants the news media to report and show its viewers. Stewart doesn't accept the contention that the speech is about national security or the economy and focuses instead on the artifice of the event. It is an artifice that the news media help create and facilitate by uncritically continuing to air the Bush speech live, even though the speech does not include the policy material they initially agreed merited free air time as a newsworthy *presidential* statement (as opposed to that of a candidate for office). As Stewart has

noted about his show in an earlier interview, “What we try to do is point out the artifice of things, that there’s a guy behind the curtain pulling levers” (Hedgpeth 2000). Here he does just that.

Stewart then shows several clips from the Bush speech that CNN chose not to air in any of its three reports.

Stewart: [Bush] began by throwing out the first pander.

Bush: It’s great to be in Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania. It’s such an honor to be back here. It’s great to be in a part of the world where people work hard, they love their families....

Stewart: [*said out of the side of his mouth*] Yeah, not like New York—family hating jackasses; lazy family haters.

CNN does not show this clip because, given the news values of mainstream journalism, such statements by politicians are not newsworthy; they are typical of political speeches. For reporters assigned to follow the candidate’s campaign, in fact, they have heard such statements countless times by this point in the campaign, said to different crowds in different places. For Stewart, however, the clip merits the viewers’ attention because it shows that not only is the statement itself ridiculous, but that it is not beneath the president to pander to audiences. This is part of the overall point that Stewart attempts to make throughout the entire news segment—he continually asks the viewer to step outside the staged event to assess what information is available that might shed light on both presidential candidates’ fundamental character as people and leaders.

Stewart continues covering the event by again showing another clip that CNN chose not to air:

Stewart: But then it was rival bashing time. Bush warmed up with a few insults aimed at the Democrats’ number two man and his performance in Tuesday night’s debate.

Bush: America saw two very different visions of our country and two different hairdos. I didn’t pick my vice president for his hairdo. I picked him for his judgment, his experience....

Stewart: [showing a picture of a bald Dick Cheney] which, sadly, is as good as his hairdo.

If pandering isn't enough, Stewart shows that it is not beneath Bush to engage in *ad hominem* attacks. Again, CNN chose not to report this part of the president's speech, recognizing that attacks on one's opponents are simply part of electoral politics. Stewart, however, shows the clip not just to provide evidence of Bush's character and campaign style, but also to question the actual point that Bush is attempting to make so unproblematically—the quality of his administration's "judgment and experience" in the conduct of governmental affairs. Both CNN and *The Daily Show* have already provided evidence earlier in their broadcasts that the administration's "experience" of deciding to wage war, based on its "judgment" that there was trustworthy information to do so, was faulty. *The Daily Show*, however, is the only one to make the connection and point it out to viewers.

Like CNN, Stewart then focuses on the major policy statements within Bush's speech.

Stewart: Bush then moved onto his economic policy regarding Kerry.

Bush: Now the Senator's proposing higher taxes on more than 900,000 small business owners. He says the tax increase is only for the rich. You've heard that kind of rhetoric before. The rich hire lawyers and accountants for a reason—to stick you with the tab.

Stewart: Let me get this straight. Don't tax the rich because they'll get out of it? So your policy is, tax the hard working people because they're dumb asses and they'll never figure it out? So vote for me, goodnight?

Only during its 12 P.M. broadcast did CNN report this aspect of the president's speech, noting that Bush "also twisted Kerry's plan to roll back the cut taxes for those making more than \$200,000, describing it as a tax increase for more than 900,000 small businesses." The CNN report is critical at this juncture by pointing out the Bush campaign's distortion of Kerry's proposal (that is, rolling

back Bush's tax cuts does not amount to a proposed tax increase). CNN's focus is on the rhetorical sleight of hand. But that is the extent of their report. Stewart, however, returns the focus to the president's rhetoric by carrying the point to its logical conclusion. He illuminates the contradictory nature of the populist statement by questioning what it is exactly that Bush is trying to articulate, while also reminding viewers of where Bush really stands on taxes and how his policies actually belie the rhetoric employed here. It merits noting that news programs rarely offer direct and damning evidence of contradictory statements or duplicitous comments. The convention they typically rely on is to quote someone else who will point this out (Tuchman 1978). CNN did not even air the actual clip, relying instead on its reporter to summarize Bush's statement. One might argue that CNN has done Bush a favor by *not* airing a statement that is logically somewhat ridiculous and, instead, doing the hard work of actually deciphering for the viewing audience what the president means, thereby making him look more presidential in the process.^{vi}

The only clip of the president's speech that CNN showed in all three of its broadcasts occurred in the 7 A.M report—his statement concerning the supposed threat posed by “the dictatorship of Saddam Hussein” (quoted above). *The Daily Show* also reported this part of the speech, but with much more scrutiny to what Bush actually said. Stewart here engages in a rhetorical back-and-forth with the video clip of Bush's statement, attempting to come up with the right answer for which nation it is *exactly* that threatens America with weapons of mass destruction:

Stewart: Finally, the president brought the mood down a little, as only he can.

Bush: After September 11, America had to assess every potential threat in a new light. We had to take a hard look at every place where terrorists might get those weapons and one regime stood out.

Stewart: Well, that's true. It would be Saudi Arabia. Fifteen of the nineteen terrorists were actually from there.

Bush: ...the dictatorship of Saddam Hussein.

Stewart: No, no. I don't think that's it. Um. Oh. It was Iran—proven Al-Qaeda ties, building up the nukes program. I think it was them.

Bush: *[repeating the tape of Bush]* ...the dictatorship of Saddam Hussein.

Stewart: No, no. I'm sure...*[pause]*...Pakistan. Top scientists sold nuclear secrets to...

Bush: *[repeating the tape of Bush]* ...the dictatorship of Saddam Hussein.

Stewart: Could be Yemen. *[a graphic of a clock face with spinning hands is superimposed over a slightly faded image of Stewart, suggesting his thinking for quite some time of the possible countries, all the while Stewart thinks out loud]*. Oh.... Kazakhstan is actually a very dangerous.... Uzbekistan has always created problems in that region.... Turkey—very dangerous. Lebanon has some.... Qatar *[the graphic removes the clock face, and the camera focus on Stewart again becomes clear]*.... Oh, oh, oh. North Korea. They have the bomb. Their leader is crazy. North Korea.

Bush: *[repeating the tape of Bush]* ...the dictatorship of Saddam Hussein.

Stewart: *[holding out his arms in front of him, like a robot, said in a slow monotone voice, with a staccato cadence]*: The-dic-ta-tor-ship-of-Sad-dam-Hus-sein. Too-tired-to-fight-it. Must-learn. Re-pe-ti-tion.

Stewart scrutinizes the president's statement on its own terms—"in every place where terrorists might get those weapons": Saudi Arabia, Iran, Pakistan, North Korea, and so on. Then, through video repetition, Stewart highlights how the administration continues to repeat assertions over and over until the viewer is turned into an unthinking (or worn out) robot. In the speech itself, of course, Bush does not repeat the line. Yet Stewart recognizes that single speech events such as this do not constitute the reality that news media report and, in turn, help create. Instead, his use of manipulated video emphasizes the repeated pattern of administration efforts to establish something

that is untrue, yet which citizens must work to resist because of its repeated assertion. As Stewart is quoted as saying, “We’re out to stop that political trend of repeating things again and again until people are forced to believe them” (Armstrong 2003).

Stewart finishes the show’s coverage of the Bush speech by returning one last time to a Bush pronouncement that was simply too good to pass up for its comedic value, yet also affirms the point about Bush’s character that he has attempted to make throughout the telecast:

Stewart: But for all that, perhaps the most telling line of the speech came during Bush’s seemingly innocuous segue into a story about his wife.

Bush: You’re not going to believe this. It’s a true story, or kind of true.

Stewart: [*said with sheepish grin*] George W. Bush—I can tell I lie.

Again, CNN doesn’t air this clip because there is no news value here—from their perspective, it is a meaningless aside unrelated to either campaign strategy or policy stances. For Stewart, however, it not only ties in nicely with the previous statement about Saddam Hussein and 9/11, but it also neatly demonstrates *exactly* what is at stake in the election of the president. Bush’s proclivity to lie, in fact, was something the news media generally ignored in the election campaign, yet was an important criticism of Bush often addressed in numerous venues of popular culture during the campaign—most famously in Michael Moore’s documentary film *Fahrenheit 9/11* (Jones 2005b).

Stewart concludes the news segment of the show by turning to an event not widely covered by the news media—both John Kerry and Bush soliciting votes by appearing on the afternoon therapy and relationship talk show, *Dr. Phil*. Here he attempts to highlight the deeper truths at work again, this time with the Democratic nominee:

Stewart: But like Bush's speech, Kerry's *Dr. Phil* appearance had one moment that most clearly captured the essence of the candidate.

Dr. Phil's Wife [*Video clip of the Dr. Phil Show, an interview with Senator Kerry conducted with the assistance of Dr. Phil's wife*]: Is one of your daughters more like you than the other?

Kerry: Yes. No. That's...gosh...I'd like to...yes. But I guess...yes, the answer is yes.

Dr. Phil's Wife: Which one do you think is more like you?

Kerry: Well...um...I...that's why I hesitated, because I think in some ways my daughter Alexandra is more like me, but in other ways my daughter Vanessa is more like me.

Stewart: [*Burying his face into his hands, then moving his hands over his bowed head, gripping his hair, then the back of his neck. Stewart makes no comment, but simply looks at the camera with exasperation and dismay. The audience erupts in laughter.*]

When presidential candidates first began appearing on such talk shows with regularity in 1992, the news media covered these appearances as newsworthy events. They did so, in particular, because of the unusual nature of the appearances, but also because the news media disliked the "softball" questions offered up by these "illegitimate" non-reporters (Debenport 1992). Because such appearances rarely feature the candidates' saying much about their position on issues (focusing more instead on personal matters), the news media now generally turn a blind eye to these "campaign stops," treating them as *de rigueur* in the hustle to reach disparate voter groups. *The Daily Show*, however, calls attention to the spectacle performance not just for its groveling and humiliating aspects, but rather to highlight how such performances might actually tell us something important about the candidates. In this instance, Kerry confirmed everything the Bush campaign had said about him: that Kerry is unwilling to be pinned down on anything (despite how insignificant the matter), yet paradoxically will say anything to get elected if he believes that is what the audience wants to hear. That truth comes to light very clearly for viewers when the matter is

something as trivial as reflecting upon the relationship with one's daughter. Viewers may not be able to discern whether Kerry is a flip-flopper on foreign-policy issues (say, for instance, his various votes on the Iraq war), but they can certainly recognize mealy-mouthed remarks when it comes to interpersonal relationships.

The Daily Show, therefore, has constructed a narrative, weaving together campaign events to give the viewer insight into the candidates and who they might really be. This narrative is formulated from information derived from planned campaign events, yet woven together to tell a story that allows for evaluation of the candidates. Perhaps this is simply an entertainmentized version of a "news analysis" or "op-ed" journalism. But it is a particular brand of "reporting" that might illuminate for viewers the larger issues at stake beyond the isolated events that typically dominate news reporting.

In summary, then, *The Daily Show* has provided viewers information on several major political events that occurred the day before: the CIA report on weapons of mass destruction, Bush's campaign speech, and Kerry's appearance on a popular television program. The audience learns what the CIA report says, learns two of the main points in Bush's speech also reported by news outlets, and learns about Kerry's personal life. *The Daily Show* has not, therefore, short-changed viewers on information they would have seen by watching a "real" newscast.

Yet *The Daily Show's* audience also sees more material on these events than that provided by CNN, learning things that CNN didn't report. First, *The Daily Show* highlights political rhetoric itself, showing the false statements, *ad hominem* attacks, pandering, and populist appeals of candidate Bush, not seeing such language as a "given" in politics, but instead as a disturbing quality that exemplifies the character of the politician. Second, and perhaps more important, the program offers viewers information they have heard before, yet are reminded of here as a means of making sense of the events covered in the daily news report: there were no weapons of mass destruction;

the administration's actions exemplify its use of bad judgment because it went after the wrong regime; its economic policies are the opposite of what they say they are. Continually, Stewart will not let the viewer lose sight of the greater truths at stake here. He is constantly keeping score, adding it all up, reminding the viewer of what this says about the candidates and the larger terms upon which they should be evaluated. In a single news report, the television news reporters rarely put things together in such a manner. And what the news media ignore may actually provide citizens with the type of meaningful information upon which they can base their electoral decisions. By Stewart's doing so in a typical news-reporting format, he demonstrates the failings of news media in informing viewers, drawing attention to how media serve as conduits for false information and image management, and how it would be easy for citizens to become the unthinking drones and robots that such unquestioned lies and manipulative imagery could lead them to become.

One might be tempted to criticize *The Daily Show* for selecting damning video clips that are taken out of context and then used to ridicule or embarrass politicians, all for a laugh. As we have seen, however, the clips used by Stewart are no more out of context than the single clip shown by CNN. Both Stewart and CNN actually highlight the context of the speech—the poor debate performance, as well as the release of the CIA report—yet it is *The Daily Show* that provides even more depth to the speech by showing viewers more of it (six clips compared to one by CNN). Just because CNN and other news organizations make claims of neutrality and objectivity doesn't mean they aren't being selective in what they report and how they report it. Furthermore, Stewart reports the same events and highlights the same “newsworthy” items as CNN, including reaching many of their same conclusions. As journalism critics have pointed out, not only have the length of sound bites drastically decreased over the last twenty years, they are increasingly disappearing altogether from television news reports (despite a very large news hole with twenty-four-hour cable channels). Instead, reporters are simply summarizing what candidates and government officials say, then

interpreting those comments in a conversation with the news anchor. Yet as we have also seen, those interpretations offer the viewer little in the way of substantive critical assessments because of the norms and conventions of the profession.

In short, *The Daily Show* has matched CNN's coverage of this particular campaign event, even surpassing it by providing viewers additional information about the candidates beyond policy positions and campaign strategies and maneuvers. Of course, CNN provides a wealth of information about national and world affairs that a comedy program like *The Daily Show* can never cover. Nor would I suggest that citizens could be fully informed by watching a comedy show that provides little more than ten minutes of "reporting." Nevertheless, if we are to assess the quality of information about the presidential campaign provided by a fake news show versus a real one (as the Pew study normatively asserts), then the analysis here suggests that *The Daily Show* can provide quality information that citizens can use in making informed choices about electoral politics.

Fakeness, Reality, and the Postmodern Viewing Public

By most accounts, the institution of journalism is in a state of crisis in America (Hatchen 2005; Kovach and Rosenstiel 2001). As discussed above, the myth that young people get their news from late-night comedians is partly a desire to explain why young people, in particular, are turning away from broadcast news or print journalism as primary sources of news and information (Mindich 2005). With declining readership and viewership, the institution is economically challenged by dwindling advertising revenues as well as increased costs of production (Roberts et al. 2001; Seelye 2005a). Recent scandals related to professional norms and ethics (from story fabrication by Jason Blair at *The New York Times* and Stephen Glass at *The New Republic* to poor fact-checking on President Bush's Air National Guard records by Dan Rather at *CBS News*) have contributed to a

decline in trust with news media consumers (Johnson 2003; Hatchen 2004, 102–112). [?AU: Bibliography says Hatchen is 2005] Concurrently, with new media technologies such as blogs and search-engine portals, citizens are questioning the top-down, gatekeeper role of news media and, instead, increasingly desire a more active role in the determination and construction of what constitutes news and who gets to make it (Gillmor 2004; [?AU: no Gillmor in Bibliography] Seelye 2005b). Furthermore, the press's timidity in questioning and thwarting overt propaganda efforts by the Bush Administration (as both *The New York Times* and *Washington Post* offered *mea culpas* for their lack of serious reporting on assertions and evidence by the Bush Administration in the run-up to the Iraq war) also weakens the news media's claim to serving as effective and trustworthy watchdogs to power (Younge 2004; Seelye 2005c). Indeed, government propaganda combined with competition between news outlets that offer not just "competing views of the world, but different realities" (such as Fox News, *The New York Times*, and Al-Jazeera) leads to what Kristina Riegert calls the "struggle for credibility" with viewing audiences and voting publics (Riegert 2005).

Hence, what is also in crisis is the belief that news media provide a *realistic* picture of the world. The public is well aware that both television and politics are spectacle performances and, indeed, that the press and government are two mutually reinforcing and constituting institutions.^{viii} News media are *part of* the political spectacle (Edelman 1988), including journalists-cum-talk-show-pundits (who act more like lapdogs to power than watchdogs of it), cheerleading embedded reporters, and patriotic news anchors who wear their hearts on their sleeves. An increasingly media-savvy public realizes that news programs such as CNN are no more "real" than *The Daily Show* is "fake." Yet mainstream news media continue to believe their claims to truth—and the authenticity of those claims—because of their *authority* to make them in the first place. It is an authority they have asserted (and the public has granted) through their title, special status, institutional-based legitimacy, access to power, and the means of production and distribution. But as Foucault also

reminds us, “‘truth’ is a type of discourse that societies accept and *make function as true*” (emphasis added; Foucault 1980, 132). And as postmodernists would have it, the “authentic” exists only in “the imaginings of those who yearn for it” (Webster 1995, 170). Were that to change, or should citizens come to believe that news is inauthentic, untrue, or just another form of constructed spectacle (that is, the credibility gap becomes a chasm), then they might yearn for other means of establishing truth and reality.

The institutional practice of journalism is a modernist means of constructing knowledge of public life that for many years has been widely accepted. Increasingly, though, this means of taking account of the world is being questioned, if not discredited.^{ix} In a useful summary of postmodernist thinking, Frank Webster argues that “the modernist enthusiasm for genres and styles [of which news is one] is rejected and mocked for its pretensions [by postmodernists]. From this it is but a short step to the postmodern penchant for parody, for tongue-in-cheek reactions to established styles, for a pastiche mode which delights in irony and happily mixes and matches in a ‘bricolage’ manner” (Webster 1995, 169–170). And in steps *The Daily Show*, with a tendency for just such postmodern playfulness.

But *The Daily Show* is “fake” only in that it refuses to make claims to authenticity (as demonstrated in the analysis above). But being fake does not mean that the information it imparts is untrue. Indeed, as with most social and political satire, its humor offers a means of reestablishing common-sense truths to counter the spectacle, ritual, pageantry, artifice, and verbosity that often cloak the powerful. The rationality of political satire is that it “reminds [?AU: “us”?] of common values,” and “in its negative response to political excess, it serves to restore equilibrium to politics” (Schutz 1977, 328). Citizens know that public artifice exists, which is ultimately why the satire that points it out is funny—they just need someone skillful enough to articulate the critique. The type of fake-yet-real “reporting” performed by *The Daily Show* has led one commentator to claim that *The*

Daily Show is “reinventing political journalism” (Baym 2005). Perhaps more to the point, the postmodern audience that comprises its viewership and has made it popular are themselves reinventing what it is they want from political communication.

Though scholars often attack the press for its supposed cynicism (for example, the way in which reporters point out the man behind the curtain), I contend that the press may not do this enough. Shelving journalistic conventions to get at important truths is less cynical than turning a blind eye to the manipulation by either contending that politics will always be this way or assuming that viewers *should* be informed enough or smart enough to connect all the dots themselves. A program like *The Daily Show* refuses to sit idly by while political lies and manipulative rhetoric go unchallenged (or, as Stewart says, “until it becomes true”). Unhindered by the self-imposed constraints placed on reporters by the profession (as well as the co-dependent relationship that exists between government and the press), *The Daily Show* uses a fake news platform to offer discussions of news events that are informative *and* critical, factual *and* interpretive, thorough *yet* succinct. Does that make it biased, unfair, or unbalanced? Not when the program sets its sights on the powerful. As Bryan Keefer, editor of Spinsanity.com, has argued, “the media need to understand that pointing out the truth isn’t the same as taking sides.”^x This, of course, is what a fake news show is licensed to do, and why I contend that it provides such an important voice of political critique on the American political landscape (Jones 2005a).

In an opinion piece in the *Washington Post*, Keefer dares to speak for his generation, justifying its changing relationship to traditional news media and its search for better alternatives. He contends that

we live in an era when PR pros have figured out how to bend the news cycle to their whims, and much of what’s broadcast on the networks bears a striking resemblance to the commercials airing between segments. Like other twenty-somethings, I’ve been raised in an era when advertising invades every aspect of pop culture,

and to me the information provided by mainstream news outlets too often feels like one more product, produced by politicians and publicists. (Keefe 2004)

If the myth of young citizens turning to comedians for news and information about politics ends up proving true, then as this analysis suggests, the fate of the republic doesn't seem in jeopardy if a comedy program like *The Daily Show* is a source for their knowledge of public affairs. As Keefe's comments suggest, at least when people watch a program that blatantly embraces its fakeness, they don't feel like they are being sold a bill of goods. Hence, the postmodern claim that the "fake" is more real than the "real" is perhaps not such an unsettling notion after all.

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- ⁱ <http://people-press.org/reports/display.php3?ReportID=46>.
- ⁱⁱ <http://people-press.org/reports/display.php3?ReportID=200>.
- ⁱⁱⁱ “Jon Stewart,” *Inside Politics*, CNN.com, 3 May 2002.
- ^{iv} Transcript of *Nightline*, ABC News, 28 July 2004 (accessed from Lexis-Nexis Academic Universe, 4 August 2004).
- ^v <http://www.naes04.org>.
- ^{vi} Transcripts of CNN, 7 October 2004 (accessed from Lexis-Nexis Academic Universe, 28 March 2005). I analyze three morning broadcasts of CNN to get some idea of the different ways that a news network reports a story, as well as how these brief reports are modified as the morning progresses.
- ^{vii} As one news analyst has noted, “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.” Such conventions, therefore, make the news media “susceptible to manipulation by the professional speech writers and media handlers who seed public information with pre-scripted soundbites and spin” (Baym 2005, 265).
- ^{viii} One only needs to look at popular narratives of either news media or the interactions of media and politics to see this recurrent theme. For examples, see films such as *Hero*, *Power*, *Broadcast News*, *A Face in the Crowd*, *Meet John Doe*, *The Candidate*, *Wag the Dog*, *Bulworth*, *Bob Roberts*, and *Dave*.
- ^{ix} Again, witness the movement toward blogging (and even the news media’s embrace of it) as a manifestation of this questioning and reformulation. See, for instance, “‘The State’ (Columbia, S.C.) Launches Community Blog, Citizen Journalism Push,” *Editor & Publisher*, 30 August 2005; and Saul Hansell, “The CBS Evening Blog,” *New York Times*, 13 July 2005.
- ^x One might be tempted to assert that this is exactly what competing “news” outlets like Fox News claim—that they are simply pointing out alternative truths. The crucial distinction between a program of political satire and a news organization like Fox that claims to be “fair and balanced,” however, is their relationships to power. One is committed to critiquing power wherever it lies, while the other has proven its intentional commitment to supporting the powerful through highly orchestrated and sustained efforts by the media corporation’s leadership (see Robert Greenwald’s documentary *Outfoxed: Rupert Murdoch’s War on Journalism*).