

represented, and picky comic book “dudes” (as Robinson terms them) may find fault with some of the author’s representations.

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*Entertaining Politics: New Political Television and Civic Culture.*  
Jeffrey P. Jones. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2005.

Last October, Jon Stewart, host of the TV program *The Daily Show*, appeared on CNN’s *Crossfire*. He mocked *Crossfire*’s hosts, Tucker Carlson and Paul Begala, for holding his show to the same standards as “news organizations.” Stewart said, “You’re on CNN. The show that leads into me is puppets making crank phone calls.” Stewart argued that his show, a parody of a daily news program, should not be taken seriously. However, regular watchers of *The Daily Show* recognized that Stewart’s assertions were somewhat disingenuous. Although the medium of *The Daily Show* is humor, its political content is substantive.

Jeffrey P. Jones, in *Entertaining Politics: New Political Television and Culture*, argues that television and other media have become a vital new mode of civic engagement. Jones suggests that political comedy programs such as *The Daily Show* are crucial to this new form of political activity because they “have challenged normative assumptions about who gets to speak about politics on television” (x). Jones calls this new breed of political comedy shows “New Political Television” (x).

Before outlining the qualities of new political television, Jones traces the cultural context from which it emerged. Jones recognizes the changing surface of politics in the private sphere. Americans do not participate in politics the way they used to. However, Jones refutes the “civic malaise theory,” the notion that the civic involvement and political activity of American citizens are in a decline (16). Instead, he argues that our concept of what constitutes political activity must be revised to fit America’s evolving culture. Our culture is more and more inundated by popular media. Jones contends that nowadays, “politics and popular culture are essentially opposite sides of the same coin” (17). Politics has become a “discursive activity,” a “textual practice.”

These texts include all types of media, but television dominates. This rising importance of political television prompted him to write this book.

One manifestation of this televisual political activity is new political television. These political entertainment shows, such as *The Daily Show* and *Real Time with Bill Maher*, provide “commonsensical talk by people not directly linked to the political establishment” (x). Jones argues that these shows provide a level of truthfulness that cannot be accessed by traditional news programming. Comedian-hosts Bill Maher, Dennis Miller, and Jon Stewart created “their own brand of politically humorous talk show as an antidote” to the “fakery in public life as manifest in news and late-night television talk” (52). These hosts “have intentionally set out to say what can’t or isn’t being said elsewhere on television” (53). Jones provides a thorough study of this new political phenomenon. After analyzing new manifestations of American civic engagement, he examines the relative roles of political insiders and outsiders, the function of parody as a critique of news media, and the ways in which political voices derive authority on television.

At a time when state censorship of and self-censorship by media run rampant in the name of “terror,” Americans need public figures who speak against the dominant political ideology. Stewart, Miller, and Maher, from their positions as nonjournalists, speak with relative impunity. They shrug aside criticism from the established media and the state with the defense that they are comedians, not journalists. “Fake” news provides a medium in which criticism can be more safely spoken. However, as Maher learned after the cancellation of his show *Politically Incorrect*, hosts of new political television are not immune to censorship. Fortunately, Maher, Stewart, and Miller, continue to speak publicly. As Stewart observed on *Crossfire*, speaking of presidential candidate Al Sharpton, “I think, oftentimes, the person that knows they can’t win is allowed to speak the most freely.” Maher, Miller, and Stewart refuse to compete with network news; in the process, they find a radical freedom of speech. Jones’s timely book provides an excellent examination of the state and corporate pressures that have led to the emergence of these radical voices.

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