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'Even Better Than Being Informed': Satirical News and Media Literacy

Chris Peters

On October 30, 2010 approximately 215,000 people assembled at the National Mall in Washington D.C. Many appeared in fancy dress, and held signs with such playful slogans as: 'Don't hate me because I'm rational', 'Stark raving reasonable', and 'I'm using my inside voice.'¹ This motley assortment had coalesced neither around a defined political movement nor to protest a substantive social policy issue.

Instead, they came to Washington at the behest of two satirical comedians, Jon Stewart and Stephen Colbert, at the 'Rally to Restore Sanity', which centred on the theme of returning respectful dialogue to both the political and journalistic spheres. Focusing on heated political rhetoric and its amplification by the cable news media – much like he did in a widely-viewed 2004 critique of the CNN debate show, *Crossfire* – Stewart, host of *The Daily Show*, promoted the rally as 'looking for the people who think shouting is annoying, counterproductive, and terrible for your throat; who feel that the loudest voices shouldn't be the only ones that get heard' (Rally, 2010a). While politics may have been his focus, Stewart frequently reproached cable news, what he called 'the country's 24-hour, politico-pundit perpetual panic "conflictinator"' (Rally, 2010b), both during the rally and throughout its promotional lead-in. He unambiguously laid blame on it for perpetuating an intolerant, inconsistent, and at times, injurious approach to discussing social issues. In essence, he charged this sphere of journalism with failing its democratic function.

If we take this as a starting point – over 200,000 people showing up, being mobilized, attending a rally that imparts lessons on the state of journalism in the United States – it provokes the question: how are audiences' expectations and perceptions of journalism currently being shaped? If we listen to the cheers which accompanied each instance of Stewart echoing the oft-heard criticisms of contemporary journalism – sensational, polarizing, trivial, irresponsible, and so forth – it stimulates us to speculate about journalism's ongoing ability to, in marketing terms, 'capture' its audience.

This chapter attempts to engage with these questions by considering three pertinent and interrelated changes in concert: the shifting experiences of public trust in the media; increasing audience involvement in journalism; and a growing public understanding of media techniques. I propose we try to understand the shifting nature of the news landscape not by taking journalism as a starting point, but by looking at journalism through the changing lens of its audience(s). More specifically, the idea of *media literacy* is a helpful concept we can use to begin deciphering the changing audience—journalism relationship.

Contemporary audiences have certain moral or ethical evaluations of journalism (trust) but increasingly they also have certain participatory expectations (involvement). Media literacy influences both. It shapes how audiences learn to decode journalistic texts, sets the expectations upon which levels of trust are based, and helps define the parameters upon which audiences engage. For audiences to proclaim that particular journalistic products are politicized or biased (cable news), or that certain news practices are unethical (hoaxes, phone tapping), one needs some degree of media literacy. If one wants to augment the journalistic product (user-generated content) or if one wants to create

journalistic alternatives (citizen journalism), one needs some degree of literacy. It is, accordingly, a foundational concept for understanding the future of journalism.

The Daily Show (TDS) provides an interesting counterweight in this regard. Its popular reception over the past decade demonstrates the possibilities stimulated by an alternative form of journalism that performs multiple functions for its audience, oftentimes simultaneously: it acts as a news substitute; it engages in media criticism; and it promotes media literacy. *TDS* treats its audience as a constituency which should be aware that ‘something is rotten in the state of journalism’ and instructs them accordingly. As Stewart (2005: 133) notes of the media,

The role of a free press is to be the people’s eyes and ears, providing not just information but access, insight, and most importantly context. It must devote its time and resources to monitoring the government, permeating the halls of power to determine who is doing the people’s work, who is corrupting the process, and who will promise to be a mole in the State Department if their homosexuality is kept secret. Only after that – and only with time permitting – should it move on to high-speed freeway chases.

In these sorts of critiques, Stewart harnesses and promotes a familiar, classically modernist interpretation of the proper civic role and function of journalism.

Yet this is also where *TDS* departs from the modernist journalistic paradigm. Stewart delivers his acerbic criticism of the news media by crafting an innovative ‘experience of involvement’ for his audience, employing active forms of emotionality (humour, anger, shock, dismay) as opposed to relying on the types of passive emotional postures (control, gravitas, calmness) more typically associated with journalism (Peters, 2011). Broadly speaking, *TDS* can be conceptualized as one example of a nascent *public pedagogy* (cf. Giroux, 2000) that aims to educate citizens about journalism. Aspects of this pedagogy include formal education, popular culture, and emerging forms of news and news commentary. The result is an ever-increasing public emphasis on media (journalistic) literacy which leads to progressively more sophisticated *metanarratives of journalism*.

If part of journalism’s future is dependent on how audience perceptions and expectations of the news are being shaped, considering the journalism industry in isolation is evidently insufficient. Media literacy has been promoted through various acts of public pedagogy over the past few decades, from the introduction of curricula at the primary and secondary school levels (see UNESCO, 2011; Network, 2011), to encounters with representations of journalism through entertainment media (e.g. *The Wire*, Stieg Larsson’s *Millennium* trilogy), dedicated media commentary online (e.g. PressThink, mediaguardian.co.uk, Media Matters for America), and the rapid institutional rise of departments of media and journalism studies in universities around the globe (Joseph, 2009; Zelizer, 2009). The news industry is not the exclusive arbiter of its future and related fields such as education and popular culture are concomitant shapers that warrant greater attention. Within the United States, *The Daily Show* is a key player in this regard.

TDS promotes media literacy for a young audience that has not yet formalized nor ritualized its relationship with journalism. Accordingly, this chapter examines the shifting dynamics amongst public trust, media literacy, public pedagogy, and popular culture (in the form of *The Daily Show*). It looks at the broader educational and popular context in which journalism now finds itself and sees what lessons are being taught to journalism’s future audiences/consumers. If the educational system is the site for the future

foundations of media literacy, popular culture may be the vanguard of this change. Whether it is Charlie Brooker's *Newsnight*, or critically-acclaimed films such as *Good Night and Good Luck*, we must be cognizant of incorporating popular influences into the broader equation of how to rethink the ways that audiences evaluate journalism in a media-saturated age. What *Sesame Street* did for young children's educational urge to learn arithmetic over the past 40 years, the *Daily Show* appears to be doing for young (primarily American) adults' education about journalism.

Public Trust and Media Literacy

Public scepticism of journalism, generally measured by data which demonstrates decreasing levels of public trust in the news industry as a whole, (see Barnett, 2008; Pew, 2009) is often viewed as an alarming development. However, I contend that one cannot look at the notion of trust in isolation to judge the current state of audience—journalism relations; public trust must be considered alongside audience involvement and levels of media literacy as well. While I would by no means claim that we have witnessed a universal epistemological shift, I think one can argue that many contemporary public(s) no longer view journalism just as an institutional provider of informational content, but as an epistemological performance or process of knowledge production as well (though probably not in these terms). As such, they increasingly learn to become critical consumers of the news they are provided. Audiences have learned to be sceptical – perhaps, at times, even cynical – but such an approach simply mirrors what journalism expects of itself with respect to active distrust of officialdom.²

Contemporary trends appear to indicate that we are witnessing an ill-fated paradox, wherein higher levels of media literacy amongst the public seem to parallel lower degrees of trust in journalism. This is accompanied by a second paradox, whereby the level of trust the public has in institutions that make the news erodes at the same time that these same institutions encourage them to become more engaged or better involved in the process of news making (cf. Giddens, 1994). Journalism has moved past *Nineteen Eighty-Four*: ignorance is (no longer) strength.

Yet I contend that these developments are potentially beneficial, forcing greater transparency on the part of newsmakers and demanding greater efficacy on behalf of their audiences. Nowhere was the former more evident than in the recent *News of the World* scandal, while the rise of Indymedia and citizen journalism in recent years would seem to corroborate the second part of this claim. Accordingly, we can say that the trends of decreasing trust and declining audiences discussed above are subject to a few critical caveats. First, as the generic 'mass audience' turns away from mainstream media that it apparently trusts less-and-less, this corresponds to specific audiences seeking out media alternatives that are more in line with what they want from journalism (Jones, 2010; PEJ, 2010; Peters, 2010). So perhaps it is more accurate to say that trust has not so much decreased, as fragmented. Second, even as the proliferation of 'soft' news and infotainment programming continues unabated, from vox-pop current affairs programming, to breakfast television, personality-based cable magazines, and so forth, these more emotionally-overt, journalistically-involved products continue to trumpet certain modernist credentials – factuality, balance, and accuracy, to name a few – to accentuate their news and informational value (Peters, 2011). Much of the myth of objective journalism, in terms of the rhetoric outlining proper techniques and appropriate ethics, is alive and well.

The challenge facing those who want to reinforce the bedrock of ‘responsible journalism’ is, accordingly, to figure out how to ensure that audiences demand its fulfillment. One way is through pedagogy; just as audiences rarely flock to a ‘bad movie’ there needs to be some mechanism whereby they will support – attitudinally and economically – instances of critically-acclaimed journalistic output. Demanding ‘good’ journalism necessitates first being able to recognize it, and in terms of these lessons, they seem to be increasingly, not decreasingly, widespread.

Pedagogy and Global Media Literacy

Many of the developments discussed in relation to the contemporary shifts in journalism, especially in terms of its content, are often highly pessimistic. The industry, and not just in the United States, has evidently become more commercial, more fragmented, more beholden to technology, and more impacted by temporality over the past few decades. And for many, journalism is the worse for it.

But the significance of these developments may be more ambiguous than appears at first blush. Despite the oft-echoed critique that the news media is turning to tabloid methods, debasing itself as it capitulates to commercial interests, the irony is that, as a workforce, the industry is increasingly demanding that journalists have post-secondary education in order to be admitted into its ranks (Weaver et al., 2007). So even if we accept contentions of tabloidization and dumbing down at face value, it would seem erroneous to claim that ‘unintelligent’ journalism is resulting from more ‘uninformed’ journalists. Similarly, the promotion of media awareness is on the rise, with media literacy being promoted at the primary and secondary-school levels and media and journalism studies programs appearing around the globe. So if the public is increasingly being subject to a sort of journalistic Pablum, it is unlikely this is because they are now less aware of what they’re being fed. As Bird (1992) notes in her studies of tabloid news audiences, and Hill in her study of factual television (2007), audiences are readily able to distinguish ‘serious’ reportage from diversionary ‘newzak’ (cf. Franklin, 1997). And programs which promote such a critical awareness are currently on the rise.

Livingstone et al. (2008) note that initiatives on media literacy generally aim to serve three purposes: to promote democratic participation and active citizenship; to facilitate technological competency in an increasingly wired world; and to develop creative and expressive awareness by ensuring audiences can navigate the everyday media landscape. These thrusts drive debate and the direction of public policy. For instance, in Canada the Media Awareness Network was established in 1996 to promote curriculum change at the primary and secondary school levels. This nonprofit organization is funded by the national and provincial governments, journalism and telecommunications industries, and educational and community organizations. Working alongside ministries of education, the organization has managed to get a commitment to learning about media texts included on all Canadian provincial curricula. It notes:

Traditional media education topics—stereotyping, bias, gender and minority portrayal; objectivity and point of view; fashion, advertising and self-image; questions of ownership and content; the globalization of media; the relationship between audience and content; are as pertinent as ever in the new industrial education/entertainment complex. [...] in an environment with millions of publishers and few gatekeepers, the skills to decode online marketing and to determine the differences between fact and opinion have become essential (Media Awareness 2011).

While still in its relative infancy, the learning resources provided by the Network to teachers reflect a level of media sophistication unavailable to previous generations.

As these lessons are gradually incorporated into curricula, young adults come to possess greater critical faculties to analyze journalism. Whereas the titles of some of journalism studies' hallmark texts – *Making News* (Tuchman, 1978), *Making the News* (Golding and Elliott, 1979), and *Manufacturing the News* (Fishman, 1980) – reflect the relative novelty of critical media literacy in the academic sphere three decades ago, ideas, which in the 70s and 80s were only discussed at academic conferences, are now trickling down to younger and younger audiences. While the impacts of such epistemological shifts happen slowly, they are in evidence.³

Of course, such lessons are not restricted to Canada. The Grunwald Declaration on Media Education was passed by 19 UNESCO countries in 1982. The impetus behind the Declaration was that media literacy was essential for informed citizenship, and the first resolution of the document reads as a surprisingly poignant and prescient encapsulation of the issues with which contemporary journalism now grapples:

We therefore call upon the competent authorities to:

- 1) initiate and support comprehensive media education programs – from pre-school to university level, and in adult education – the purpose of which is to develop the knowledge, skills and attitudes which will encourage the growth of critical awareness and, consequently, of greater competence among the users of electronic and print media. Ideally, such programs should include the analysis of media products, the use of media as means of creative expression, and effective use of and participation in available media channels (UNESCO, 1982).

This focus on media literacy has expanded ever since, from 1990 when UNESCO held its first inaugural media literacy conference, to 2009, when the United Nations, UNESCO, Alliance of Civilizations, European Commission and Grupo Comunicar published a joint report on *Mapping Media Education Policies in the World: Visions, Programs and Challenges*. The recommendations in this report were taken up by UNESCO in 2011, when it published its first international curriculum on media literacy for teachers. It opens by noting:

We live in a world where the quality of information we receive largely determines our choices and ensuing actions, including our capacity to enjoy fundamental freedoms and the ability for self-determination and development. Driven by technological improvements in telecommunications, there is also a proliferation of media and other information providers through which vast amounts of information and knowledge are accessed and shared by citizens. Adding to and emanating from this phenomenon is the challenge to assess the relevance and the reliability of the information without any obstacles to citizens' making full use of their rights to freedom of expression and the right to information (UNESCO, 2011: 11).

Somewhat unsurprisingly, analysis of journalism is a component of six of the nine core modules they propose. The second module, 'Understanding the News, Media and Information Ethics', focuses specifically on journalism and its four units – 'journalism and society'; 'freedom, ethics and responsibility'; 'what makes news: exploring the

criteria'; and 'the news development process: going beyond the 4 Ws and 1H' – bode well for journalistic literacy gradually becoming a mainstream aspect of education. This is part of a broader global trend which has seen journalism and media studies departments become enmeshed in universities over the past couple of decades.

The study of journalism, originally a US-based phenomenon, has seen a rapid rise in its birthplace over the past few decades. Indeed, the number of American colleges and universities offering degrees in journalism and mass communication increased 52 percent between 1982 and 2002, from 304 programs with 91,016 students enrolled to 463 programs and 194,500 students (Weaver et al., 2007: 33). While some of these programs do little more than institutionalize the apprenticeship function, providing a basic skill set to aspiring journalists, others provide grounding in mass communication theory. From would-be journalists, to communications majors, and bachelor students taking minors in media studies and related disciplines, each generation of university graduates is being increasingly exposed to various strands of critical, interpretive, postmodern and poststructuralist thought on journalism, not only within the US, but globally, as teaching and research spreads worldwide (Joseph, 2009).

It seems as though a call for an increased emphasis on global media literacy (Meyrowitz, 1998) is being answered at a number of different institutional and supra-national levels, which implies that the global level of media literacy is on the rise. However, the implementation of media literacy often focuses upon the formal educational level, something which takes time and must overcome the bureaucracy and re-training necessary for substantial shifts in curricula. It would probably be naïvely optimistic to overestimate the current degree of news literacy on a global scale, however, within certain pockets of young adults, exposure has certainly led to a greater awareness. Yet education is not the only sphere we need to consider.

Public Pedagogy and the Rise of *The Daily Show*

The attention received by *The Daily Show* over the past decade serves as colloquial evidence for the assertion that the boundaries between news and entertainment have fundamentally shifted in the contemporary age, even if the historical distinction between the two is undoubtedly a false dichotomy (see Delli Carpini and Williams, 2001). From a *Rolling Stone* cover of Stewart and Stephen Colbert ('America's Anchors'), to articles in *The New York Times* ('Is Jon Stewart the Most Trusted Man in America?'), or tributes by journalistic stalwarts like Tom Brokaw, who dubbed Stewart the 'citizen's surrogate' – a role usually reserved for the media ('Jon Stewart: Wickedly Insightful') – in *Time*, there are numerous examples of *TDS* and Jon Stewart being held up as synonymous with, or sometimes superior to, conventional journalism. What is interesting is how such articles call upon 'ideal types' of hard news, or utilize exemplars from the pantheon of trusted, traditional American journalists.

It seems that in an age of hybridized media formats, *The Daily Show* has become enmeshed for many people as indistinguishable from, in terms of the validity of its truth-claims, the traditional benchmark for 'factual television', namely professional, network journalism (cf. Hill, 2007). What is striking when one considers audience surveys is the exceptionally rapid incorporation of *The Daily Show* (a satirical news program) amidst more established alternatives of 'news' (Pew, 2004; 2008). In an age of vast media proliferation and audience fragmentation, audiences consistently renegotiate their

conceptual schemas to stabilize increasingly volatile genre definitions of factual programming on television. In this regard, *TDS* has elevated its status quite quickly.

It is hard to point to a specific moment when Stewart established his imprint on *The Daily Show*, and equally difficult trying to assess its transformation from cult to critically-acclaimed status. However, the win of a Peabody award for its 2000 US Presidential coverage could certainly be considered one of the stepping stones. Popular acceptance was soon to follow. By 2003, the audience for *TDS* had nearly doubled under Stewart,⁴ from 427,000 in 1999, to 788,000 (Bauer, 2003). That same year the Television Critics Association named *The Daily Show* its winner for ‘Outstanding Achievement in News and Information’, beating out such notable as *60 Minutes* and *Nightline* (TCA, 2007). The two previous and following years, the award was given to PBS’s *Frontline*. During the Iowa and New Hampshire primaries of 2004, *The Daily Show* drew more viewers among the 18-34 male age bracket than any of the nightly network broadcasts (AP, 2004). By 2005, Stewart was averaging 1.4 million viewers per evening (Goetz, 2005) while winning another Peabody for the show’s ‘Indecision 2004’ election coverage. As an increasingly popular source of election coverage, mid-term reporting by *The Daily Show* in 2006 drew just shy of 2 million viewers per evening (Fitzgerald, 2006). As the stature and status of the program rose-and-rose, a slogan on its website became less-and-less ironic: ‘*The Daily Show* with Jon Stewart – it’s even better than being informed’ (Comedy Central, 2007).

Yet such popularity is only one part of the calculus that warrants its study. Noteworthy to many of the academics who began to study the influence of *The Daily Show* in the mid-2000s was the suggestion, highlighted by a Pew Research poll of news consumption in 2004, that it was being viewed not just as entertainment but as a valid source of news. While the ability of the show to inform and instruct is belittled on its official web site, which states: ‘If you’re tired of the stodginess of the evening newscasts, if you can’t bear to sit through the spinmeisters and shills on the 24-hour cable news networks, don’t miss *The Daily Show* with Jon Stewart, a nightly half-hour series unburdened by objectivity, journalistic integrity or even accuracy’ (Comedy Central, 2007), this contention of frivolousness is significantly undermined by the critical and academic acclaim for the program, the perception of its audience, and by the eagerness with which Stewart enters into public debate about the appropriate role of journalism. Since Stewart took over the show in 1999, an increasing number of prominent politicians and public intellectuals began to traverse the interview desk, critical acclaim continued to build, audiences started to classify it as news, and academics began to interrogate the effect of *The Daily Show* as journalism (see Baym, 2005; Baumgartner and Morris, 2006; Young and Tisinger, 2006; Fox et al., 2007).

It is curious what, if anything, we can make of this ascendancy in terms of the increasing impetus among journalists and journalism studies scholars to regularly evaluate the ‘State of the News Media’.⁵ Satirical news, and *The Daily Show* in particular, may not quite be a cause célèbre in the midst of this debate, but it does raise questions about the purpose of news, the shifting media environment, the changing demographics of journalistic consumption, and the efficacy of conventional news styles in generating audience interest and involvement. What it seems safe to say is that *TDS* is not only an emerging form of journalism, often acting as a substitute or augment of traditional news for its viewers, but a forum where the metanarratives of journalism are frequently discussed, providing young adults with an unexpected avenue for media literacy.

In 2004, the aforementioned – and oft-cited – Pew Research Center poll on preferences of news audiences was released. It found that 21 percent of 18-29 year olds cited comedy

television as the resource through which they ‘regularly learned’ about the US presidential campaign. Only 23 percent mentioned the traditional network newscasts, a shift from 9 and 39 percent, respectively, in 2000 (Pew, 2004). In particular, *The Daily Show* was noted by many respondents as a primary example of this move away from traditional sources. Media outlets quickly picked up on the results and ran articles questioning what this meant for journalism, an impetus to self-reflection. This study also foretold the rise of academic investigation into the program.⁶

The commonality between the journalistic and academic fields was that in both, the 21 percent statistic from the Pew poll was ubiquitous. That interpretation of the results was a bit misleading did not stop a popular myth forming around young viewers and their preference for consuming ‘fake’ news (Jones, 2010). The survey provided a rationale for media observers to ask a fundamental question about the program, a question which has been re-asked and re-adapted in many guises since. Simply put, people wanted to know: is this news? This became the principle emphasis in academic discussions of *TDS*, which tended to focus on its news value or its degree of similarity with journalism.

From a political standpoint, *The Daily Show* stands firmly at the crossroads of debates over the politicisation of entertainment and the stylisation of news and politics (e.g. Corner and Pels, 2003; Van Zoonen, 2005; Riegert, 2007). Much academic work which focuses specifically on *The Daily Show* investigates the program in this light, discussing its impact on political engagement and attitudes towards the political process. One such case was a forum held during the National Communication Association’s annual conference in 2006, which interrogated the claim by Hart and Hartelius (2007) that Stewart’s cynical approach to discuss politics was a threat to democracy, resulting in mistrust and antipathy. Similar arguments have been made by Bennett (2007) and Baumgartner and Morris (2006), though Bennett argues that the context and the intended audience of the program may mitigate this effect. The opposite position is pursued by authors such as Hariman (2007), who asserts that Stewart’s comedic yet cynical take illustrates the equivalency between the average citizen and politicians, promoting re-engagement.

Another prominent academic thrust is to consider *The Daily Show* vis-à-vis traditional news sources and, through content analysis, attempt to judge whether its coverage is comparable. Authors such as Fox et al. (2007) and Brewer and Marquardt (2007) conduct such studies, finding a reasonably similar level of ‘serious’ content. To sum, the majority of content-based studies are focussed on answering the question: does this do as traditional news does?

The other primary thrust of academic work is to consider the media criticism aspect of the program. For instance, Feldman (2007: 407) takes a look at the broader popularization of *The Daily Show* and considers how industry discourse about the program’s media criticism allows the journalism community to examine its own practices. Borden and Tew (2007) make an argument that parallels this, noting that Stewart and Stephen Colbert are better viewed as media critics rather than journalists.

Of course, *The Daily Show* is both news substitute and news criticism. It can be conceptualized as ‘faux’ news (Peters, 2009: 216); *faux*, in this usage having a different sense than its direct English translation of ‘false’, as we see in terms such as *faux* fur or *faux* leather (an imitation based on a dissatisfaction with the killing of animals); or in the sense of a painting in the trompe l’oeil style (a *faux* front which blurs the real and its representation); or in the sense of *faux amis* in foreign languages (words which look similar but have very different meanings). The rise of *TDS* as a mainstay of television

comedy must accordingly be evaluated in terms of this critical component. The show acts as a discursive point of resistance to mainstream rationales of knowledge and power (cf. Foucault, 1980), specifically, its gaze seems focused upon deconstructing the ‘staged’ aspects of political and journalistic performance (see Corner and Pels, 2003). Jones and Baym (2010: 281f) push this analysis in a slightly different direction, conceptualising *TDS* not just as the zenith of news and entertainment blurring, but as a ‘neo-modern approach to public affairs’ that pursues modernist questions of truth and accountability in a postmodern format; a form of contemporary political talk with greater ‘authenticity’ than its cable news equivalents. The remainder of this chapter adopts a similar logic to interrogate how *TDS* goes beyond being just ‘newsy’ content for its audience. By looking to its function with reference to the news media, what becomes apparent is that *TDS* acts as a form of public pedagogy at a time when core news values appear tenuous and hard to sustain (see Henry, 2008; McChesney and Nichols, 2010). The idea of pedagogy implies an underlying premise that it is not enough to just look at the content of *TDS*; one needs to infer what epistemological ‘work’ its viewers – or perhaps more appropriately fans – are expected do with its lessons.

Media Literacy and *The Daily Show*

At a time when news organizations are fretting about declining consumption and the disappearance of young viewers, *TDS* seems to provide evidence that there is still implicit value, status, and appetite amongst younger generations for news values that dovetail with the modernist goals of 20th-century objectivity. Costera Meijer (2007) notes that young people still hold the promise of professional journalism sacrosanct, use its conventions to readily distinguish between quality and trivial coverage, and report that watching ‘real’ news (if only occasionally) gives them a feeling of doing something productive. They may find themselves more engaged by alternative forms of news, but they don’t want this to come at the expense of journalism’s core ideals. Although journalism in the 21st century appears subject to a trend in reflexive modernity whereby institutions begin to encourage an appearance of involvement with their audiences/clients (see Giddens, 1994), studies like these, or the response to the *Daily Show*’s popular indictment of cable news, seem to indicate that there is a ‘tipping point’ whereby excessive interaction or dramatization comes to be seen as violating the journalism industry’s fundamental mandate.

Of course, this is not a challenge exclusive to journalism. In law, taking a victim’s mental anguish into account has become standard practice in recent years, but it is assumed this should not come at the expense of justice. In medicine, allowing patient involvement in selecting treatment is de rigeur, but it is assumed this should not come at the expense of health. In journalism, involvement on behalf of the journalist may have become commonplace, but not at the expense of truth. Put otherwise, much of what passes for communication on cable news is concerned with generating affect and response, rather than engaging in the pursuit of ‘truthful’ communication, which is a misplaced embrace of subjectivity. What is witnessed on *The Daily Show* is an apparent attempt to redress the imbalance between involvement and truth-claims that is evident on cable news. As Stewart noted in his closing address at the Rally to Restore Sanity (2010b),

We live now in hard times, not end times. And we can have animus, and not be enemies. But unfortunately, one of our main tools in delineating the two broke. The country’s 24-hour, politico-pundit perpetual panic “conflictinator” did not cause our problems, but its existence makes solving them that much harder. The press can hold its magnifying glass up to our problems, bringing them into focus,

illuminating issues heretofore unseen. Or they can use that magnifying glass to light ants on fire, and then perhaps host a week of show on the “dangerous, unexpected flaming-ants epidemic!” If we amplify everything, we hear nothing.

As Stewart deconstructs the techniques of Fox News, CNN, MSNBC, and CNBC on a nightly basis, what is surprising is that by displaying cable news’ foibles and faux pas, *TDS* finds a receptive audience who appears to yearn for ‘authentic’ displays of truth in a more ‘reflexive’ age (Jones, 2010). The ascendancy of cable news and *TDS* dovetails, and much of the latter is based upon a critique of the former.

Learning About Cable News

When one browses the top video clips of *The Daily Show* in its online library, what immediately becomes striking is how often these are tagged with keywords such as ‘Cable News’, ‘Media’, ‘Pundits’, and so forth. Of those clips viewed more than 1,000,000 times (15 clips in total), 13 take cable news as their primary focus.⁷ The other two emphasize politics, more in the vein of ‘traditional’ satire.⁸ If one expands the search to consider all clips with 100,000 or more views, Fox News and various Fox News’ personalities are, unsurprisingly, the most prominent target, although CNN, CNBC (especially a much-watched interview with Jim Cramer), and MSNBC also figure prominently. Of the 340 clips tagged as ‘Fox News’ in *TDS* video archive, 101 of these have been viewed 100,000 times or more.⁹

The primary techniques to establish discourses on cable news on *TDS* are redaction (combining and juxtaposing various clips to demonstrate inconsistency, change of position, and so forth), host-based parody (impersonating the mannerisms or interpreting the thoughts of various hosts), reportage-based parody (field pieces that imitate cable news’ techniques), and interview (direct questioning and engagement with cable news personalities). With these approaches, Stewart crafts three overlapping discourses that serve as lessons about the practices and ethos of cable news.

A *discourse of hypocrisy* is the dominant formulation that *TDS* crafts surrounding Fox News, and is rarely formed around the other major networks. Simply put, hypocrisy points out those instances when the position of various hosts – who take avowed positions in their programming about social issues – suddenly reverse their position or demonstrate inconsistency. Typically, this is done through redaction, counterpoising the previous declarations of hosts against the current stances, something which has become increasingly commonplace since the change in Presidential administrations in 2008. *TDS*’s redactions point to coverage that is based not around finding truth from facts, but about shaping facts to fit one’s truth. Accordingly it reinforces lessons on foundational aspects of the journalistic mandate: neutrality, factuality, honesty, and integrity.

A *discourse of disingenuousness* is a second clear articulation crafted by Stewart in his treatment of cable news, and encompasses all major cable networks in its critique. Disingenuousness points to the disconnect between the stated journalistic aims of the networks and their actual performance. From seemingly manufactured, faux outrage on Fox, to fawning, rather than hard-hitting, financial journalism on CNBC, to CNN’s soft news techniques despite its hard news posture, Stewart demonstrates for *Daily Show* audiences that the stated promises of cable news are not being delivered. In essence, a discourse of disingenuousness makes the claim that cable news networks are treating audiences condescendingly. In terms of the current debates on the news industry, these

lessons impart to audiences what the rightful expectations of journalistic conduct should be in a commercial landscape.

One last discourse worth mentioning is that of *superficiality*. Much like disingenuousness, superficiality points to a patronising treatment of audiences on behalf of journalists. By showing explicit cases of infotainment, inane ‘happy talk’ and banter, token implementation of audience interaction and similar actions, Stewart points out the lack of serious content or lack of serious engagement on behalf of the cable networks. While only a small subset of the video clips on *TDS*, these redactions make visible many of the criticisms often formed under the rubric of infotainment.

Reaffirming the Core Goals of Journalism

For some time, there has been speculation that presentation is beginning to outstrip content in the so-called ‘serious’ press; the result being a merging of the supposed bifurcation of the serious from the popular within journalism (see Franklin, 1997; Kovach and Rosenstiel, 1999; Delli Carpini and Williams, 2001). The irony of this, with respect to *The Daily Show*, is that despite ostensibly exemplifying this trend, the show appears quite cynical towards such a development vis-à-vis professional journalism. The target of its discontent, cable news, is a sphere where the ‘blurring’ of news with entertainment is often unmistakable. And when we take a closer look at *The Daily Show*, and its treatment of cable news, what becomes strikingly evident is its promotion of a classically modernist stance on the purpose of the press. As audiences become savvier to media techniques, what stands out about *TDS* is how it tries to (re)assert ethical norms into the public discourse on the purpose of the journalism. Stewart not only critiques cable news, he attempts to teach his audience how to think about journalism.

Based upon their ubiquity and audience response, it is reasonable to say that the deconstruction of cable news is the signature dish of *The Daily Show*. Yet the recipe borrows upon a set of ingredients passed down from the modernist hallmarks of ‘traditional’ journalism (Hallin, 1992). Stewart does not directly compare and contrast cable news to the hallmarks of professionalism, such as the *CBS Evening News* under Cronkite, nor does he contrast their reports to the most robust examples of investigative journalism, such as Watergate. Instead he relies upon the strength, stability and resilience of fourth estate-type discourses on the purpose of news, and utilises this invisible – but not absent – formation to put forth a coherent critique. There are possible ancillary effects, beyond entertainment, that come from *TDS* relentlessly underscoring the tension between cable news’ claims to integrity and its everyday performance. While it is perhaps unsurprising that journalistic outlets and news blogs take great interest in Stewart’s deconstructions of the cable news industry (journalism has long been, as Zelizer (1993b) notes, its own interpretive community) the fact that online clips of these redactions can draw millions of views after their original broadcast means that many young people are devoting significant time, perhaps unwittingly, to developing a critical lens to view this sector of the news industry.

Amidst a shifting journalistic field, a critical form of news satire – as we get with ‘faux’ newscaster Stewart on *The Daily Show* or the ‘truthy’ news pundit Stephen Colbert on *The Colbert Report* – is not just an alternative avenue for reasoning with the facts of the day. It is also a form of media pedagogy that outlines the inappropriateness of much current journalism. These programs, which appeal to a young demographic apparently disaffected with the news (Minditch, 2005), implicitly assert how press coverage *should be*. In effect, what the redactions, parodies, and interviews on *TDS* create is a fairly clear

articulation about cable news; an avowedly normative discourse which characterises these outlets through their opposition to ‘proper’ journalism. More specifically, the redactions on *TDS* have the effect of summarising the dispersion of techniques, statements, and perspectives which appear on Fox News, CNN, CNBC, and MSNBC to craft a discursive formation that situates the performative discourse of cable news within the broader journalistic field.

Moments when the actions of Stewart transcend his typical audience to engender a broader discussion on journalistic policy and performance, as when he went on *Crossfire* to criticize the format of political ‘debate’ on CNN;¹⁰ or when he critiqued CNBC for their sycophantic reporting on the financial industry;¹¹ or when he held the Rally to Restore Sanity,¹² spread and potentially stabilize this discourse. When this is paired alongside the growing distrust many people have with journalism, what we witness is a concerted effort on *TDS* to (re)articulate the bifurcation between ‘serious’ and ‘populist’ news styles.

In effect, by clarifying the place of cable news within the journalistic register, *TDS* instructs its viewers on the democratic purpose of journalism in an age of fragmentation, proliferating styles, and waning public trust. Though faux news, *TDS*’s critique of cable news (re)confirms 20th-century discourses that valorise gravitas, accountability, proportionality, consistency and journalistic rigour for a generation that was not alive when this ‘objectivity regime’ was at its zenith (Schudson, 2001; Ward, 2004). Through the enduring strength of this established myth of serious journalism, Stewart positions cable news as serious journalism’s ‘other’. If we expand upon the contentions of Jones and Baym (2010) above, that *TDS* is a neo-modern approach to public affairs, we could say that *The Daily Show* is program that promotes modernist values, using a postmodern format, to act as both watchdog and educator on the ‘amodern’ practices of contemporary cable news.

What Do News Audiences Want?

Journalists are taught to distrust what they are told, and think it’s a good thing, yet seem deeply troubled when the public begins to distrust them. When this supposed loss of trust is amplified by economic cutbacks and uncertainty, the outlook by many is understandably bleak. As debate swirls around what journalism can do to staunch its ‘crisis’, media outlets have responded by experimenting with style, increasing access and involvement with audiences, and altering content. Many of these changes, at least in terms of their implementation by cable news, are often viewed with scepticism to outright scorn on *The Daily Show*.

Many journalistic organizations are quite muddled in the world they now find themselves; a world where experience and expertise become synonymous, fact and opinion are muddled, and truthiness (validity determined by personal feelings of truth) comes to the fore. Van Zoonen (2012) summarizes these trends in public discourse under the notion of the rise of ‘Epistemology, wherein personal experience is offered up as incontrovertible justification of knowledge. When one considers this in conjunction with the financial pressures facing journalism, it seems quite reasonable for pessimism. This chapter has resisted this urge, arguing that *The Daily Show* can be viewed as a popular instance of a broader trend towards educating audiences (or citizens or consumers, depending on one’s perspective), into the practices and conventions of mass media. The

lessons it imparts reemphasize laudable goals such as accuracy, proportionate coverage, and critical reportage at a time of ‘crisis’ in the industry.

The Daily Show is simultaneously an alternative source of news, a form of media criticism, and a populist ‘module’ on media literacy that promotes a modernist perspective on media awareness to a young audience that does not yet have a fixed relationship with journalism. It is an audience that, in all likelihood, experiences disillusionment by what Stewart shows them. However, it is an audience that is also being given information on much of the ‘news’ of the day while being taught how to ‘read’ media and how to ‘know’ journalism in parallel. In essence, *TDS* is an emerging form of news but it’s more than that; it represents a critical, cultural pedagogy about the fundamental ethics of journalism.

As Giroux (2000) notes, many acts of cultural work should be viewed as anchoring themselves on the premise of justice. In the case of *TDS*, the site of debate is over what a ‘just’ journalism should look like. Of course, it is not only Stewart who marshals this rhetoric, implicitly or explicitly, about what journalism should be. The cultural work which underlies the cable magazines that dominate Fox News and MSNBC also involves proffering claims of journalistic superiority (Peters, 2010). So how can audiences be expected to separate the wheat from the chaff if every outlet claims to be wheat? One hopes that as rates of media literacy improve in general, perhaps fewer news consumers will face a sort of ‘anosognosic’s dilemma’ (Morris, 2010), wherein their unawareness of what constitutes ‘quality’ journalism – or, in this chapter’s terms, news illiteracy – is so pronounced that they cannot even recognize that they are unaware.

This is not exactly a revolutionary pronouncement; growing audience awareness of the processes and conventions in other media industries, from entertainment to advertising, have resulted in more creative, transparent, interactive, and hypertextual media products appearing over the past few decades. And although hype and promotion can still give ‘poorly’ made products a chance, audiences seem remarkably savvy in terms of denigrating and dismissing the poorly-reviewed film or television series while elevating and supporting the critically-received. In this sense, much of the future of ‘quality’ journalism lies in the hands of audiences to not only recognize but to desire and demand thoroughly-researched, civically-relevant, critically-acclaimed, news.

This probably means the news industry needs to adopt a bimodal strategy. The first aspect is to figure out some way to clearly distinguish high quality (not to be confused with elite), journalism products for different audiences. Every news organization marshals the discourse of quality under one guise or another nowadays – news you can trust, news you need, fair and balanced, and so forth – so it is the duty of reputable news organizations and journalists, probably as a collective, to promote actions or standards that make such ‘superiority’ visible; perhaps this means institutionalizing distinction in some manner so as to make it more perceptible for audiences. The second approach is to encourage support through indirect funding or complimentary financing. Journalism is already recognized as a public good in many countries – a foundation it would be wise to reinforce – but it could do a better job promoting itself as a necessary public service like medicine, education, or academic research. If the industry could forge stronger partnerships and lobby more effectively for government and trust-based funding (say by applying for framework grants to produce children’s news for use in schools), it might not be quite so exposed to the invisible but unforgiving hand of the market.

Notes

1. Photographic compilations can be found on various internet sites. These were selected from the *Huffington Post* at: http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2010/10/30/the-funniest-signs-at-the_n_776490.html
2. An old maxim to aspiring journalists states: 'if your mother says she loves you, check it out.'
3. This understanding, borrowed from Bauman (2000: 123), is that 'the way learning is structured determines how individuals learn to think' (see also Deuze 2006d).
4. Jon Stewart replaced the former host of *The Daily Show*, Craig Kilborn, in 1999.
5. Foremost among these, at least in the United States, is the annual Project for Excellence in Journalism report of the same name. Within academia, international conferences with titles such as 'Future of Journalism' or 'Journalism Research in the Public Interest' are increasingly held.
6. In 2004, when the Pew survey was released, there were no peer-reviewed articles on the program. A standard academic database search would only uncover a five-page political communication opinion article that mentioned *The Daily Show* in passing. At the end of 2006, when the *Daily Show* was incorporated into a research project I was conducting on emerging forms of broadcast news (Peters, 2009), three peer-review articles had appeared which took it as a primary focus. By 2011, this number had climbed to 41. [Figures confirmed by an EBSOhost search of peer-reviewed articles, with 'Daily Show' as keyword or in abstract, March 1, 2011.]
7. Search conducted at <http://www.thedailyshow.com/videos> on September 2, 2011.
8. It is fairly evident that we can speak of 'fake' news being or quickly becoming a recognized broadcast genre. A quick Wikipedia search indicates its international scope, with programs being launched in Australia, Belgium, Canada, Chile, France, Germany, Israel, the Philippines, Portugal, Russia, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, Turkey, the UK and US in recent years. While this is mere speculation, I assume that, unlike *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report*, many programs take the satirizing of current events and politics, as opposed to satirizing the *news media's coverage of these events*, as their primary point-of-departure. However, the performative style of traditional newscasts is often utilised in such programs for comedic effect (ie. mock gravitas).
9. Survey conducted on March 1, 2011.
10. A clip of the exchange can be found at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aFQFB5YpDZE>. As of July 3, 2011, this clip had been viewed 3,842,507 times.
11. This clip, available at: <http://www.thedailyshow.com/watch/wed-march-4-2009/cnbc-financial-advice>, is the second-most viewed clip ever on the *TDS*'s official website, with 2,097,143 views as of July 3, 2011.
12. A Google search for 'Rally to Restore Sanity' returns 4,390,000 hits, as of July 3, 2011.

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