The Daily Show: Journalism’s Jester

by

Mark R. McCarthy

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Department of Humanities
College of Arts and Sciences
University of South Florida

Co-Major Professor Daniel Belgrad, Ph.D.
Co-Major Professor Margit Grieb, Ph.D.
A. David Payne, Ph.D.

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Dedication

This work is dedicated to Jimmy for keeping me on task by asking me “shouldn’t you graduate first?” each time my attention would stray.
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ABSTRACT

The social meaning of television news has been under transformation since the successes of cable news in the final years of the previous century. In their attempts to preserve viewership and to remain relevant, traditional broadcast news outlets increasingly emulate the conventions of cable news. Instead of retaining audiences, the result has been declining news content and a continued loss of viewers. Amid these industry transformations, the concept of “journalist” continues to undergo change. This evolution of the news allows for a decidedly unique response to news programming in The Daily Show With Jon Stewart. Though advertised as a half-hour comedy show, it has established itself as a consistent re-teller and producer of news, only possible in a post-modern era of journalism after objectivity. Amid the industry’s shift in priorities from objectivity and reporting to influencing, framing and re-telling the news, The Daily Show is considered as much an example of journalism as many of the shows currently in the news sphere. Although our society is currently saturated with information, this information often fails to penetrate the surface of the issues covered.
Too much information is as paralytic as ignorance. Recently, attention has shifted towards a re-evaluation of television news into something that will both help the public find the information they are searching for and give them the tools to make sense of and utilize that information. This concept of journalism as tool is present in every episode of *The Daily Show*. The show encourages viewers to peel away the layers of mediation of traditional newscasts, to recognize substance and the lack thereof, and become active consumers of information rather than passive receptacles submersed in irrelevant information. *The Daily Show* proves that a news show can inform, entertain and teach audiences how to critically process television as an informational medium.
Introduction

Beginning in 1990 with the rise of cable news, the social meaning of television news has undergone significant transformation. Since that time, traditional broadcast news outlets have been emulating the conventions of cable news in a struggle to remain relevant. Instead of retaining audiences, the result has been declining news content and a continued loss of viewers. Simultaneously, cable news programming continues to enjoy a steady increase in viewership, unaffected by the efforts of traditional broadcasters. Critics argue that this comes at the cost of actual news content, as hype and theatrics receive significantly more airtime. Concurrently, the concept of “journalist” is also changing, something not without historical precedent, as almost every new technology relevant to the news industry has had an impact on its meaning. The introduction of cable is no different. Arguably, the number of performing journalists now equals that of professional journalists in television news. Underlying these changes are the economic concerns that represent the industry’s primary focus.

The evolution of the news allows for a decidedly unique response to news programming as evidenced in the approach taken by The Daily Show with Jon Stewart. Though advertised as a half-hour comedy show, it has established itself as a consistent re-teller and producer of news, only possible in a post-modern era of journalism which does not have objectivity as its primary concern. That is not to say there is no longer objectivity in journalism, just that the myth of objectivity is being replaced with an
acknowledgement that pure objectivity never existed. Amid the industry’s shift in priorities from objectivity and reporting to influencing, framing and re-telling the news, *The Daily Show* can be considered as much an example of journalism as many of the shows currently in the news sphere. In fact, a study published in the Journal of Broadcasting and Electronic Media examined the 2004 Presidential election coverage and found that only 28% of network newscasts were substantive, and that *The Daily Show* coverage was substantive 22% of the time. The faux news format of *The Daily Show* serves as both a joke about, as well as a gateway into, the news industry.

The show first aired in 1996, but has undergone significant transformation since then, and the current format more focused on politics and media, owes much of its popularity to the addition of Jon Stewart as anchor in 1999. The show has an approximate following of 1.6 million viewers for four nights of the week, with additional programming devoted to political events like the Republican and Democratic National Conventions and election night. Since the addition of comedian *cum* journalist Jon Stewart, it has morphed into a news show framed by comedy.

By pairing a comic format with actual news content and commentary, the show practices what I call “piercing journalism,” making the news relevant again without further sacrificing content. By “piercing” I am alluding to a comment from *The Daily Show* contributor Lewis Black, that “the show teaches people to watch the news with a jaded eye.” But unlike Black’s weary eye, I argue the eye being developed is actually sharper than before, more akin to a laser that is able to penetrate the mediating layers of television news and politics.

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1 All television is necessarily mediated since any event displayed is a representation, rather than an actual experiencing of that event.
In a continuous display of self-reflexivity, *The Daily Show* emphasizes mutually beneficial changes from within the system, rather than promoting the outright destruction and subsequent renewal. To this end *The Daily Show* mocks the attempts of cable and network news to establish authenticity and authority through various performance techniques that are more subject to economics than to creating meaningful experiences. The show is almost wholly dependent on the industry itself, and hence aims to counteract the tendencies it sees as unhealthy to the system rather than completely breaking down the system. It practices critique from within the system rather than against it.

Audiences and industry professionals alike have embraced the show for saying what they are thinking. Brian Williams, anchor of *NBC Nightly News* explained his view of *The Daily Show’s* place in the news world when he stated “Jon is the vitamin supplement. We are the main meal.” In fact, *The Daily Show* is an attractive alternative at a time when critics charge the news as failing in its most basic duty, which they see as promoting an informed viewership.

The popular concept that a properly functioning American democracy requires a free press working to create an informed populace has been embraced since Thomas Jefferson expressed it over two centuries ago. Direct government support of this ideal has included freedom of the press in the first amendment to the U.S. Constitution, mandated primary and secondary education, and government initiatives to support higher education. Theorist Henry Milner updates the concept that American democracy requires an active

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5 This is not without controversy or misconceptions, like when Fox News correspondent Geraldo Rivera erroneously commented that Jon Stewart and Steven Colbert “make a living putting on videos of old ladies slipping on ice and people laughing… They exist in a small little place where they count for nothing” (O’Reilly 2006). Oddly, this comment was during a conversation between Rivera and Bill O’Reilly (both of whom found early success through sensationalism) in which they lament the media’s joy in the sufferings of celebrity.
free press by advocating what he calls civic literacy, the ability for a populace to demonstrate “the knowledge and skills to act as competent citizens.” Milner rightly asserts that without civic literacy, the public not only lacks political knowledge but also the willingness to participate in the political process. An illiterate public is excluded in the political decision-making process, which, in turn, reinforces a cycle marked by a lack of interest and disenfranchisement. The Daily Show, through its unique synthesis of humor and “civic literature” invites the audience to participate in the important endeavors that build and maintain the foundations of a functioning American democracy.

Although our society seems currently saturated with information, this information often fails to penetrate the surface of the issues covered. Too much information can be as paralytic as ignorance. The current state of news relies on celebrities, punditry, repetition, and opinion. This coupled with its emphasis on sensationalism serves to distract audiences from the lack of context and substantive content in the programming. Instead, television news relies on media-savvy devices to create the illusion of substance. In order to break through the levels of deception, audiences must learn to understand how and what information to process, question the veracity of sources, and draw logical conclusions. Recently, attention has shifted towards such a re-evaluation of television news through groups like the Pew Center for the People and the Press. Their 2008 State of the Media report reflects the root of my argument, that “[j]ournalism also must help citizens find what they are looking for, react to it, sort it, shape news coverage, and — probably most important and least developed — give them tools to make sense of and use the information for themselves.” While I will argue many reasons why The Daily Show
should be considered journalism, the idea of journalism as tool is present in every episode of *The Daily Show*.

*The Daily Show*, aided by its comedic premise, encourages viewers to peel away the layers of mediation of traditional newscasts, to recognize substance and the lack thereof, and become active consumers of information rather than passive receptacles submersed in irrelevant information. In his classic lament *Amusing Ourselves To Death*, Neil Postman warned of the risks of television as a medium for religion, news, and political debate since it was conceived, and functions best as, entertainment. Half seriously, Postman suggests that the best chance America has for retaining control over these societal discourses are programs like “Saturday Night Live […] whose intent would be, not to get people to stop watching television but to demonstrate how television ought to be viewed.” Although Postman rejects the long term effectiveness of such a show, noting television’s power to co-opt subversive elements, the success of *The Daily Show* and the equally successful spinoff, *The Colbert Report* challenge this assumption. iii They prove that a news show can inform, entertain and teach audiences how to critically process television as an informational medium.

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iii Postman notes “the parodists would become celebrities, would star in movies, and would end up making television commercials” (Postman, 162).
Chapter One: Foundations

What Is News & Why Bother to Define It?

For most consumers of news, definitions are rarely necessary, most often only being done in the negative. For most, the definition of news is as simple as “I know it when I see it” but only used in conjunction with what news is not. Lance Bennett explains the concept of “news” as simply what the newsmakers choose to report on and a public chooses to consume. Since the news is just a construct between these two parties there is no universal definition of what can be called news and divergent news sources should be embraced more readily. Almost two centuries ago, when the primary newsmakers in America were the political machines, news content had a clear political slant and the stories were interpreted through the party’s ideology. As the audience’s taste moved away from direct political campaigning the machines stopped supporting these papers, contributing to a lack of economic sustainability of such papers. Similar transactions between the newsmakers and news consumers have caused the ebb and flow in periods of sensational, personal interest, investigative, and most recently celebrity news. Again, the importance of this lay in that many who discount voices outside of the mainstream do it by highlighting what is not news to them. The addition of comedy makes The Daily Show seem like “non-news” to some. Similarly, non-Latino observers may deem a Spanish language newscast as less credible due to the language barrier or cultural conventions. The point being, as long as the newsmakers and consumers are in agreement as to what is news, effort should not be spent on discounting that agreement.
Such energy would be more productively spent exploring the depth of content.

Since the definition of news is not fixed, it is not surprising that “less serious” forms of news have existed. In 1835, the *New York Sun* printed a series of articles revealing the presence of moon men that were observed by a powerful new telescope. The series was, of course, a hoax, but it netted the paper a record circulation and no ill will from the public. The news industry understood that investing in these “non serious” stories, they could reach new readers and grow their relationship with existing ones. This trend of newspaper-sponsored hoaxes would continue for nearly one hundred years, until objectivity, real or perceived, became the stated goal of any news organization. A hoax was not considered in line with the lofty goals of journalism as profession and practically disappeared altogether.

In the United States, it was not until a *Saturday Night Live* sketch aired, Weekend Update, that fake news with a humorous slant would again enjoy a mass audience. Unlike fake stories printed in newspapers, however, Weekend Update works within a comedic framework that uses real news stories as the setup for a quick joke. The success of this type of sketch comedy allowed for the emergence of *The Daily Show*, which is in fact a synthesis of Weekend Update and the earlier newspaper hoaxes. While print media relies on historical precedence for its authority, *The Daily Show* plays with postmodern ideas of projected authority using performance to mock its use in televised news programming. Instead of the relatively superficial treatment of stories on Weekend Update, *The Daily Show*’s commentaries are more in-depth, written under the assumption that the audience maintains a certain knowledge of current events.
What is a Journalist

For many of the same reasons that it is important to have a working definition of the news, so too is it important to define the term journalist. The American public seems to agree that Jon Stewart is a journalist. In 2007 Stewart ranked in the top ten favorite journalists among PEW respondents. In the study, Stewart was reported to be as admired as Dan Rather, Tom Brokaw, Brian Williams, and Anderson Cooper, all of whom appear on major national news programs.

The PEW study only represents one half of the news production/reception mechanism made up of news consumers and news producers. In order to better understand The Daily Show in the eyes of news industry professionals, it is useful to summarize the groundbreaking work of Erik Ugland and Jennifer Henderson, Who Is a Journalist and Why Does it Matter? Disentangling the Legal and Ethical Arguments. According to Ugland and Henderson, the question “who is a journalist” is more nuanced than it initially appears and therefore they make a distinction between those interested in legal definitions and those concerned with professional ethics. By making this initial distinction one can better understand the term within a specific framework rather than trying to find a universal definition. With regard to professional ethics Ugland and Henderson make it a point to clarify that in making “threshold distinctions that seem to represent the logical cut-lines in this domain” those distinctions are “unavoidably imperfect” since “within the broader interpretive frameworks we apply to all information…. there are potentially as many definitions of journalist as there are consumers of journalism.” Nonetheless, these distinctions are constantly being made by consumers and professionals alike in order to establish the credibility of news sources,
which is why it is important to understand where Jon Stewart resides within this framework.

In understanding the definition within professional ethics Ugland and Henderson dissect the term into “tiers that take account of different communicators’ unique goals, tactics, and values.”\(^{14}\) These tiers are labeled “top-level,” “second-level,” and “public communicator.”\(^{15}\) The top-level and second-level journalist are focused on a more constant “dissemination of truthful, newsworthy information.”\(^{16}\) In contrast, the public communicator disseminates “newsworthy information to others, but in a sporadic and unregimented way… only occasionally or without a permanent media presence…” An example of public communicator would be a successful businessman giving a public address. It is the notion of a second-level journalist that is so useful to The Daily Show, as the second-level journalist is described as being “engaged in a more regular, systematic, and conspicuous dissemination of news… their efforts are continuous and their contributions are made with some predictability and purpose…”\(^{17}\) However, unlike top-level journalists, they do not adhere to the “standards of practice and core values that have traditionally defined the profession…” In other words, the first level often wishes to distinguish itself through professional training, education, affiliation, and adherence to standards of practice. It is within this framework that Henderson and Ugland characterize Jon Stewart as a journalist.

It is important to note that there have been attempts to avoid classifying Stewart as a journalist by classifying him as a media critic instead. Sandra Borden and Chad Tew’s work, The Role of Journalist and the Performance of Journalism: Ethical Lessons From “Fake” News ( Seriously), note “Cable TV journalists altered their journalistic
performance to attract a larger audience; they became more sensational, ego-driven, trivial, entertaining, and manipulative."\textsuperscript{18} It is their contention that Stewart “routinely challenge[s] cable news journalists for the role-appropriateness of their performances” as a response to these altered performances.\textsuperscript{19} It is their understanding that these challenges by Stewart to other media entities classify them as critics; this seems myopic, as it discounts a journalist’s ability to be multifaceted, as well as their own assertion that the journalists in question altered their own performances yet remained journalists. Stewart has merely expanded the definition further, making it clear that the behaviors of media organizations and their entities are newsworthy. Such reflection is no different than the reporting done in the wake of the Judith Miller or Jason Blair cases in which the news industry focused critique inward.\textsuperscript{iv} Indeed Borden and Tew recognize this self-regulating function of journalists; they simply place Stewart somewhat outside of this process, as what they call a “quasi insider” at best. This attitude may suggest a bit of arrogance that, unlike the industries and agencies journalists report on, the journalistic profession and industry is beyond such critical examination.

Borden and Tew’s narrow definition also minimizes the importance of journalists within the American democratic system. Many have referred back to the words of certain founding fathers to remind Americans of the important role the press has historically played. The oft-referenced Fourth Estate exists both to inform the public and provide another layer of checks and balances as protected by the First Amendment.\textsuperscript{20} Given the general consensus that a healthy press is required for a functioning democracy, Borden and Tew’s recognition of self-regulation has implications beyond the news industry.

\textsuperscript{iv} Jason Blair resigned from the New York Times in 2003, after it was learned that he had plagiarized and fabricated parts of his stories. Judith Miller was implicated for her potential role in the outing of CIA operative Valerie Plame.
The Way It Wasn’t

Many critics commenting on the state of modern news refer back to a golden age of standards and excellence when integrity and objectivity ruled the industry. Yet, even a cursory look back shows that such an age is more grounded in nostalgia than reality. As the nineteenth century drew to a close, the consolidation strategies adopted in other economic sectors were also applied to the newspaper industry.

At the turn of the century there existed thousands of newspapers in the United States, most with clearly discernable political views representing the most radical of both ends of the ideological spectrum and everything in between. According to Mitchell Stephens, Professor of Journalism and Mass Communication at New York University, there were about 7,000 newspapers in 1880, but that number decreased significantly in the first half of the twentieth century. At one point New York City boasted twenty daily newspapers, by 1940 it had dropped to eight. During the same period twenty-five cities in the United States with a population of more than 100,000 would have only one daily newspaper.21

While consolidation cut costs and increased efficiency, the newspapers faced a crisis of credibility. If the papers were seen to be just the mouthpieces of their wealthy owners, they would never find the mass audience required to sustain their growth. The solution was to create a separation between management and the editorial staff aimed at fostering the development of professional journalism. Journalists also saw the benefits of management/editorial separation that included increased job status, better compensation, and more autonomy in their positions.22 The zeitgeist valued a scientific and professional approach to most endeavors in the United States. Schools of journalism began to appear,
and with them respect and credibility for the profession. In 1904 the University of Missouri established the first of these schools, and by 1923 they numbered twenty.

Media Scholar Michael Schudson notes that concurrent with the proliferation of journalism schools, “Journalism, like most professions, developed a set of business practices first, then endowed those practices with impressive professional rationalizations, and finally proceeded to rewrite its history in ways that made the practices seem to emerge from an inspiring set of professional ideals.” 23 Those practices focused on facts and accuracy, and following the basic who, what, when, where, how, and why framework of a story. 24 The rules of objectivity were ostensibly clear: “news and opinion should be kept apart.” Practically though, there was a need for “the color” to support and illustrate those facts. This color could include embellishment, opinion, and “images he [the reporter] had not witnessed and had no direct testimony about” as long as the embellishments were of “non-essentials.” 25

Considering the gap between explicit guidelines and actual practice, it is not surprising that the industry and audiences lack a clear understanding of objectivity’s role in journalism. This gap appears to have had an influence on the Society of Professional Journalists current code of ethics that strives for the more attainable goal of journalists to be “honest, fair and courageous in gathering, reporting and interpreting information.” 26 While eliminating bias completely is neither possible nor practical, the separation between management and editorial staff did have the effect of lessening the influence the owner had over content. These practices and the availability of telegraphed news stories from varied sources allowed newspapers to address a larger number of political views, enhancing the image of objectivity, and thus increase circulation.
Historically, the ideal of objectivity has been both pursued and undermined by technological developments, so any look back must also acknowledge those developments. The first major conceptual shift represented a move away from what Neil Postman calls the “typographic mind.” In the mid-nineteenth century the telegraph made it possible to transmit information to a greater number of people and at a faster speed than ever before. According to Postman, technology’s ability to remove the barriers of space and time sped up the news-making process, but technology’s limitations also necessitated a significant sacrifice of context in the news. In practical terms, the telegraph further facilitated a shift away from intricate in-depth pieces. Newspaper owners quickly realized the benefit of such a technology to their business; an entire globe’s worth of irrelevance would ensure they would never want for eye-catching headlines to sell their papers. The news was no longer contextually anchored in the local; to paraphrase Postman, the news was from anywhere, addressed to anyone, yet related to no one in particular. In addition to making global events easily accessible, the telegraph also had a practical impact on the news industry. The job of a journalist was split into two functions, with the reporter on the scene telegraphing, and soon thereafter telephoning, the story to a rewriter. These rewrite men and editors then summarized the day’s events into sensational headlines, which satisfied many as representing the news of the day. In the quest for readership, the facts were employed as much to “entertain as to inform” leading to what sociologist Michael Schudson terms “documentary fiction.”

Concurrent with the transformations brought by the telegraph, the introduction of images served to further shape print journalism. Photographs were first introduced into newspaper copy during the Civil War, though their usage would not become
commonplace until 1897. According to Postman, the effect of photographs in the news was to further de-contextualized it, rather than provide greater illumination. Postman’s interpretation of photography’s effect rests on the idea that images may grant a snapshot of a precise instant but also inherently exclude certain levels of discourse, e.g. conveying the abstract or engaging in content beyond the scope of the lens. Readers were left with what would eventually replace in-depth commentary: a compelling headline and eye-catching photo.

While newspapers delivered the news, turn of the century Americans depended on the radio for their entertainment needs. Soon though, radio would mature as it came to play a decisive role in the U.S. involvement in World War II. Although the European political situation leading up to the German annexation of Austria was clearly of global concern, American media outlets were committed to delivering entertainment, not politics. Edward R. Murrow’s insistence on using the medium for more than relaying European choir recitals and the like ultimately influenced American sensitivity to the increasingly dire situation of the English. Murrow’s drive, and the desire of the fledgling CBS to compete with powerhouse NBC, changed the role of radio for most Americans. Through his radio work in Europe and later Great Britain, Murrow established the basic format of broadcast journalism. Prior to the Anschluss, most reports were written before broadcast and read on air by a single journalist, though sometimes several journalists in different locations would read their written reports in turn, a practice known as a roundup. Murrow updated this by allowing the participants to engage each other in a conversation known as a roundtable rather than taking turns reading a script. These format changes and Murrow’s colorful descriptions highlighted radio’s sense of
immediacy, effectively dissolving the barriers between audience and the media like never before.

Before the widespread adoption of television, newsreels served as the synthesis of print journalism and radio. These filmed news stories, shown on cinema screens, were initially intended for entertainment, and so the newsreels were slow to present anything that could be considered newsworthy in the traditional sense. In fact, the industry paper Variety would state: “The first and only rule of the newsreel is entertainment.” 33 Yet, the format of broadcast journalism was, in part, shaped by the newsreel’s use of dramatic license to interpret and present the news of the Second World War.

In Germany, propaganda newsreels were used to great effect, and their success was seized upon by the American war effort. The newsreel series *The March of Time* used dramatic reenactments and creative editing techniques to present the news. Some of these techniques later became the basic tools for television news reporting. When actual reporting was difficult to arrange, the producers employed locals to act as Nazi soldiers and mixed this with actual news footage, for example. Less apparent was the usage of splicing, juxtaposition, trickery, and hidden cameras to create any desired effect the producers wanted. For example, in an attempt to paint a politically active southern preacher as a fascist zealot the producers alternately faded between his image and that of Mussolini. 34 It could be argued that since newsreels prior to *The March of Time* were the equivalent of the modern tabloid, these techniques were not challenged because the newsreels were using entertainment standards, not the restrictive journalistic code of ethics.
After the war, Murrow successfully brought serious news to television by hosting *See It Now*, a weekly half-hour news program that mirrored the political views of its host. First airing in November of 1951, *See It Now* would transform television news. Newscasts prior to *See It Now* lasted fifteen minutes and mostly consisted of the headlines being read into the camera. *See It Now* was first to feature the split screen interview, adapt Murrow’s radio roundup, and make use of television’s unique ability to broadcast simultaneous images from around the world. As Bob Edwards described, *See It Now* “made a show of television itself. There was no studio set, Ed seated in the control room of Studio 41 surrounded by the tools of the young medium: cameras, monitors, and the control panel […]”³⁵ The show’s practice of acknowledging itself is synonymous with modern news programming.³⁶ Repeatedly cited for its excellence, the show strove to be fair and thorough in its presentation of news stories, rather than invent an image of complete impartiality.

Unlike Murrow’s success in radio, entertainment ultimately prevailed over news programming, mainly due to tensions caused by advertisers wary of the subject matter and the burden imposed by the Fairness Doctrine. The doctrine, an attempt to regulate political speech on the airwaves in order to ensure balance, had the unintended consequence of complicating controversial stories since the doctrine required free airtime to alternate views. The following example is quite telling:

A *See It Now* program on the plight of the small farmer carried the equal-time question to ridiculous lengths. Secretary of Agriculture Ezra Taft Benson insisted the small farmer was not in trouble. He was given a rebuttal program, which he

³⁵ According to Bolter and Grusin, the process of hypermediacy attempts to draw so much attention to the media so that the audience feels part of the process and thus removes the psychological barrier.
used to praise the Eisenhower administration’s farm policy in an election year. This, in turn, upset the Democrats, two of whom were given a program to rebut the Benson program, which rebutted the original program, which was about the small farmer, who by now everyone had forgotten in the political back-and-forth.  

While advertising issues and the Fairness Doctrine were obstacles to the economic viability of television news programming, the impact of the audience’s desire for less serious shows cannot be discounted. Thus, the bifurcation of American news habits between print and television remained slow, and newspapers continued to be the primary source of “serious” information for most Americans.

The nineteen sixties marked another shift in how U.S. viewers obtained the news, as new journalism brought a literary touch to the genre. Audiences and journalists alike began to reject the sterile objectivity of the previous decade, arguing that the fervent insistence concerning objectivity was harmful. Moreover, journalism began to favor critique and investigation over parroting official sources. As it became evident that the United States government was not only willing to lie, but had an implicit right to do so, audiences and journalists quickly lost faith in bedrock institutions. Objectivity itself was now in question, seen as helping to create a system that subverted the truth.

In his work Discovering the News, Michael Schudson outlines the critiques of objectivity, highlighting the perils of relying so heavily on such manufactured detachment. His first point builds on the conviction that “a news story rests on a set of substantive political assumptions.” Secondly, he points out that the format of the news story is biased towards sterile facts that exclude context, processes, and alternative
viewpoints outside of those being presented. Schudson’s third argument centers on one
result of gatekeeping, vi in which official viewpoints are relied upon to the exclusion of
most others. As a result, critical perspectives in journalism became the norm and
interpretive journalism was encouraged in print and broadcast.

The 1980’s marked another shift for the news industry, one that in many ways
mirrored the concurrent neo-conservative tide in politics. Limits on ownership were
diminished, allowing media conglomerates that owned increasingly significant stakes in a
variety of media types to become dominant. The political energy that encouraged critique
was replaced by an economic drive. Once it became clear that news divisions could be
profitable, money became the primary catalyst for significant change in the news
reporting industry. Resource-intensive aspects like investigative journalism were replaced
by celebrity coverage because sensationalist reporting attracts more viewers at a lower
cost. The purchasing and processing of information has displaced in-depth reporting. And
in the case of broadcast news, media personalities play the part of professional journalists
for a fraction of the cost. As a result, the news has returned to its reliance on objectivity
to establish its authority, though not as a professional standard or to assure quality
reporting, but due to objectivity’s usefulness as a selling point, which is in the end, better
for the bottom line.

Moreover, there is the shift away from traditional newsgathering techniques to a
more efficient system of news aggregation, repackaging and dissemination. Much of the
live staff segments and banter are the result of news gathered by independent sources and
used by the newscasts. Viewers are not opposed to this method of newsgathering, as can

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vi First introduced by social psychologist Kurt Lewin to describe how information is filtered by the media. While Schudson and others note the comfortable relationship between the gatekeepers and official sources, that is only one possible result.
be seen by the popularity of news aggregators online (The Drudge Report, Google news, etc). *The Daily Show*’s reliance on the formal news industry is thus not a unique phenomenon, but an example of this trend towards aggregation. *The Daily Show* is in a unique position within the changing news structure, however, in that it actively presents itself firstly as performance and secondarily as an information source.

With the massive changes that occurred in the nineteen-eighties and the rise of cable news in the nineties, a renewed examination of the state of the news industry began. It became clear that the ideal of absolute objectivity in journalism had not been realized nor was it realizable. Instead the drive has been towards transparency and honesty. The Society of Professional Journalists most recent code of ethics states, “Journalists should be honest, fair and courageous in gathering, reporting and interpreting information.” The code continues “Distinguish between advocacy and news reporting. Analysis and commentary should be labeled and not misrepresent fact or context.” However, in their 2005 report on the state of Cable News, the Project for Excellence in Journalism noted 28% of stories included the journalist’s opinion, with Fox at 68%, MSNBC at 27%, and CNN at just 4%. And though there is no such breakdown for 2006 or 2007, the latest report noted “the growth in MSNBC and some individual programs on CNN Headline News seem to be associated with the rise of even sharper opinions.”

In light of the above analysis, perceptions in the United States are not necessarily surprising. A 2006 PEW study showed Republican television viewers found bias in every

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\*\*ii In their 2006 report, The Project for Excellence in Journalism focused on a single news day with similar results: “The study also confirmed another earlier finding, that reporters on cable news are more likely to offer their own opinions about events than other media. Over all, 47% of cable stories on May 11 include reportorial opinion, compared with 14% in the media as a whole… And for the biggest story of the day — the plane scare in Washington — that number jumped to 83%.”
news outlet polled, except Fox News. Conversely, Democrats found Fox News the least credible. Possibly the most telling portion is that neither group found any news outlet (print or broadcast) more credible than 32%. This may be because a majority of Americans polled prefer news without a point of view and the underlying presence of a point of view creates distrust within the audience. In an effort to satisfy the audience desire for opinion free news, cable news outlets often disguise (rather than eliminate) bias in their programming.

For example, cable news programming slogans still cling to the modernist narrative of pure objectivity. Fox News claims to be “fair and balanced” and their promise that “we report, you decide,” clearly implies that their reporting is opinion free and the audience is free to judge for itself. Likewise, CNN touts itself as “the most trusted name in news” and according to CNN general manager and executive vice president Teya Ryan, CNN is “not an opinion network… we do news.” Unfortunately, the numbers show that in fact CNN and their counterparts are perceived as opinion networks. Again, the presence of opinion does not necessarily disqualify programs from delivering reliable news; the attempts to disguise and disavow bias are what erode credibility.

In just over a century the news industry has undergone massive changes, facilitated as much by advancing technology and shifting news tastes as economic undercurrents. The nineteenth century began with massive consolidation within the news industry, then just print, and closed with similar consolidation due to the dominance of cable news. The new century seems to mark another shift, away from the dominance of televised news to a more fragmented system of aggregation and presentation. Competition in this new marketplace has redefined the news as just another form of
entertainment vying for consumer attention. Not surprisingly as the news industry has moved towards entertainment, entertainers have inserted themselves into the news whole for the same reasons.
Chapter Two: The Fox Effect

There is little doubt that the Fox News Channel has changed the way Americans get their news. Fox’s success has prompted changes in style and technique throughout the industry. The line between reporting and opinion is increasingly blurred on the three cable news networks; hype and celebrity displace substance, and personalities replace experience and know-how. While many of the techniques I will discuss were introduced or perfected by Fox News, all of them are the result of an increasingly competitive drive for viewers initiated by the economic success of Fox News. Because the concept of media objectivity has been shown to be more nostalgic fantasy than historical fact, my intent here should not be seen as an attack on Fox News, but rather an attempt to highlight the changes fostered by Fox’s economic successes. These changes forced the news industry to place economic viability alongside their obligations as the source of news, resulting in a more entertaining look and feel. The industry evolved to a point where news blends with entertainment, which allowed for an entertainment show that presents the news, The Daily Show with Jon Stewart.

A cursory review of the state of cable news reveals the impact Fox-inspired techniques and style changes have had on news institutions as a whole. News stories are becoming less in depth in almost every measurable way. There are fewer sources determining what becomes news, fewer viewpoints presenting varying perspectives on stories, less detail in reporting, and less context given in each story. In an effort to maintain credibility while embracing these changes, the networks rely on creative editing,
story placement, visual cues, and technologies to maintain the façade of up-to-the-minute-ness. They project the illusion of substance without actually having to deliver it.

Any discussion of these techniques must begin with the primary component in constructing the news, which is the decision of what constitutes newsworthy material. In any given day there are more potential news stories than could be reported practically. And so, various processes are used to select between that which will become news and that which is not considered newsworthy. The sum of these processes constitutes an application of what social psychologist Kurt Lewin terms gatekeeping, due to the filtering process involved. Later media scholars like Lance Bennett would successfully apply the term to the news-making process.41

According to Lance Bennett, a key component of the gatekeeping process, known as indexing, is simply the reliance on official sources that provide a consistent stream of information. These indexed sources include government officials, politicians, and a variety of civilian authorities. Indexing is not new, and certainly not unique to Fox News.42 However, the economic success of Fox News has transformed the news division into another revenue stream (rather than revenue drain) for their parent companies. Instead of relying on costly fieldwork and investigative reporting, much of the news agenda is set by information that flows from indexed sources. Increased reliance on these sources has proved so economically beneficial that these indexed sources have shifted from providing a source to providing the source in a majority of news stories.

While mostly a background process, gatekeeping also plays out on camera, most noticeably when examining the guests invited to participate in news programming. A 2001 study by the media watchdog group Fairness and Accuracy In Reporting (FAIR)
cited the three most frequent guests on Fox’s *Special Report with Brit Hume* as Fred Barnes, Mort Kondracke, and Mara Liasson. FAIR argues that rather than represent the political spectrum they merely cover more conservative to less conservative. In 2002 and 2004 FAIR revisited the issue with similar findings. The 2004 study found that conservative guests heavily outweighed progressive guests throughout the 25 weeks studied. The guest selections are not inherently antithetical to an informed debate; however, presenting the guests as a representation of the whole political spectrum is. Such presentation leads the viewing audience to assume that the facts presented are more comprehensive and cohesive than they really are.

Gatekeeping has been criticized because through the process of selecting sources many voices are left unheard. Indeed, as much can be understood by that which is omitted as that which is presented as news. According to the Project for Excellence in Journalism (PEJ), 52% of all cable stories studied presented only one viewpoint, which renders them considerably less inclusive than traditional newscasts. Even when another view was presented, one view was often favored over the other. In these cases, 21% of cable news stories featured a primary view, compared to network news’ 2% to 8%. Network news featured a mix of viewpoints 72% to 86% of the time with cable offering a mix only 27% of the time. This lack of diversity in views in cable news stories leaves audiences with a less complete understanding of the topics that are covered and more likely to accept the dominant viewpoint as fact.

A recent story on the Berkeley Marine recruiting station controversy illustrates the technique of masking the underrepresentation of viewpoints. Fox’s *The Big Story with*
John Gibson technically featured two points of view, though those views were hardly balanced. It featured a recorded clip of Code Pink, a women’s organization for peace that declared “[t]he presence of a recruiting station right in the heart of Berkeley just doesn't fit with the policies and the sentiments of the people of Berkeley.” This statement may be a coherent place to begin a political debate, yet the story only featured previously recorded audio clips from the group, precluding any chance of discourse. In the name of balance, right-wing radio host Mark Williams was invited on air to comment. He called Code Pink “parasites” and referred to Berkeley as “the left wing freak show of America” in contrast to “normal Americans.” Perhaps this is not surprising since the catchphrase for his radio show is, “It’s Not Right vs. Left, It’s Right vs. Wrong.” Also, Fox News correspondent Douglas Kennedy cited the city’s decision to grant a protest area as “doing everything they can to make the army [sic] feel unwelcomed [sic]. Some say it’s just Berkeley being Berkeley.” ⁴⁴ Such tactics are not meant to provide the audience with enough information to form well-informed opinions, but instead to feign balance.

The gatekeeping process also allows bias through content choice. Brit Hume’s show on Fox, specifically its political grapevine segment, illustrates this. The topics for this segment are traditionally negative in connotation and most often feature the non-conservative as subject. Hume demonstrates how story choice allows a program to remain true to an ideology without explicitly endorsing that ideology. For example, in November of 2007, John McCain was asked by one of his supporters “[h]ow do we beat the bitch.” Though CNN and MSNBC reported on the story throughout the news day Special Report with Brit Hume⁴⁵ chose not to comment on the McCain story, except to

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⁴⁴ Special Report is cited by the PEJ as “the closest thing that cable has to a signature newscast.” The show is also classified by Nielsen Media Research as a news program.
mention Hillary Clinton in regards to her attempts to “control reporters” and to “influence media coverage.”\textsuperscript{45} Yet when a Clinton supporter called President Bush a “bastard” at a 2008 rally, Hume twice chided Clinton for not rebuking the woman. And in an interesting spin of Fox’s failure to cover the initial McCain incident, the audience was later reminded that “[l]ast year… Republican candidate John McCain was widely criticized for not admonishing a questioner who referred to Mrs. Clinton as ‘the bitch’.”\textsuperscript{46}

Though the gatekeeping process is an effective tool in shaping the discourse, “framing” techniques are equally effective in determining what information the audience receives. In his response to Robert Entman’s work on framing, Paul D’Angelo relies on Entman’s assertion that news frames “are themes within news stories that are carried by various kinds of framing devices.” A few examples of these devices include trivializing, polarizing or marginalizing the subject, as well as creating “episodic or thematic” frames throughout a newscast.\textsuperscript{47} Equally popular is placing a story immediately before or after another story/headline to encourage the audience to create associations between the stories. The two episodes of Special Report with Brit Hume referenced in the previous paragraph also illustrate framing in action. After admonishing Hillary Clinton, Hume immediately transitions into a poll that indicates “fewer Americans are receptive to the idea of returning Bill Clinton to the White House.” This is quite similar to the framing of a November 2007 Grapevine story on Hillary Clinton’s media manipulations, which was followed by a piece on her actions with regard to the Larry Craig case. In this piece she is labeled as one “of the Senate’s most liberal members” and associated with gay rights.

\textsuperscript{46} “Planted questions apparently not the only way the Hillary Clinton campaign has sought influence media coverage. Michael Crowley writes […] that the Clinton campaign uses frequent rebukes, late night complaint phone calls, and the withholding of access as tools to control reporters” (Brit Hume, November 14, 2007).
groups and questionable ethical judgment.\textsuperscript{48}

If one were to think of the processes of gatekeeping and framing as the dull, workaday aspects of television journalism, occurring mostly behind the scenes, then the acts of “remediation” are the glamorous acts that play out on screen, creating a dazzling image of what the news is expected to be. Creating and maintaining these facades requires multiple and constant acts of “remediation,” a term Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin coin to describe the relationship of every medium to previous and contemporary media. When viewing the news on television, the audience brings with them references from radio, film, newspaper, and the web.

It is through the “dual logics of remediation,” immediacy and hypermediacy, that television news attempts to justify its claims as the key player in journalism. For most of television’s history, the drive was toward immediacy, which attempts to remove any trace of the media by “ignoring or denying the presence of the medium and the act of mediation.”\textsuperscript{49} Only recently has the use of hypermediacy to draw attention to the media (so that the audience feels part of the process by removing the psychological barrier) become equally popular. Bolter and Grusin also point out that the latest technological addition, the Internet, has facilitated audience acceptance of increased hypermediacy in most every form of media, especially the news.\textsuperscript{50}

Exploring the limits of hypermediacy, cable newscasts fill a majority of the screen with text, graphics and video images, in an effort to craft an all-encompassing image of television news. In their examples, Bolter and Grusin rely heavily on then-dominant CNN and the increasing trend of appropriating the format of the Internet in order to emulate the technology and its association with instant information. Looking back, the format (as
illustrated in figure one) is comically sparse when compared to contemporary
newscasts.\textsuperscript{51} Though lacking the excess of current cable newscasts, CNN’s modest
attempts at hypermediation are immediately noticeable. The images of a functioning
control room behind the newscaster and an accessible laptop combine with the traditional
stack of papers in an effort to welcome the audience into the news making process.

![Image of a newscaster with papers and a laptop]

**Figure 1. An early example of CNN’s Headline News**

In the relatively short span of ten years, the subtle form of hypermediation seen in
figure one has given way to a barrage of simultaneous information sources. One such
innovation is the now ubiquitous news crawl, though its effectiveness as an information
source is a matter of debate. Early research, cited in Michael Keefe-Feldman’s yet
unpublished work, shows that the audience’s ability to retain the audible information is
lessened when accompanied by a news crawl.\textsuperscript{52} The news crawl is a relatively new
addition to television news and has only existed since September 11\textsuperscript{th}, 2001.\textsuperscript{xi} Initially

\textsuperscript{xi} First to feature the crawl was Fox at 10:49 AM, CNN was next at 11:11 AM and MSNBC first featured
their news crawl at 2:00 PM.
used to relay terror related news, it has since expanded to include more details related to
the featured story or unrelated headlines. While the news crawl is meant to express a
sense of up-to-the-minute-ness that supports television news’ image as immediate and
comprehensive, its repetitiveness and the distraction it causes negate both.

Joining the news crawl in the lower third of the screen of cable newscasts is text
directly related to the story being covered. As they relate to hypermediacy, these texts are
a natural extension of the extra large excerpt blurbs in magazine articles or the user
comments added below Internet articles. Rather than disrupting the viewer experience,
they replicate other comfortable experiences meant to simplify the act of information
gathering. But as used in television journalism, the text is used to tease viewers and to
keep them from changing the channel by presenting loaded questions or simply being
sensational. For example, in the tradition of using sensational statements to pique viewer
interest, a sample CNN graphic reads “End times? On Fox, Neil Cavuto featured a
graphic asking, “Is the liberal media helping to fuel terror?” (Figure 2). The Cavuto
graphic attempts both to retain viewers and to frame the content by sensationalizing and
oversimplifying its subject. These cues are especially effective if a viewer is unable to
hear the audio or seeks guidance on how to interpret the story.
The cognitive drain that textual additions cause is only compounded when graphics populate the screen. According to the limited capacity model the brain can only process so much data at one time, so during “mediated message processing, viewers have a limited amount of cognitive resources available to process audio and video information in television messages.” Yet there are more logos, graphics, text, and competing video feeds on screen competing for limited cognitive resources.

In the Fox News example shown in figure 3, there are second and third tier texts, flanked by the current market conditions, and a spinning FoxNews.com logo. In the upper left is another digital onscreen graphic indicating a live broadcast with a waving American flag. Finally, there are three mini boxes to the right highlighting other top stories. These images attempt to convince the viewer that they are simultaneously learning about opposition to a labor initiative, market conditions, a shuttle launch, a high profile court case, and a recent administration post choice, and that Fox News is technologically superior and its patriotic commitment to the United States. And though
this overload of information is a hindrance to processing information, it is unlikely that it will disappear from cable news practice since the importance lies in the feeling that one is getting more information. It is an atmospheric tool rather than a legitimate presentation of as many news items as possible.\textsuperscript{55}

Figure 3. Information populates most of the screen.

In examining the presentation of television news, one is reminded of Umberto Eco’s reflections on Disneyland. The park manufactures and supplies a reality much more attractive than the actual world. For Eco, Disneyland’s Main Street is an amalgamation of history, memory, convenience, and nostalgia meant to more perfectly represent any “real” Main Street in order to drive consumption. Similarly, television news is continuously replacing the real, remaking it into an image that better represents the expectation of what the news is expected to look like. The idea is that only a more perfect image, one that uses exaggeration and excess, looks authentic enough to elicit a greater sense of authenticity from the audience. The lion share of time, energy, and capital put
into television news is devoted to maintaining a near perfect reimagining of the news in order to drive consumption.

In order to maintain a sense of immediacy in television news, the industry also relies on a disproportionate use of live staff, voiceovers, banter, and frequent cuts to live shots. To appear as current as possible, and justify their claims of superiority over competing news media, cable news programs ignore the traditional mainstays of journalism, namely investigative and other package pieces. The Project for Excellence in Journalism has reported that in efforts to appear up to date, only 30% of cable news stories were staff packages, the written and edited stories which historically constituted “the primary element of television news.” Viewers are encouraged to assume that so much time is spent with live pieces in order to deliver the most up to date news, though statistically this is not true. In fact, 47% of all stories from 7 AM – 11 PM were either exact repeats or repeats with no new substance. Only 21% of repeating stories had either a new angle or new substance. A content analysis of network news broadcasts reveals that only 28% of the newscast is substantive content; the remaining time is composed of hype.

The same report also illustrates the trend of focusing on a small number of stories, to the exclusion of many others. This is true even when relatively little in the chosen stories has changed. The lack of news is obscured by the sense of urgency projected by the newscasts.

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xii This is up from 24% in 2007 yet still sharply less than nightly network news’ 82%.

xiii The No Joke study defined: “hype, as a meta-concept, is categorized by the concepts of horse race and hoopla. Indicators of horse race are references to or images of the campaign contest, such as who's ahead and behind in the polls… tactics, and… endorsements. Indicators of hoopla are references to or images of activities… related to campaign events and their trappings, such as photo opportunities… baby kissing… crowds, balloons, and celebrities.”
Featured in The Project for Excellence in Journalism’s 2005 annual report, the segment titled “A Day in the Life of the Media” provides several examples by focusing on a single news day. While there existed a wide range of potential news stories to cover, CNN, FOX and MSNBC all chose to focus the majority of resources on just three stories. Two involved trials closed to camera, the Michael Jackson molestation trial and the murder trial of Illinois’ “Zion murderer,” and the other was a daylong analysis of the fifteen-minute plane scare over the capital. Since the media was barred from the courtrooms the main events revolved around thirteen California courthouse entrance shots in anticipation of Macaulay Culkin’s arrival to testify and 14 empty podium shots of where the Zion prosecutor would eventually hold a press conference in Illinois.\(^{59}\)

The Project for Excellence in Journalism’s 2007 report expanded to include the entire year, but was no less problematic. Of the top ten news stories covered by cable news, the Anna Nicole Smith story nearly tied with domestic terrorism in airtime equaled that of the Virginia Tech shooting, and exceeded both the Valerie Plame and U.S. Attorney firing scandals. Spending two percent of a news year on the Anna Nicole scandal seems excessive. In theory that time could have been used as excellent spring board into the related topics of prescription drug abuse, paternity struggles, suicide and other topics interesting to the audience at large. Instead, the coverage was celebrity-centric, not only excluding the ancillary topics just mentioned, but also avoiding background information and displacing other, more newsworthy, stories.

Technically speaking, audiences are getting more of one sort of information than in the past - that is, the opinion injected by anchors and correspondents. Traditional news
programming works diligently to disguise most traces of personal opinion in newscasts.\textsuperscript{xiv}

A major criticism of Fox News has been over-infusion of opinion into the news, yet as cable news evolves, there are examples of this infusion on all three cable news networks.

Rick Sanchez and Mike Galanos of CNN often insert their opinion during their newscasts and reports. Sanchez for example made this point when speaking to Senator Tom Tancredo “And when you say there are spineless politicians out there -- I don't care on what side of the immigration issue you're on -- you're absolutely right. Either side is afraid to tackle this...”\textsuperscript{61} It should be noted that Tancredo made no reference to other politicians, so Sanchez was not summing up the Senator’s views, instead injecting his own.

More often though, cable news programming avoids undisguised opinion in favor of more subtle tactics. Fox’s \textit{Special Report with Brit Hume} is careful to make its political philosophy less obvious by using story choice, story placement, and guest commentators in the place of opinionated commentary by the host. Brit Hume positions himself as impartial observer whose main task is just to keep the conversation / program moving. In order to discern the political slant of the show one must look beyond the more obvious markers.

Not all opinion is directly attributed to the host/correspondent. One of the most colorful examples is also found on Fox News. The phrase “some people say” (and its variants) is used repeatedly to segue into unsubstantiated or un-sourced commentary. With regards to news sourcing, the trend towards fewer sources/viewpoints has affected news content onscreen in that 74% of cable news stories featured one or no fully

\textsuperscript{xiv} Perhaps responding to the sentiment represented by a 2006 PEW study indicating that 67% of Americans prefer to get their news from sources without a particular point of view.
identifiable source. *Outfoxed*, a documentary critical of Fox News’ practices, features montages of clips illustrating the ubiquity of “some people say” on a series of easily sourced matters.xv

Viewers expect journalists to have practiced due diligence when researching and reporting information. Every un-sourced or under-sourced news story discourages the viewing audience from questioning the history and motives of those providing the information. Instead, the mere mention of a title or degree is meant to establish total authority; the exception being when an “opposing” source is introduced with a label meant to devalue their positions. In the case of Fox News, the term liberal is often used to devalue the entire opposition, as is often the case when referencing think tanks. A search of the Lexis Nexis transcript database, searching for the words “think tank” over the two years prior to July 15th 2008, shows that Fox news programming prefaces the term think tank with an ideological label far more than its network or cable competition.xvi There are also the equally vague references to “sources.” Increasingly, these sources are nothing more than government or administration officials “leaking” pre-approved messages in accordance with their press strategy.

Titles work to confer expertise for guests. Meanwhile reporters, pundits, and newscasters adjust their behavior and appearance to project authority. Traditionally, they homogenized their accents, dressed professionally, and sat at a desk, all in order to immediately signal their legitimacy to a viewer. These adjustments and props were meant to suggest an education within the field, years of experience, and the reliability associated with the source.

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xv Jon Stewart was involved in the documentary.
xvi Of the references on Fox, conservative think tanks received no label, while those deemed liberal where labeled such. The exception was the Cato Institute and their negative comments about Presidential hopeful Mike Huckabee. At the time he was not considered a viable candidate, sharing just 6.1% media exposure with three “other republican” candidates.
with both. Recently though, this performance aspect has come to dominate as a source of qualification. Newscasters and correspondents are chosen for their youth, attractiveness, and relatability to the audience - education and experience are a bonus.

Many of the techniques already described are designed to maintain an image of reliability and comprehensiveness while keeping costs down, but none are as controversial as the video news release, or VNR. These prepackaged public relations packages are disguised as news, but are meant to promote products or policies. While VNR’s are not new, their usage has drawn increased criticism because they are beginning to replace traditional reporting with little or no disclosure as to their origin.

For example, in 2003 the Bush Administration released a VNR that espoused the benefits of the President’s Medicare drug plan in the guise of a typical news report. Because stations aired the VNR without any disclosure of origin there was a noticeable outcry. However, the Medicaid VNR was only one of about twenty such releases by federal agencies during the Bush Administration, covering topics that ranged from security to the war in Iraq, all sympathetic to the Administration and its policies. According to the Project for Excellence in Journalism, the number of stories from “government or other third parties” rose from 14% to 23% between 1998 and 2002. And while the volume of these feeds increased, the disclosure did not. A 2006 report by the Center for Media and Democracy found that nearly 90 percent of the time TV stations made no effort to disclose at all.

One reason the video news releases are so effective is their emulation of traditional news packages, enhanced by the actors hired to play journalists. These actors

seem authentic because they successfully recreate the markers of authority expected from actual reporters. Their dress is identical to the typical local correspondent’s, and their use of associated equipment like the large hand microphones further cements this image. They also use the phrasing (reporting from Memphis this is Jane Doe) and visual setup of a local broadcast, all to create an instant image of credibility. Audiences do not expect to face actors during the evening newscast, but increasingly this is the case.

Video news releases are often seized upon as the most extreme example of performance entering the news sphere. Yet countless examples point to the erosion of the barrier that separates entertainment and news, leading to the current state of infotainment. If we are to agree that the news is a construct based on the relationship between newsmaker and news consumer, infotainment is replacing the older construct of television news. It is in this environment that shows like The Daily Show are able to deliver both information and entertainment in a more straightforward way. By removing the emphasis on authenticity, The Daily Show is shifting the emphasis toward accountability and common sense.
Chapter Three: A More Perfect Jester

“If you watch the news and don't like it, then this is your counter program to the news.” – Jon Stewart

Somewhere between nostalgic altruism and corporate self-service exists the current state of news making. A means to evaluate and interpret the news is therefore needed in order to reconcile the gap between the news industry’s product and the audience’s needs. As a for-profit enterprise the news industry has no desire to be an altruistic conduit for information. The driving forces behind the industry are self-serving, constantly struggling to maintain the appearance of reliability, objectivity, and completeness in the pursuit of economic success.

Though the system is in need of an overhaul in order to meet the requirements of the consumer, it would be irresponsible and impractical to destroy the system and start from scratch. *The Daily Show* highlights the deficiencies of the system and institution with the aim of promoting change from within. Much like the fabled court jester, *The Daily Show* is able to say the uncomfortable things that the rest dare not say. And in the multimedia overload made popular by traditional news outlets, it seeks to inform the audience so that it may learn while laughing at the information presented. The show’s didactic function creates an audience that, over time, learns the rules of information manipulation and becomes a more critical, media-savvy audience.

Several recent trends have combined to reshape both the concept and function of news. One notable example is how the performer has displaced the professional in the
news industry. Experience has been replaced with the image of what experience is expected to look like. Therefore, to function within this post-modern news world it is not enough just to recognize that every action is performance. One must learn the rules of the game in order to work within it rather than be worked over by it.

I’m Not A Reporter But I Play One On TV

In contrast to traditional newscasts, *The Daily Show* utilizes a variety of cues to alert the audience to the fakeness of certain content within it. Whether it is Stewart as the dutiful straight man to a correspondent’s hyperbolic rhetoric as well as any other number of cues, the audience is let in on the joke. Like most of *The Daily Show’s* techniques, these cues respond to and highlight actual acts of deception in the media.

Though simple commentary on these manipulations would be effective, *The Daily Show* relies on unique tactics to reveal the inner workings of the news industry. Unlike the actors in the previously mentioned video news releases the cast’s nightly emulation of traditional reporters is not meant to elicit a sense of authenticity from the viewer. Instead *The Daily Show’s* goals are both comedic and meant to discourage the audience from blindly accepting stereotypical superficial markers. *The Daily Show’s* use of fake credentials for its correspondents is a nightly commentary on journalist as expert. Many of the made up titles are relative to the topic at hand, though sometimes, superficial features of the correspondent are also in play. For example, Larry Wilmore is black, and so when speaking on “black issues” he is the show’s “Senior Black Correspondent.”

This commentary is not limited to just the appearance of journalists. In his work on *The Daily Show*, Geoffrey Baym recognizes the current trend in which “Each [title] emphasizes the point that in the contemporary media environment, expertise is conferred,
rather than an earned status…” The Daily Show’s use of these titles certainly speaks to journalists first, but quickly extends to all groups that rely on projected status over actual substance. It is notable that the use of these markers does not necessarily equal a lack of training or ability.

The Daily Show also effectively emulates the other key indicator of authority – physical appearance. Jon Stewart appears in a three-piece suit and correspondents are likewise dressed in business professional attire. The studio, other than the off-camera live audience, has the necessary accessories of a news program, i.e. impressively technical-looking equipment and an atmosphere created by the buzzing of continuously incoming news. The Daily Show features the oversized news desk, fancy graphics and the scrolling marquees as a parody of the sense of urgency relayed in the news business. Traditional news programming on Fox and CNN rely on similar props, whether it be the White House or Capitol building in the distance or the oft used Sunday round table format.

A significant aspect of television news is the value placed on presentation. Earlier examples explored how images conveying experience replace actual experience. The complimentary alternative to this trend is the increased use of younger, more attractive personalities whenever possible. As Daily Show correspondent Samantha Bee notes in a segment titled News I’d Like to Fuck (NILF): “news anchors used to be just pretty enough that you could spend half an hour a night getting informed. But now they are so hot I just want to stay home, draw a steamy bath, and inform the shit out of myself.” To illustrate this trend, she continues with examples of female anchors in extremely short skirts, knee-high “scoot me boots” and other revealing clothing. She also reveals her process for choosing which cable news outlet to watch, depending on what kind of NILF
she is in the mood for. She classifies CNN’s anchors as the “supple, fresh-faced anchors next door,” MSNBC’s as the “dirty over thirty” set, and Fox News’ hardcore NILF’s working at the Hustler of news networks. While comical, the segment suggests to the audience that a women’s role on cable news is more to spice it up than add credibility.

*The Daily Show* includes another staple of the serious news broadcast, by featuring reporters in the field that confer legitimacy of the reported stories, à la I was there and have witnessed it all. While most news organizations have greatly reduced their field reporting staff, it still exists, but mostly as just another visual cue. A favorite gimmick of news programs is to use the actual White House as a backdrop, when reporting on Presidential policy issues. Arguably this does nothing for a story other than to remind the audience that the news source is reliable due to physical proximity to the story. Utilizing the technology of green screen editing, in which the correspondents are digitally added to a backdrop, *The Daily Show* can still rely on relevant locales without budgetary concerns. The image is easily discernable as a fake, immediately letting the home audience in on the joke. In both cases the story is just as topical and meritorious, but *The Daily Show* attempts to erase the pretense by reminding the audience just how much of a traditional newscast consists of performance.

The current administration has been criticized for multiple acts of disseminating political propaganda, though some observers find the media’s complicity, or at least laziness, even more concerning. To promote the No Child Left Behind initiative, conservative commentator Armstrong Williams was paid two hundred and forty thousand dollars to promote the program on his syndicated radio show and during various other media appearances. The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) staged a
news conference in 2007 by masquerading its own staff as reporters, and the Administration’s use of certain Video News Releases was found to violate the ban on using public funds for propaganda by the nonpartisan Government Accountability Office (GAO). It could be argued that the current political environment encourages such behavior on the part of politicians in a constant testing of the boundaries, but it is generally accepted that more often than not the media will foil such attempts. Instead the acts go unnoticed or underreported far longer than would be expected if the media were truly able to self-regulate and self-censor.

Capitalizing on the readiness of recorded footage, The Daily Show has a seemingly endless supply of political and ethical missteps to convert into comic gold. The show will often feature an exasperated Stewart assuming the role of awestruck viewer while the correspondent re-enacts the indifference of the media. This model was taken to the extreme in 2004, when Daily Show “Senior Media Ethicist” Rob Corddry expressed his embarrassment that the White House is better at fake news than The Daily Show. Corddry’s reaction was in response to the fake news reports touting the President’s Medicare plan, finally admitting that, “as a fake news show, we’re a sham.” This 2004 segment would be followed up by another similar set of segments in 2005 after the New York Times revealed hundreds of fake news reports were produced by the Bush administration to influence public opinion. Much of the debate centers on the lack of disclosure of such reports to the viewing audience, but The Daily Show also attempts to teach its audience how to recognize these video news releases. In a 2006 segment, Lewis Black shows multiple clips of supposed reporter Kate Brookes reporting on the benefits of ethanol for at least five different local news stations. While showing the clips, Black
gives the following advice on how to spot a VNR: “Here’s a clue, you’re watching your local news in Las Vegas, and for some reason they toss to a reporter in Iowa.” More often though The Daily Show effectively highlights the deceptive nature of video news releases by acknowledging their existence with biting satire.

**Gatekeeping & Indexing**

In the course of gathering news efficiently, the processes of gatekeeping and indexing leave voices unheard, viewpoints under-represented and whole topics unexplored. The Daily Show enjoys a unique relationship with the processes of gatekeeping since unlike traditional news outlets The Daily Show does not rely directly on the favor of indexed sources, instead borrowing from the broadcasts of other news outlets.

In fact, The Daily Show relies on “15 TiVos and even more newspapers, magazines and Web sites” for a majority of the news it covers. Because of this, the show is restrained by the gatekeeping practices used by those news sources. Much of the time The Daily Show tends to ignore sources that are ignored by the news and is dominated by that which the traditional news has deemed relevant. Though this may seem like a shortcoming, in reality it is a reflection of the news industry as a whole, which favors the more economical practice of news acquisition from other sources over the expense of original reporting.

In his work on The Daily Show and its relationship to the news-making process, media scholar Aaron McKain uses the show’s critique of the mainstream media’s obsession with the Michael Jackson indictment in April of 2004 to illustrate how The Daily Show is tied to the gatekeeping processes of the media. The Daily Show criticized
the media’s choice to cover Jackson to the exclusion of other stories, which at the time included the Presidential race and the war in Iraq.\textsuperscript{70}

Throughout his article, McKain aptly explains how \textit{The Daily Show} is beholden to the mainstream media. McKain explains that by critiquing the news’ gatekeeping functions \textit{The Daily Show} is necessarily reliant on those functions, and that “TDS lacks the autonomy to determine which instances of potentially gate-worthy news make it in. In other words, they are beholden to a gatekeeper they do not employ.” However, he wrongly asserts that if it chose not to mimic the day’s news coverage of the Jackson indictment \textit{The Daily Show} risked irrelevance.\textsuperscript{xviii} Recognizing the inequity of the system and its own reliance on it, \textit{The Daily Show} often chooses to skewer the gatekeeping process itself.\textsuperscript{71} So while \textit{The Daily Show} is indeed inexorably tied to the gatekeeping functions of the news industry, its commentary reveals these processes and encourages the audience to look upon these practices with skepticism. In the Jackson example, \textit{The Daily Show} found the Jackson treatment egregious enough that the media’s behavior became the story. By making the media the subject \textit{The Daily Show} reveals its autonomy to determine what is news, in this case the media’s coverage of Jackson.

In addition to the Jackson indictment, the Anna Nicole Smith “crises” and other similar treatments, \textit{The Daily Show} has a recurring segment titled “Slow News Day” in which they chide cable news programming for devoting time to lighter topics when there is lack of more serious happenings in the world. Examples include a November 9\textsuperscript{th} Fox News segment that featured a pair of bartenders giving out dating advice. A simple

\textsuperscript{xviii} It is important to recognize that \textit{The Daily Show} often features original newsworthy material. In lieu of the Jackson broadcast, the show could have featured any number of original segments, including their “mock investigative segments.” McKain himself recognizes these segments as including sources that were not caught in the news’ gatekeeping processes, and these segments are not the only segments that are independent of the news’ gatekeeping.
LexisNexis search shows that other outlets covered the election results that ushered in a Democrat majority in Congress and Donald Rumsfeld’s transition out of the Administration. CNN was also ridiculed for devoting airtime throughout the day to its anchors getting comfortable in a new studio, at a time when the Pentagon decided to evacuate American citizens from Israel in light of the hostilities between Israel and militants in Beirut. CNN was also featured on the Slow News Day segment on a separate occasion for devoting 102 minutes of uninterrupted coverage of the Olympic Torch relay.

True to its function as a tutorial, The Daily Show exposes these weaknesses of gatekeeping as an informal means of education. By relying on traditional comedic devices and the audience’s ability to recognize “what’s wrong with this picture,” the show is able to be effective without lecturing. To use a previous example, on a national-international level there is no such thing as a slow news day, and The Daily Show makes this clear through the traditional setup-punchline organization of a joke. First, the segment is positioned at the end of the headlines segment that highlights some of the more substantial news of the day (setup), and then shows one of the previously mentioned clips (punchline). By taking the media to task for the disconnect between their image (like CNN’s slogan “America’s most trusted news source”) and their actions, The Daily Show encourages viewers to demand something similar to the “truth in advertising” a consumer would expect from other products.
More is Less

“People don’t want a few stories thoroughly investigated, they want a lot of stories barely mentioned” – Jon Stewart

We have seen that filling the twenty-four hour news cycle with substantive coverage has been a challenge for the cable news networks. Although it has the benefit of an abundance of time, cable news declines to utilize this advantage over traditional news broadcasting by exploring stories more in depth. Instead cable newscasts work to deliver the most stories. A CNN commercial proudly boasts: “none of this [chattering teeth onscreen]… the most of this [arrow pointing to the word news]… the most stories per hour [SPH graphic]. This commercial was, of course skewered by The Daily Show for its absurdity in the face of twenty-four hours of news space already lacking context and substantive content. In fact, the media’s creation of, and inability to fill, the twenty-four hour news cycle is a recurring theme on The Daily Show.

The audience is often being shown just how little news is actually being featured on the cable news networks, when The Daily Show layers clips from the day’s news. The clips feature the newscaster’s / reporter’s conjecture masquerading as breaking news. A clip from March of 2006 concludes with Jon Stewart’s observation: “Three cities, three 24-hours news networks, no news – just the delicious taste of needless fear.” He was referring to the live coverage of two suspicious packages and a potential rifleman on a roof, all of which turned out to be innocuous. Stewart has been able to question these techniques directly, for example when he interviews MSNBC’s David Gregory:

Stewart: At what point does the twenty-four hours become like, well what the fuck do you think? How much is too much?

Gregory: Well you know you have to look at it that not everyone is
watching it at the same time, so there can be a little repetition sometimes.

Stewart: Right, right, right

[other banter]

Gregory: Look the idea is that there is different voices, there’s news that happens throughout the day.

Stewart: Yes

Gregory: As you well know and appreciate

Stewart: Oh breaking news, what ever happened to breaking news. Remember in the old days when Brokaw would come in and be like breaking news bulletin from NBC and you would lean in and say ‘wow something happened?’ I’ve gotta show you something, this happened on MSNBC today at 11 [Rolls clip]

Newscaster: This is breaking news coming to us from Morristown, New Jersey…

The clip is actually unsteady video of Brett Favre leaving his private jet.

Consistent with The Daily Show’s didactic approach to presenting the news, Stewart sheepishly presses his guest for an explanation. Gregory attempts to justify the coverage with jokes before explaining the “gradations of breaking news in a cable news environment” though none seemed more urgent than breaking news. The conversation continues as Stewart and the audience attempt to understand the make up of cable news, while calling attention to the shallowness of the twenty-four hour news cycle.

Repetition Makes Reputation

“Talking points: they’re true, because they’re said a lot” – Jon Stewart

In chapter two I discuss how repeated shots of unchanged courthouse scenes serve as substitutions for fresh information, contributing to a less substantive newscast. Talking points serve as the verbal equivalent of the repeated visuals offered in the previous example, as these points seek to influence the direction of the discourse. By consistently
repeating talking points the audience is conditioned to accept the desired message. In spite of the relatively little new information provided in these talking points, they become more entrenched over time. In line with *The Daily Show*’s goal of exposing observed absurdity, the show reveals the deleterious nature of talking points when those points are substituted for actual debate.

By setting up clips in succession, *The Daily Show* is able to show just how contrived talking points are. The montage of clips quickly demonstrates the orchestrated (and effective) nature of political communication that seems commensurate with what an audience may expect from marketers, but not from cable news. Jon Stewart explains the rationale for talking points, “what matters is not that the designation be true, just that it be agreed upon by the media so that no further thought has to be put into it…” The segment continues:

CNN: This is 28 pages from the Republican National Committee. It says, ‘Who is Edwards? It starts off by saying a disingenuous, unaccomplished liberal.’ We also saw from the uh Bush-Cheney camp they uh released talking points to their supporters.

JON STEWART: Talking points. That’s how we learn things. But how will I absorb a talking point, like ‘Edwards and Kerry are out of the mainstream’ unless I get it jack hammered into my skull? That’s where television lends a hand.

FOX NEWS: He stands way out of the mainstream.
CNN – Terry Holt, Spokesman: …way out of the mainstream.
CNN – Bush Comm. Director: That stands so far out of the mainstream.
CNN – Lynn Cheney: That he is out of the mainstream.
CNN Terry Holt: …they’re out of the mainstream.
CNN – Frank Donatelli, GOP Strategist: …he is well out of the mainstream.

JON STEWART: I’m getting a feeling. I think, I think they’re out of the mainstream. But, what if I wonder why?

CNN – Frank Donatelli: …two of the four most liberal senators
CNN : …two of the four most liberal US Senators.
MSNBC – Ed Gillespie: …the most liberal member of the United State’s Senate. 
MSNBC – Lynn Cheney: the most liberal member of the United State’s Senate. 
FOX NEWS – Bill Kristol: …who was rated as the number one liberal in the 
United State’s Senate. 
FOX NEWS – Elizabeth Dole: the number one most liberal senator in the United 
State’s Senate.

JON STEWART: Wow! Those guys are liberals!! In fact, if I didn’t know better, 
I’d say they’re the first and fourth most liberal in the whole Senate. And while we 
don’t have any idea what that means and where those rankings come from and 
how they were arrived at, or whether it’s even true, I don’t like the sounds of it. 
And it’s certainly not something for the media to question. As a matter of fact, I 
would imagine people like that, liberal and out of the mainstream, hang out in 
some pretty extreme places.

ABC: Lindsey Graham: …talking about the hate-fest. 
FOX NEWS: …last Thursday night’s hate-fest. 
PAT BOONE: …Radio City Music Hall hate-fest.

JON STEWART: See, out of the mainstream, liberals, and hate-fest. Keeping up 
with current events is easier than you think. 
Talking points: they’re true because they’re said a lot. 75

The above example is typical of The Daily Show’s use of montage to expose repetition as 
a method to shape the political discourse. 

Talking points are elements that lead Neil Postman to conclude that television is 
inappropriate for political discourse. And as long as repetition replaces context and 
analysis, Postman’s assertion is validated. One might expect that on an evening centered 
on politics, like that of the President’s 2006 State of the Union address, the discourse 
would be more substantive. Yet the President’s speech and the Democratic response 
allowed Stewart to comment again on the reliance on repetition over substance.76 In the 
first segment, clips show the President repeatedly mentioning 9/11, terrorism, and Iraq. 
Similarly, the Democratic response relies on repeating the phrase “there’s a better way” 
to which Stewart responds “so if you know that better way please send it to Democratic
headquarters…” an apparent dig on Virginia Governor Tim Kaine’s lack of originality. Given that the Democrats and Republicans seem unwilling to use the occasion to put forward solutions, instead relying on tired rhetoric, a frustrated Stewart’s response to the President is equally applicable to both parties, “Or I guess you could stick with the old hits. No one really goes to see The Stones to hear the new shit, I know that.”

Simply put, the key to selling a message effectively through repetition is consistency. And though it may stand to reason that a change in circumstance or available information could jeopardize the effectiveness of a given message, in practice that is not the case. An effective technique to reconcile conflicting messages is to revise the original message to match the current message so as to appear consistent. Due to the time that has elapsed between the two messages and the media’s unwillingness to effectively examine the shift in message, most casual observers are left to accept the revised message as the original.

This was the case with the politically motivated firings of several United States Attorneys in late 2006. When pressed at the beginning of the scandal, then Press Secretary Tony Snow, responded, “It’s pretty clear that these things were based on performance and not on some sort of attempts to do political retaliation if you will.” Three months later a reporter began a question “At the beginning of the story, the President, you, Dan Bartlett said on camera that politics was not involved, this was performance based, but…” to which Tony Snow interrupted with “No that is something we have never said that.”

Again, The Daily Show is able to expose the deceit in these practices of revisionism. Stewart, unable to reconcile the words of the two Tony Snows, attempts to
use both clips on screen simultaneously to reason with one another. The effect is, of

course, comedic, but in this form the presentation serves to highlight undeniably the

absurd schizophrenia of this political rhetoric. Once again montage becomes the ultimate

truth device in an increasingly disingenuous political process.

The montage of repetitions shatters the image of political ease that speechwriters

strive for. The Daily Show’s punch-line format simultaneously creates an opening for a

variety of dialogues. Most obviously on the issue of how rhetoric and hyperbole have

replaced substance. This was the case when The Daily Show was first to report on the

President’s choice to recycle part of his speech for outgoing CIA Director Porter Goss\textsuperscript{xix}

when introducing his replacement Michael Hayden less than two years later.\textsuperscript{78}

Bush 2004: The right man to lead this important agency at this critical moment in

our nation’s history.

Bush 2006: He’s the right man to lead the CIA at this critical moment in our

nation’s history.

The dialogue shifted from the new appointment to the administration’s apparent

belief that neither the media nor the American public pay enough attention to the political

process to warrant originality, even considering the questionable ability of Porter Goss as

CIA Director. The story was soon picked up by the mainstream media and allowed them,

however briefly, to recognize their own shortcomings and The Daily Show as a

significant player in the news game.

\textsuperscript{xix} Goss prior to becoming CIA Director: “I couldn't get a job with CIA today. I am not qualified.” Goss

after becoming Director “The jobs I’m being asked to do, the five hats that I wear, are too much for this

mortal. I’m a little amazed at the workload.”
Quality Control

In chapter two I illustrate the shift away from context and depth in favor of conversation and commentary with statistics on how time is spent during newscasts and the examples of Anna Nicole and Michael Jackson. Though two distinct problems, they are nonetheless related, and *The Daily Show* has addressed both through several segment types, as well as its own presentation of the news.

Most traditional newscasts normally lead with the headlines, with the remaining time often devoted to packaged news stories and live staff. The same is true for *The Daily Show*, and studies have shown that the amount of time devoted to substantive content is comparable to traditional news programming. As previously noted, a study published in the *Journal of Broadcasting and Electronic Media* that examined the 2004 Presidential election coverage found that only 28% of network newscasts were substantive, and that *The Daily Show* coverage was substantive 22% of the time. Network newscasts filled the remaining broadcast time with hype, whereas *The Daily Show* filled the remaining time with comedy. The study defined substantive coverage as “the concepts of campaign issues and candidate qualifications” and categorized hype “by the concepts of horse race and hoopla.” Present both in and out of the election cycle are the package pieces (pre-recorded stories) of *The Daily Show*. On average 24% of the episode on which “packages” appear is devoted to these pieces, equal to the amount of time devoted to similar packages on cable news.\(^{xx}\) This emulation of traditional news first serves as a parody of the news then sets the show up as an alternative to the news.

Often missing in traditional newscasts that rely on talking points or argument is

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\(^{xx}\) The package data from *The Daily Show* was results from the author’s study of one month of the show’s episode segments to determine the ratio of package pieces to all other segments.
the inclusion of substantive alternative viewpoints. A recent package story featured on The Daily Show offers a good comparison to those on more accepted news programs, specifically the Fox News treatment of the Berkeley recruiting controversy examined in chapter two. The Fox News example featured a conservative radio host speaking live, while the opposition was relegated to previously recorded clips. Daily Show correspondent Rob Riggle begins his report on the Berkeley situation with the disclaimer that he was an active Marine in Iraq, even featuring a picture of him in fatigues. Though in his report Riggle only interviews those opposed to the Marine Corp recruiting station, he uses humorous techniques to present the opposing viewpoint. In different ways the protesters’ own words are used to present both sides of the argument. For example, one interviewee remarks: “I kinda felt like probably how the Iraqis felt, like we were being occupied here in Berkeley.” Riggle then shows alternating shots of war torn Iraq and laidback Berkeley, noting they are “practically indistinguishable.”

The diversity of viewpoints is also ensured because many of the legitimate points made by the protesters receive airtime, as do the contradictory comments made by the protesters. When one protester noted that it was important to protect free speech, Riggle hoped for some organization that would be sworn to defend it, to which she replied “wouldn’t that be great.” Riggle was of course referring to the Marine Corps, which is sworn to defend free speech among other rights. Pointing out inconsistencies in an argument fosters a more critical examination of the issue by encouraging introspection on the part of the various interested parties, including the audience.

xxi By saying both, I do not mean to imply that there are only two points of view, I am just focusing on the two that are presented by the media in this case.
The Daily Show most often addresses the issue of context when it responds to the commentary found in newscasts. Stewart notes, as previously quoted responding to the talking points about the supposedly most liberal member of Senate, “[a]nd while we don’t have any idea what that means and where those rankings come from and how they were arrived at, or whether it’s even true, I don’t like the sounds of it. And it’s certainly not something for the media to question.” The Daily Show serves to remind the audience of the importance of understanding the whole situation and not just the sound bites.

Recognizing Frames

In chapter two, Brit Hume’s disparate treatment of the similar incidents involving Hillary Clinton and John McCain supporters illustrates the influence that framing has in shaping discourse. Because this influence often goes undetected, the audience is unlikely to take into account the effects of framing when digesting the news. A study presented to The Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication’s 2007 national conference compared The Daily Show and NBC Nightly News in their framing of the news. They chose a single week in 2006 because it was not part of the Presidential election cycle and contained a major news event (Israel’s bombing of Lebanon). The study concluded that NBC’s coverage was more in-line with preserving the status quo, a common observation many framing analysts make of traditional news programming. The study cites several differences in coverage of Lebanese and Israeli victims that suggests a “pro-Israel stance” as well as the contextualization of the conflict with American interests.

By contrast, The Daily Show’s treatment draws comparisons to the 1976 Entebbe hostage crisis in which Israel acted more surgically. Stewart also pokes fun at the media’s
“Americanization” of the conflict, suggesting a trivialization of the Israelis and Lebanese.

Overall, the study found that “viewers of The Daily Show would have learned about more current topics, and in some cases, more about historical context, than viewers of The NBC Nightly News.” 79

As an increasing number of Americans rely on multiple news sources, the ability to understand the function of framing becomes especially important. This variety highlights the need of a critical voice to help reconcile the varied news presentations. The Daily Show fits perfectly within this model both in practice and in philosophy. Stewart has been quoted on multiple occasions saying that his show should not be the sole news source for anyone. True to this philosophy, the show is not comprehensive, but as a news-source the show reframes news available elsewhere, often dramatically. 80

Mediating Reality

“That's why we have this. It's the liberal media filter. It was invented in the 1950s by angry gays and Jews who couldn't get work in musical theater.” – Rob Corddry

In the previous chapter, I explain how the on-screen news space is hypermediated, awash in extraneous information to such a degree that the viewer’s ability to process any of the information is diminished. More than just useful to keep the viewers visually engaged, these innovations are meant to tell viewers that the news source they are watching is uniquely capable of providing the most information in one place. In his work Gatekeeping and Remediation, Aaron McKain comments on how the immediacy and hypermediacy techniques that are used to portray authenticity dictate the news’ range of behaviors at its disposal.
The Daily Show’s audience is made aware that hypermediation is traditionally used to evoke an emotional response (a feeling for the authentic) whenever The Daily Show uses these techniques in excess. By refocusing attention on hypermediation techniques, hypermediation loses the ability to make the viewer forget the mediation that is occurring.

Not surprisingly, The Daily Show has been quick to comment on the gimmicks used by news programming, like the innovation of the news ticker or CNN’s virtual map that allowed reporters to stand on the region they were reporting on, both in 2001. In the 2008 primary season, The Daily Show featured segments comparing the election technology employed by several cable news outlets. Stewart compared CNN’s set to a Circuit City showroom for its slew of television screens, touch screen that controls “voting balls” and “magic pie chart,” and Fox’s “Election Link Vehicle.” One week later Fox unveiled their own election headquarters studio populated by giant touch screens, pie chart technology, and even a billboard sized video screen. And most recently, CNN’s debate coverage featured a “patronizing piece of made up technology” that CNN dubbed the “perception analyzer,” which in fact was a dialing device used by members of a debate focus group.

In his work on the Daily Show, Geoffrey Baym describes his concept of the media as a searchlight providing both political accountability and giving citizens the resources required for informed political involvement, but “[b]y contrast, today’s television news, absorbed into the portfolios of the giant media conglomerates, has become a floodlight -- a hyper-mediated, theatrical light of exposure, a commodity packaged to sell.” Accordingly, The Daily Show acts to adjust the floodlight, dimming the layers of
mediation long enough for the audience to see through them. Consequently, the audience is then able to recognize the existence of these layers, and identify the core of the subject.
Conclusion

Much like the world that they cover, journalists and the news industry are undergoing constant change. At the onset of the twentieth century the industry began to define itself by a set of professional standards that had previously just been successful business practices. This attempt to elevate journalism also worked to rewrite history and create the myth of objectivity.

In the decades that followed, the news industry fought the entertainment industry for the attention of American consumers. The new journalism movement of the nineteen sixties changed the way Americans got their news by infusing storytelling into the process. Simultaneously, investigative reporting became popular, adding another layer of entertainment qualities to the industry.

Yet it was not until the nineteen eighties, and another pattern of news industry consolidation, that the blending of information and entertainment solidified. News departments were no longer money losers, finally contributing to the economic successes of their parent companies. This period also marked the appropriation of the aesthetic of objectivity while concomitantly exploiting their ability to be non-objective, a decidedly postmodern characteristic.

Because of this environment, Journalism professionals attempt to redefine and understand what constitutes a journalist. The answer is more complicated than a simple chart of who is and is not. For our purposes, the question is understood by only looking at the professional aspect. Once legal definitions are excluded we are left with a layered
definition of journalist. Those with journalistic schooling and work experience are of a
different order than those who simply perform the duties of a journalist, yet they are both
journalists. Over the past decade Jon Stewart has, through consistent performance of
journalism, become a journalist.

In the late nineteen nineties cable news would reinvent itself with the addition of
Fox News. Though competitors and critics will point to allegations of a conservative bias,
such critiques miss the point. Fox News has proven that cable news is a viable and
extremely profitable enterprise. Their blending of news and entertainment has altered the
way news is presented on cable and traditional networks. Competing networks have
appropriated the news ticker, adopted higher production values, and a focus on punditry
and celebrity news in response to Fox News’ success. By examining the changes
introduced by Fox News, which have been adopted by others, helps to understand and
redefine the current practices of broadcast journalism.

Simply put, the blending of entertainment and news can be traced to the first years
of television. Television was designed to entertain, broadcast news to inform. The
realities of the marketplace and changing technologies have led to the current state of
infotainment meant to compete with other forms of entertainment. By starting somewhere
far removed from journalism and mocking their way towards it, The Daily Show ended
up in the same place as programming that began as “hard news” that has since infused
itself with entertainment.

This shift towards infotainment is also why The Daily Show engages in a reflexive
examination of the system that determines and delivers the news. Arguably something
that could only be initiated from outside the established news industry, The Daily Show
energetically highlights the failings of the media with as much zeal as it does politics and world events. These examinations remind the audience that *The Daily Show* does not make light of the news to destroy it, but rather to strengthen it without making any claims to truth.

It is within the faux news format that *The Daily Show* is able to mock the current state of broadcast journalism while also emulating it. The source material is mined from the day’s news, Stewart physically fits as the traditional anchor, and the reports and reporting are meant to mimic the audience expectation of a newscast. The reporting that results is of equal informational value to those newscasts, while satire, parody and other comedic devices serve to satiate the audience’s desire to be entertained.

The news industry has evolved to allow a variety of news sources to exist under the umbrella of “the news,” and while many may try to dismiss *The Daily Show*, for its entertainment roots it is clear that the show is just a different flavor of news. The difference, and a source of hope, is that *The Daily Show* doesn’t just comment on the news of the day, but also on the newsmakers and news tellers. To use a phrase recently in vogue in news broadcasts, Stewart and crew are “keeping them honest.” The show has proven itself to be substantively comparable to traditional newscasts and attracts an audience in search of more than just a few laughs.

It may be fitting that Jon Stewart, the man who transformed *The Daily Show* into what it is now, is also the most reluctant to see it for what it has become. In the past, Stewart has lambasted the media for giving the people too much of what they want, entertainment and conflict, and not enough of what they need, reasoned analysis and substantive reporting. Out of this frustration he helped create an entertainment show that
delivers the news, as well as traditional news programming does, with the added benefit of teaching viewers how to critically examine the media they depend on.

When studies show that almost one-third of Americans under forty believe shows like *The Daily Show* are replacing traditional news outlets some may be ready to predict the end of journalism as we know it. But if *The Daily Show* has made anything clear, it is that there is not only room for different voices, there is also a need. Jon Stewart’s critical comments of CNBC in relation to the current economic crisis resounded with the media, the American public and even the White House. The call was not to scrap twenty-four hour reporting, but rather to do a better job of it. By being a nagging voice, reminding politicians and journalists that they are being watched and held accountable, *The Daily Show* continues to influence journalism in the twenty-first century.


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