

**The Truth Can Be A Funny Thing: A Comparison of
Traditional Broadcast News to *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*
in Coverage of the 2012 Presidential Campaign**

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When the ratings for the season finale of *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo* top the ratings of the Republican National Convention coverage, (Sieczkowski 1) we must be in a world filled with audiences that consume anything given to them, but also a world where only the few have ultimate access to influence public communication. Media is driven by commerce and capitalism and news corporations face the simple task of feeding whatever information they so please to a public set in tradition and complacency. This project breaks down the way in which television news constructs information to persuade and manipulate audiences. In reaction to this exploitation, *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* uses entertainment and satire as an alternate to traditional news programs. Although critics of Stewart argue that his comedic style distracts audiences from participation in democracy, Stewart utilizes inversion to inform viewers of what is really going on in traditional news programs. While Jon Stewart and other comedic producers work to clear the cloud of journalism and inform the audience about deep-rooted broadcast televisions' operations, people may turn their attention towards these shows because, well, they are funny. One study even found that while *Daily Show* uses humor, it is equally substantive to traditional news (Fox, Koloen & Sahin 213). Through both satirical and traditional segments involving the coverage of the 2012 Presidential Campaign, this project explores the changing political sphere and works to find a balance between comedy and traditional reporting. To do so, I look at four traditional news segments and two episodes from *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* on Comedy Central, and works to discover whether or not viewers allow entertainment value to take precedence over receiving information from traditional broadcast news. By comparing and contrasting traditional news coverage with *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart's* treatment of the Presidential Campaign of 2012, this project explores how satirical news fosters, and/or hinders, the political knowledge and behaviors of its viewers.

James Watson in “Representing Realities: An Overview of News Framing” discusses how Television News frames information and its affects on audiences’ conscious and subconscious cognitive processes. He explains that the way news frames stories predisposes viewers’ experiences and normalizes the texts they distribute. There are six elements of framing: point of entry, point of view, storyline, edited footage, sequencing and news worthiness. The point of entry refers to how the rhetor positions the viewer with elements like titles, music and graphics. Through points of view, news programs work to create identification with viewers. Audiences are not only subjected to certain views based on networks’ assumptions but also expected to align with the newscaster as representing a majority opinion. Furthermore, storylines in news programs create trust and believability. However, viewers may not realize that much of a storyline or plot is heavily edited to ensure that the footage matches the program’s evidence and conclusions. News worthiness refers to producers deeming stories relevant and then choosing to amplify or blur information. Finally, sequencing plays an influential role in both traditional and satirical news. This project discovers how both traditional news segments and *The Daily Show* sequence clips in order to establish certain opinions toward central issues.

Considering the general consumption of television for pure entertainment value, it is vital to analyze satirical news and its implications for a public that should be informed to make democratic decisions. In “No Joke: A Comparison of Substance in *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* and Broadcast Network Television Coverage of the 2004 Presidential Election Campaign” Julia Fox, Glory Koloen and Volkan Sahin argue that people’s knowledge, opinions and behaviors are directly affected by their dependency on television for their primary source of information (214). A PEW Research Study found that in 2004 21% of respondents under the age of 30 relied heavily on *The Daily Show* for their political news (Fox, Koloen & Sahin 215). The

traditional segments from CBS, NBC, MSNBC and FOX News present the idea that news is a source of pure and objective information that society can consume in order to remain informed. On the other hand, satirical news like *The Daily Show*, suggests that traditional news cannot provide objective information. Ultimately, in the comparison between traditional news segments and *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* it is essential to recognize that although satirical news uses mockery and humor to report about politics, the benefits of its popularity contribute to a more informed democratic populace.

Traditional News Coverage of the 2012 Presidential Election

CBS's *60 Minutes* contains a weekly segment in which a reporter interviews people of interest and works to provide information about their lives and their work. These interviews use a straightforward, question and answer format. On September 23, 2012, CBS conducted interviews with the 2012 Presidential election candidates, President Barack Obama and former Governor Mitt Romney. Scott Pelley begins the interview with Romney and after a few minutes of questions about his candidacy, the setting switches from an office to footage of the two boarding Romney's private jet, during which time Pelley asks about specific policy details such as potential tax rates. *60 Minutes* followed the governor on his campaign to Boston and continued the discussion when Pelley begins to pressure Romney about some of his ambiguity regarding budget and tax cuts. However, the criticism seems to remain brief and Pelley hesitates to put too much pressure on the former governor. After the 20 minutes with Romney, the segment cuts to Steve Kroft, who conducts the interview with President Obama in the White House Blue Room. He begins by saying "Mr. President you were elected 4 years ago promising hope and change for the better, your opponent argues that you have achieved neither"(Kroft *60 Minutes*). The

American flag, the blue room embroidered rug and an all white intricate fireplace constitute the background; a setting in which Watson would recognize as a frame for the media's agenda. It encourages the audience to believe that the intricacies of the setting represent the significance of the interview. Throughout the segment, Kroft challenges the President with the facts about the lack of benefits for homeowners after the housing crisis, however the challenge remains amiable and the criticism recedes with Obama's chance to answer. President Obama responds by explaining that in the four years of his presidency people have been able to pay off or purchase homes and how the housing crisis has faded. Although Kroft challenges his interviewee, the interview in general remains fairly direct.

The smallest detail like introduction, or the setting of each candidate's interview, is important to analyze. The program's simplistic style seems to initially invite the audience to recognize the seriousness of the issues. However, the reason that the nature of the news is serious and informational is to counter satire and provide credibility. The audience is set in a frame where Romney's luxurious landscapes contrast with his campaign attempts to act casual. While Obama's interview set the viewer up to recognize the importance of his career and the stability of his position. Although these interviews appear straightforward at first glance, Watson's model explains the influences of news shows on subconscious level. CBS utilizes points of entry including the music, titles, graphics and even the scene that position viewers to recognize a certain opinion. They then identify with the newscaster, trusting that media will work for them and eventually aligning themselves with the values and opinions of the closest source they have to the truth (Watson 122). The news business is dependent on the consent of its viewers. The power of media corporations has claimed a near monopoly on what they assert to be facts given to audiences and those without power are unaware that they are being controlled. "The role of

journalist has transformed from ‘watch dog’ to ‘lap dog’ of government and big business. ‘This can result in absurd performances which journalists dutifully reproduce official pronouncements that distorts or hides pertinent information’ (Borden & Tew, 2007)” (Meddaugh 378).

It may be significant to note that *60 Minutes* ratings have slowly declined as the years have passed. David Blum writes an article about *60 Minutes* and acknowledges the show’s leadership transition. He argues that after 36 years, the original director “Hewitt perfected his role as the stand-in for the audience, shaping the show around his own simple mantra: Tell me a story” (Blum 1). However, Blum identifies the shortcomings of the program as traditional news has become less desirable to younger audiences who want more than just a story. He claims that CBS specifically chooses its stories hoping that relevance can save its profit and generate a younger viewing crowd. “It’s no sin to seek an audience, of course; there’s no reward in producing good television in a vacuum. But for a series that has little hope of cracking the top ten TV shows the way it once did, it’s hard not to interpret story selections as part of a campaign to restore ratings dominance” (Blum 1). Specifically, during an election year, the coverage of the race becomes a priority to gain ratings, and through the style and settings of the interviews with the candidates, CBS attempts to illustrate a sense of neutrality but reveals its liberal slant when it comes to their ease on the President and scrutiny of Governor Romney.

Similarly, in an NBC segment on *The Today Show*, Matt Lauer and Peter Alexander cover the campaign trail and approach the issue of Mitt Romney calling President Obama weak when it comes to foreign policies. The clip starts with Lauer at the anchor desk but quickly cuts to split screen with him talking to correspondent Peter Alexander in Virginia. Alexander takes over and explains Romney’s attack against Obama. He says, “In Virginia, a reinvigorated Mitt Romney might as well have been singing in the rain” (Alexander *Today*). He goes on to say that

Romney leads the poll of “likely voters” by 5 points as a table with percentages flashes. The next table pops up titled “registered voters” and Obama leads by 5 points at 50%. NBC presents images of attacks in Libya, which Watson’s model suggests, frame the idea that the violence abroad has a direct relationship with Obama’s weakness. Watson’s idea of sequencing in traditional newscasts plays an important role because it creates context for the intended information with certain preceding segments, and then alters perception with the content that follows. With close attention and scrutiny, networks’ agendas become easier to recognize. For the next 15 seconds the scenes switch back and forth from Romney speaking, to men with guns and explosions. Jürgen Habermas highlights the idea that news constitutes “bearers and leaders of public opinion – weapons of party politics” and has the ability to shape our attitudes, beliefs and values (Habermas 53).

This segment from *Today* on NBC focused on Mitt Romney’s criticisms of Obama’s foreign policies. Media can foster open public debate and information exchange, which is vital for a democracy to thrive. However, In Vineet Kaul’s research article, “Interface Between Media, Democracy and Development” he looks into the relationship between media and democracy and claims “serious reporting is difficult to sustain in competitive media markets that put a premium on the shallow and sensational” (53). Kaul argues further that the path to democracy can be rocky due to the obstacle of the government and power structures efforts toward commercialization and profit. The shallow nature of *Today*’s segment reinforces the idea that society is subjected to simplistic programming in order for networks to rake in profit. Unfortunately, the frivolity of these segments further reiterates the notion that American audiences cannot handle complexities and depth when it comes to political news. In this specific piece, *Today* chose to focus on Romney’s one comment about weakness and Peter Alexander

reports with sarcasm that Romney “might as well have been singing in the rain” (*Today*) after the debate. Networks do not trust audiences to process and understand complex information but expect society to trust that they have the viewers’ best interest. Another element most news shows use today are polls, which Jon Stewart would deem useless and inconsistent. Moreover, one can only assume that images of gunmen and bombings playing in sync with Romney speaking are an effort to make a connection between the two. Jürgen Habermas might agree that these tactics are used for the purpose of driving a certain value system and that networks today are the “bearers and leaders of public opinion – weapons of party politics” from whom the audience cannot hide (Habermas 53). *Today* reflects news programs that emphasize entertainment more than informing a democracy.

Furthermore, Chris Matthews of MSNBC explains his frustration in Obama’s performance at the first Presidential debate in a clip from a nightly broadcast. Matthews begins by explaining Obama’s plan of being aggressive and organized. He screams “I don’t know how he let Romney get away with the crap he threw out tonight about social security” (Matthews MSNBC). He addresses Romney in saying “Don’t come out here and pretend you care about old people cause you met somebody at some campaign event. You’ve written off 47% of the country before you even started”(MSNBC). Ultimately, Matthew’s slogan of the night was “Where was Obama tonight?”(MSNBC). He claims that the real debate is going on with MSNBC and that Obama should watch affiliated shows like *Last Word* and *Hardball*. Matthews concludes by claiming that MSNBC goes after the facts and Obama went into the debate unprepared.

It is no secret that Chris Matthews on MSNBC projects a liberal message in his show and news segments. Although the commentary in his aforementioned segment about the first presidential debate criticized Obama, it illustrated a strong effort to show Matthews’s high

expectations of the president. MSNBC's flashes of social media like tweeting, only further gives the viewer the impression that others are involved. If information transmission involves power and the operation of viewers that consent and accept what they're given, the power of news can be significant, yet daunting. Matthews's outright criticisms of Romney and "the crap he threw out" (MSNBC) provide a not so restrained view of the Republican candidate. His high hopes for the President are consistently portrayed and his aggressive frustration at a lying Romney suggests MSNBC's liberal agenda. Although MSNBC and Chris Matthews make no endeavor to conceal their political slant to an unassuming audience, viewers fall victim to their efforts at blowing stories out of proportion and advertising network affiliated shows. Regardless of their honesty when it comes to political opinions, the network not only pushes the ideology that Republicans are untrustworthy but also continues to maintain the common goal of all news programs, moneymaking.

Another cable news station that provided audiences with loads of information about the 2012 candidacies is FOX News. In a segment called "Obama Cranking Up Attacks on Romney" FOX works to illustrate Obama's actions after unfavorable press about the debate. It begins with the host introducing the topic: "President Obama and what he's doing to try to put a tourniquet on those poll numbers"(FOX News). Correspondent Ed Henry says that the President announced "no more Mr. Nice Guy"(Henry FOX News). He goes on to argue that the Obama campaign has focused too much on Big Bird attacks, and they then play a clip of Obama mocking Romney by saying "Elmo has been seen in a white suburban, he's heading for the border". FOX also explains that Obama media has been linking Romney to criminals like Bernie Madoff and Ken Lay of Enron while large, unflattering pictures of the criminals flash on screen. Although FOX News quickly blames Obama's campaign for overemphasizing certain issues, they spend an

equal amount of time reiterating points that they are intentionally trying to downplay. They continue by playing the Big Bird Obama advertisement and Will.I.Am dancing to the Sesame Street theme song at his introduction of Obama's speech in Ohio. The segment displays a graphic of the Sesame Street character "Count" and a tally of the President's mention of the children's show thirteen times but no mention of Libya or the economy. There is a short clip of the Ann Romney interview with FOX and Henry says she is sick of hearing that her husband "lied" his way to debate victory. Certain news programs use specific testimony to amplify the points that they are making and create a sense of truth.

FOX News is a media counterpart to MSNBC, with an explicit political voice in its coverage of the 2012 Presidential race. "Fox News's slogan is, 'We report, you decide.' This seems to suggest, first, that they are actually reporting information; and, second, that audiences can actually decide anything within a reality that is so heavily mediated" (Colleta 867). The segment mentioned above deals with their coverage of Obama's desperation after his downfall at the first debate. FOX, not surprisingly, decided to highlight the president's PBS campaign commercial and their cut to the images of Madoff and Lay imply that Obama's media took an extreme approach. Furthermore, the coverage of Will.I.Am with the "Sesame Street" theme song plays out of context and overstates the Sesame Street theme. FOX News also has the tendency to take on confirmation bias through their interviews with guests. In the discussed clip, Ann Romney gets the opportunity to rant about the "poor sportsmanship" towards her husband after the debate.

Is it fair that audiences are led to believe that news is truth when programs like FOX News work so hard to avoid dissonance that they'll intentionally eliminate the opposing side? Mickey Huff and Peter Phillips are two men who work for a foundation that fights for media

democracy. Unfortunately, they found that the downsizing of reporters at news networks has resulted in a narrow range of news from government and institutional sources, sensationalized disasters and crime, and a shift away from fact-based reporting (Huff & Phillips). While *The Daily Show* critics are quick to deem the program a pessimistic critique of the customary television news fashion, but fail to realize that traditional broadcast news does not constitute healthy, ethical reporting.

Author Rick Perlstein looks at how corporations' needs and media processes can make any issue they deem "newsworthy" seem significant. He argues that if news coverage highlights their stories enough, people will trust it:

Today's marquee fibs almost always evolve the same way: A tree falls in the forest -- say, the claim that Saddam Hussein has "weapons of mass destruction," or that Barack Obama has an infernal scheme to parade our nation's senior citizens before death panels. But then a network of media enablers helps it to make a sound -- until enough people believe the untruth to make the lie an operative part of our political discourse. (27)

Traditional news is produced with the assumption that viewers will tune into broadcasts for local, national and global information. Networks generate stories with the hope that audiences are becoming more informed, but fail to realize how political slants and biases affect the nation's perceptions. Perlstein argues that facts and truth are not sound elements in media and through repetition of information, regardless of validity, becomes streaming truths in public dialogue.

Satirical News Coverage of the 2012 Presidential Election

Denise Bostdorff in “Making Light of James Watt: A Burkean Approach to the Form and Attitude of Political Cartoons” applies Burke’s concept of perspective by incongruity to humor in media. Perspective by incongruity “involves altering an orientation of expectation by viewing and incongruity, which is inconsistent or not in agreement” (Bostdorff 198). In the case of satirical news shows, comedic segments take issues like the political campaign and turn viewer attention to the misconceptions often seen in traditional news. She argues that comic frames can alter audience perceptions of certain figures and structures. Bostdorff also writes about Burke’s notion of burlesque as “an attitude of rejection which is based upon contextual inversion; whatever would appear well, the rhetor inverts to appear badly” (Bostdorff 200). Burlesque also takes everything to an “absurd extreme” and results in the viewer rejecting the original subject (Bostdorff 200). In the case of satirical news, critics claim that Jon Stewart utilizes extreme mockery to diminish audience trust in traditional structures. Similarly, in “Mocking the News: How *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* Holds Traditional Broadcast News Accountable” Chad Painter and Louis Hodges recognize the purpose of Jon Stewart and his scrutiny of traditional newscasts. Painter and Hodges claim that *The Daily Show* holds media responsible when it comes to the public in four ways. The first way is by “pointing out falsehoods”, the second is by “pointing out inconsistencies”, the third is “pointing out when inconsequential news is blown out of proportion”, and the last way is by “critiquing the very nature of broadcast news” (Painter and Hodges, 269-271). Ultimately, the authors assert that through all of Stewart’s tactics such as imitations, mocking pictures, continuous critical jokes and montages, he argues that traditional broadcast news fails to create an informed public.

George Gerbner said “humor is the pill of power” and it normalizes the way society sees the world (Gerbner “Mean World Syndrome”). In this sense, different versions of television

news involve satire, such as *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*. “A typical episode of Stewart’s program is divided into three segments” (Painter & Hodges 266). The first segment begins much like a typical news broadcast, with Jon Stewart as the anchor at a desk, providing the daily news. The second segment includes mock reports from his faux field reporters and the third segment usually involves an in-studio interview. Painter and Hodges thought it significant to pay attention to “spoken text, visual features such as type of shot, content, sequencing, and graphics” (267). In comparison to television news coverage right before the presidential election, it is important to look at some of Stewart’s episodes involving the candidates including October 4, 2012. This episode of *The Daily Show* episode specifically involved commentary about the Presidential Debate. The show always begins with the image of a spinning globe and music that illustrates not only patriotism but also mockery of traditional news introductions with the loud trumpets and overemphasized seriousness of the newsroom. The narrator leads with “From Comedy Central’s World News Headquarters in New York, this is the Daily Show with Jon Stewart”(Daily Show). As Stewart scribbles on paper at his desk, the camera pans the studio and the audio includes crowd cheers and music. He begins by bringing up the hot topic of the Presidential debate and says that although the nation is divided, everyone agreed on one thing, Obama’s failures at the debate. Back in the studio, Stewart sits next to an image of Obama and exclaims, “there is no red America, there is no blue America there is only the American that can’t believe how bad this guy did in the debate!” (Daily Show).

While more footage of the debate plays, Stewart’s slogan “Democalypse 2012”(Daily Show) is displayed. Stewart explains, “Romney won with the sound on...Romney won with the sound off” he plays a portion of the debate with audio and then silent, illustrating that Obama never looked up or challenged Romney. He mocks the President and asks “what were you

looking down at?” and then the naked woman drawing from the *Titanic* movie appears with Romney’s head drawn on. It works as Stewart’s attempt to mockingly justify Obama’s lack of eye contact. Stewart’s commentary is embedded with his hand gestures, satirical facial expressions and comedic voice fluctuations that all illustrate not only his observations on politics but also his condemnation of news coverage. Stewart implies that Lehrer, the debate moderator, could not figure out who was who and imitates Lehrer joking, “energy wise there’s a difference, this gentleman here [Obama] appears to be on ambien and the other gentleman [Romney] appears to have tried caffeine for the first time in his life.” Overall, Stewart remarks that Obama disappointed even those not in his favor, including “Osama Bin Laden, from the bottom of his watery grave” (*Daily Show*). Meanwhile an illustration appears of Osama Bin Laden sitting on a cartoon couch next to Squidward from the show *Spongebob Squarepants* watching Obama on TV and raising their hands in dismissal. Stewart leads a segment on his show called “Polish That Turd” and he introduces it much like a game show. The segment shoots to a montage of clips of Democratic representatives justifying Obama’s behavior at the debate by claiming he had a “dignified reserve”(*Daily Show* MSNBC clip). Unfortunately, Stewart disagrees with this justification and blames Obama’s passivity on his own personal shortcomings.

To illustrate the differences between satirical news’ coverage and traditional news coverage of the Presidential Race, an additional episode of *The Daily Show* (October 10, 2012) represents the comical approach to politics. Similar to every other episode, *The Daily Show* opening uses music and a “newsroom” introduction to set the audience with a mindset parallel to how they recognize traditional newscasts. In this segment, Jon Stewart continues his coverage of what he refers to as “Democalypse 2012” (*Daily Show*), which is the label he has given to his comedic interpretation of the candidacies for the 2012 election. Stewart refers back to Romney’s

statement about budget cuts to PBS and the popular “Big Bird” comment that placed Romney in media spotlight and left Obama making jabs the days following the debate. Obama’s campaign advertisement involving Big Bird received a lot of backlash including some from Jon Stewart.

This episode of *Daily Show* highlights the downfall of the President not only at the debate but also his focus on Sesame Street the days following. Furthermore, Stewart claims that he is aware of how the race is tightening because of newscasts coverage of polls. He plays clips of these polls being reported: ABC’s PEW poll, MSNBC’s Gallup Daily Tracking poll, FOX’s Swing State poll, Hardball’s MRA poll, FOX News poll, Sienna College poll, MSNBC’s Quinnipiac University poll, FOX News’ Marquette University poll, FOX News’s ABC Washington poll, MSNBC’s Wall Street Journal poll, MSNBC’s Marist College poll, and the FOX News’s 7-11 poll. Through a mosaic of these polls being released, Stewart works to ridicule how far-fetched polls are and how news programs often use them as sources of objective information. Stewart calls these newscasters “addicted” to polling and how more often than not the polls on different channels contradict themselves. He points out that the day prior CNN posted two polls that had different percentages and then a *FOX News* poll that tied the two candidates, thus illustrating how news programs use polls and declare their accuracy, when they have shown irregularities and unreliability. Michael Ross and Lorainne York explore *The Daily Show*’s humorous play on stereotypes to focus on America’s self-assurance and criticism. In “First They’re Foreigners: *The Daily Show* with Jon Stewart and the Limits of Dissident Laughter” they discuss how *The Daily Show* resists traditional media but simultaneously establishes new norms in awareness about important world affairs. “Four nights a week, Stewart and his collaborators wield the appealing anti-environmental tool of comedy to probe the complex topography of twenty-first-century American public affairs” (Ross & York 352).

The structure of *The Daily Show* illustrates its mockery of traditional broadcast news. Bostdorff would claim that Jon Stewart's humor highlights the over exaggerations in news stories, like FOX News's coverage of Obama's Big Bird commercial. He mocks the way in which news blows these stories out of proportion and critics would argue that this causes the viewer to reject the original coverage. Furthermore, Jon Stewart's anchor bit and faux reporters use comedy to illustrate the frivolous nature of traditional news broadcasts. "Stewart has emerged as our voice of sanity in a sea of insanity in a new media age with its ephemeral nature and lack of substance" (Parsi 4). Supporters of Stewart argue that his humor acts as an effective channel in the midst of a shallow and embellished news world. "Hard news has shifted to punditry. Facts have given way to opinions" (Parsi 4). The introduction in *The Daily Show* impresses upon its audience an overemphasized mockery of the classic newsroom fashion.

Bostdorff's concept of burlesque illustrates that mockery unmasks distortions. Stewart scribbles on his paper as an impersonation of typical news anchors and their efforts to seem credible. In this episode on October 4th 2012, he dramatizes the coverage of the debate by first emphasizing, "there is only an America that can't believe how bad this guy [Obama] did in the debate!" (*Daily Show*). In the course of his title flashing "Democalypse 2012" (*Daily Show*) and the sequence of other news show clips, he jokes about the very nature of how news has covered the debate. Stewart highlights the immediacy of attacks on Obama after his performance and further focuses on superficiality with the sound on/off clip and the nude *Titanic* caricature of Romney. Stewart spends most of his time in *The Daily Show*, poking fun at the incongruities he recognizes in daily life. Although he tends to illustrate his liberal point of view, *The Daily Show* adamantly tries to play both sides. Jon Stewart is not the symbol of idealism in American culture; inevitably every program on television today contains bias. Rather, he is the actor in the

performance of a show that works to uncover the manipulation of broadcast news. The particular episode studied from October 4th is laden with images and commentary, including Osama Bin Laden sitting with a cartoon octopus, to play up just how absurd traditional coverage has become.

In Bostdorff's work, Burke's concept of burlesque explains that images like this alter the viewer's perception from taking the issue at a serious level to leaving the image with a smile (201). Overall, Stewart uses his "Polish the Turd" (*Daily Show*) game to prove that news illustrates falsehoods when they try to buff up negative information for their own benefit. The very nature of news should be fact-based reporting, not providing audiences with flourished diction. However it is also significant to recognize that the mediation process itself alters information transmission.

In the second episode discussed, Jon Stewart points out that the nature of news gives a sense of false optimism that coincides with the networks' values. His joke about how Obama will be happy if he wins the post-election highlights the flaw in one anchor's argument about Obama winning the post-debate. Stewart also brings up how frequently the news has covered Romney's Big Bird comment from the first debate. Furthermore, a focus of Stewart involved what he calls news's "addiction to polls" (Jon Stewart). Not only does he play a montage of twelve different channels with different polls in a matter of twenty-six seconds but also displays a poll on polls. He ultimately tries to demonstrate the nonsensical nature of news utilizing polls as accurate evidence to support arguments. Stewart's comedic method through his use of facials, voices and gestures he highlights what to distrust about traditional news. "Through these vocal and linguistic shifts, Stewart amplifies a critical argument" (Waisanen 124).

Political Satire in the Public Sphere

Jürgen Habermas argues that new forms of media transmission altered the public sphere in bourgeois society. When the second half of the 18th century introduced newspapers, there was a transition from literary journalism of private individuals to public services of mass media (Habermas 53). Self-regulation in public discourse became regulated by the state and this tangled the bourgeois social and political worlds (Habermas 54). More recently, a transformation occurred from traditional broadcast news as the primary source of political information, to late night and satirical news shows taking hold of political participants. The ideals associated with Habermas' public sphere reveal that news will never deliver the fact-based reporting that is promised. Instead, the commodification of television news presents the postmodern dilemma: mediated processes always alter information that is transmitted; there is no pure "news". This realization, then, reframes how to view *The Daily Show* as a critique of traditional news shows, and asks us to investigate the strengths and weaknesses of the shift to satire and comedy in the political landscape.

Although the content of television news seems candid and informational, almost all media reflect bias. Unfortunately, society deals not only with corporate greed, but also the consequence of believing that television creates and reflects reality. Shows like *Studio 60 On the Sunset Strip* and movies like *Network* have attempted to reveal the gate keeping function of news sources to viewers as a struggle between art, commerce and political pressure. In *Packaging the Presidency*, Kathleen Hall Jamieson, she recognizes that the messages constantly put forth by the news can be mistaken for infallible truth, when the reality is quite different. "News has the potential to underscore false claims and inferences instead of undercutting them. In fact, by replaying ads in reports that examine strategy instead of substance, news can legitimize

distortions and give them free air time” (Hall-Jamieson xxii). As a result, satirical news emerged in response to traditional news distortions. While critics argue that comedic news programs promote cynicism toward traditional sources of information, they fail to recognize the benefits of humor to a generation heavily reliant on entertainment.

“John Thompson defined ‘ideology’ as ‘the ways in which meaning (signification) serves to sustain relations of domination’” (Sillars & Gronbeck 262). Sillars and Gronbeck discuss a nineteenth century developing definition of an ideology as a consciousness given to the lower classes by the powerful. Ideological criticism “recognizes the ways that questions of power, class, race, gender, and dominant institutions influence the way humans think about their world” (262). In the case of looking at television news, this paper utilizes ideological criticism to break down how news writers and producers have social power that influences audience perceptions of politics. Television news functions as a vehicle through which ideologies get projected, but it also reflects its own overarching ideologies. Through narrative structures the news creates and reinforces stories involving antagonists and protagonists in the everyday world (265). Network newscasts stick to traditional reporting and sharing of information through field reporters and in-studio anchors, while satirical news shows, like *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* work to break down the inaccuracies and exaggerations present in those traditional news shows. Bostdorff defines a metaphor as “a rhetorical device that performs the function of perspective, allowing us to see ‘something in *terms* of something else’” (Bostdorff 202). Based upon this definition, the news shows discussed are in themselves metaphors. Although they are reporting about events that occur in the Presidential Campaign, their hidden agendas and political biases are apparent through the use of music, graphics, text and content. Furthermore, Neil Postman in *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business* suggests that media is a

metaphor and the technology of information transmission is itself a more relevant factor than the content of shows. He argues that media channels such as television only serve the purpose of relaying images and information while audiences consume and submit rather than actively engage it (5). The news, where society goes to obtain information about their local, nation and global worlds, convey more meaning and contains more manipulation than meets the eye.

Roderick Hart and Johanna Hartelius in “The Political Sins of Jon Stewart” explore the serious consequences of Jon Stewart’s sarcasm and pessimism toward traditional institutions. Hart and Hartelius argue that rather than relying on cynicism to challenge politics, society needs to utilize skepticism to orient with global issues. They claim “unlike the cynic, the skeptic can have faith in human institutions because they are fashioned by group effort, not by lone individuals, and because the ravages of time rarely vanquish them” (Hart & Hartelius 771). It is no wonder that time cannot conquer political institutions considering how the patterns of domination will not falter in a society governed by hegemonic norms. Television news programs rely on the collective unconscious to allow patterned mediated processes that instill cultural biases and predispositions. This is not to say that Jon Stewart perfects the practice of information transmission, but instead that traditional institutions have the advantage of conventional foundations. Furthermore, Hart and Hartelius assert, “Jon Stewart’s use of cynicism constitutes a performance, a construction in the truest sense of the term. His discourses are both an art form and a style, a type of display more than a type of argument. As such, Stewart’s performances become ends in themselves rather than ways of changing social or political realities” (266).

Lisa Colleta’s article in the *Journal of Popular Culture* discusses the notion that ironic or comedic television like the *Daily Show*, poses the problem of creating inactive societal participants. She argues that the negative views of the media put forth in these shows cause

audiences to become uninformed and disinterested. Colleta quotes Rob Wilkie: “this logic leads to a cynical lack of engagement and a stifling of real and meaningful debate; it is simply another way of enunciating democracy itself with a wink and a nod”(858). Similar to Neil Postman, Colleta recognizes the consequences of allowing television to entertain audiences with a lack of active cognitive and critical thinking. “Awareness of incongruity – if it is viewed with enough distance – creates laughter, and as Freud suggested, moves us into an appreciate of aesthetic form rather than to action” (Colleta 872). Nonetheless, Stewart has the ability to captivate an audience, and whether or not it is fastened to tradition, it illustrates success in information distribution. Even Jon Stewart himself poses the question “What’s more cynical than forming an ideological news network like Fox and calling it ‘fair and balanced’?” (Jon Stewart).

In addition, Hart and Hartelius make the case that politics “depends on serious beliefs seriously pursued” (267) while “Stewart’s antics let him evade critical interrogation, thereby making him a fundamentally anti-political creature” (264). Similar to Colletta, Hart and Hartelius accuse Stewart of making light of serious issues but not holding himself accountable for distancing audiences from politics. This notion rests on the idea that society can trust traditional news. However, Habermas suggests that society cannot depend on corporations that do not thrive in public interest but rather in private financial welfare. As a result of doubt in traditional institutions, satirists use comedy to offer different perspectives. So although Hart and Hartelius claim that “Jon Stewart & Co. are bullies who force us into one and only one way of imagining the world” (269), they fail to realize *The Daily Show* does not encourage tunnel-vision, but instead engages in a multi-faceted way of consuming political news.

Unlike Hart and Hartelius, W. Lance Bennett and Robert Hariman take on the challenge of defending Jon Stewart in their articles structured as defense cases. Hariman argues “Stewart is

not a cynic but rather a parodist, a satirist, a comic engaging in political humor in the manner of Aristophanes, Erasmus, Mark Twain, Will Rogers, Richard Pryor, Garry Trudeau, and many, many others, all of whom also could be accused of the additional crime of being popular” (Hariman 274). Both Bennet and Hariman realize that although comedy itself proposes a superficial way of thinking, it can also “offer the freedom to make associations that fall outside the bounds of ideologies and other preordained truths” (Bennet 279). Similarly, Bostdorff uses Burke’s ideas to argue that satire causes the viewer to see inverted images and therefore generate a clearer understanding of the uninverted subject. Stewart, and other comedy news programs may contain their own elements of hyperbole, but ultimately these shows attempt to break free of dominant norms and encourage viewers to challenge hegemonic frames in traditional news. The shows also provide audiences with the chance to learn through entertaining devices. Hariman notes that *The Daily Show* audience between 18 and 29 years old actually proved to be more knowledgeable about politics than others who did not watch the show (274). He asserts that humor in political news coverage is not a detriment to democracy and uses sarcasm to project his thoughts on traditional journalism:

Banish the critic in his fool’s cap if you believe that politics has no room for laughter; banish him if you believe that there can only be one tone to public speech, the tone of the censor; banish him if you believe that politics today deserves nothing but earnest appreciation; and banish him if you believe that journalists today are doing a heck of a job. (276)

Hariman and Bennett argue for the benefits of Jon Stewart’s satirical style, but it is also important to recognize comedy’s effects on people’s perception of politics. Critics of Jon Stewart claim that *The Daily Show* engages in cynicism toward politics and the way traditional media

cover political issues. However, don't all institutions follow a structure that involves some elements of storytelling and persuasive appeals? It is in fact, the discourse of storytelling involved in both traditional news and satirical news that imparts audiences with the tools to unveil the dominant processes in political media. Jon Stewart provides a different guide to what "more politics" could look like. Jon Stewart's form and style differ from that of traditional newsrooms, however he ultimately provides a more contemporary and progressive way of understanding the news.

Don Waisanen in his application of Burke's work to comedic political programs argues that "comically framed perspective by incongruity [was] at the apex of Kenneth Burke's theories of how human beings can best relate to and build community with one another. He invested morally to the idea that, 'mankind's only hope is a cult of comedy'" (Waisanen 136). Furthermore, Bennett's defense of Jon Stewart recognizes that in comedic news shows, "audiences are invited to consider the incongruous and possibly absurd elements of political events" (Bennett 279). Moreover, the conclusions of Y.M. Kim and John Vishak's study on political information acquisition, suggest that viewers of traditional news more accurately store political information, while entertainment news audiences more often perform further political research. Kim and Vishak found that both entertainment media and traditional news coexist to balance out the political landscape. The contrast of traditional news and satirical news present in political discourse constitutes a healthy democratic public sphere. "Cornelius Castoriadis added to this perspective the idea that for democracy to work not only do people have to have a passion for public values, social responsibility, and participation in society, but they also need to have access to those public spaces that guarantee the rights of free speech, dissent, and critical dialogue" (Giroux 17). In this sense, Jon Stewart takes advantage of these rights and works to

provide people “with the knowledge and skills to be able to participate” (Giroux 17) in a society “capable of self-criticism and social criticism” (Giroux 17). Hart and Hartelius’s conclusions that “the long view of history finds that the only solution to bad politics is more politics” (272) is combated by Waisanen who argues that satirical critics like Jon Stewart “critique and innovate upon the suasive phenomenon of contemporary public life, to activate new insights about acts of human communication” (Waisanen 120).

Waisanen explores further Burke’s element of perspective by incongruity and claims that it “can remoralize (Dow, 1994), jarring people into new perceptions about their constructions of reality (Rockler, 2002). The comic frame further provides what Burke calls ‘maximum consciousness,’ or a point from which human beings can perceive social inconsistencies” (Waisanen 121). Bostdorff’s work contributes to this definition of perspective by incongruity through Burke’s contention that each person has “a bundle of judgments as to how things were, how they are, and how they may be” (Bostdorff 198). She argues that incongruities, specifically created in comedy, provide new orientations to those preconceived judgments. Furthermore, in shows like *The Daily show*, “comic strategies are more than simply techniques for creating entertainment – they are tools for rhetorical criticism with sociopolitical application” (Waisanen 134). Jon Stewart ultimately provides social commentary on politics, and offers younger generation of political participants an angle that is both entertaining and easy to understand. “Young voters have traditionally been the lowest demographic to turn out on Election Day (Jasperson & Yun, 2007; O’Toole, Lister, Marsh, Jones & McDonagh, 2003). Yet, the success of *The Daily Show* and similar programming in enticing young audiences may indicate that they may be interested in politics, just via nontraditional venues (Feldman, 2005, p.2)” (Meddaugh 377).

It is important to recognize that although Stewart's style and form stray away from traditional news, his delivery cannot be deemed right or wrong. Rather, he provides audiences with merely a different type of guide to the political sphere. Waisanen and Meddaugh both recognize that comedic news shows generate a spark of interest in politics that is influential in creating active democratic participants. *The Daily Show* works to highlight the failures of traditional institutions and is continuously "challenging the hegemonic discourse that so often governs our daily lives" (Meddaugh 387). Overall, Jon Stewart produces an antidote to audiences imprisoned by the long-standing structure of traditional broadcast news. "When the public is being deceived or misled, is it, in fact, cynical to expose the deception or distortion or is it simply being realistic?" (Bennett 279).

Xiaoxia Cao puts *The Daily Show* to the test and focuses on the direct correlation between viewers of soft news programs and their attentiveness to political issues. Cao concludes that comedic news show audiences better understand political issues because late night programs present information in less confusing ways. "Extended to *The Daily Show*, this logic suggests that receiving information about a political issue on the program can increase viewers' attentiveness to additional information about the topic because they will find the topic entertaining and easy to understand" (Cao 31). Contrary to the arguments that humor and entertainment contribute to more a knowledgeable and active generation, Hart and Hartelius claim that the work of Jon Stewart impairs democracy. "Mr. Stewart cleverly claims to advance the tenets of democracy during his nightly assignments while in truth leading the Children of Democracy astray. He plants in them a false knowledge, a trendy awareness that turns them into bawdy villains and wastrels" (Hart & Hartelius 263). In the same way, Cao argues "Jon Stewart may increase the sense of alienation from the political process among those who already feel

detached from the process by cultivating mistrust in the political system (Baumgartner & Morris, 2006)” (Cao 43). While both notions assert that Jon Stewart steers society away from being active in democracy, it is equally significant to recognize that “Jon Stewart’s perspective may stimulate political participation among apolitical citizens by increasing their confidence in their own ability to understand political issues (Baumgartner & Morris, 2006)” (Cao 43). Therefore, *The Daily Show* acts as a forum for discussion about the nature of the news and politics, providing an arena for a healthy and democratic public sphere.

The debate about whether or not satirical news fosters or hinders democracy has its foundations in the argument that traditional news is overrun by privatization and commodification. “In the last decade, the representative functions of democracy have been severely compromised in light of a political system whose policies are shaped by powerful corporations and the imperatives of the rich” (Giroux 12). Certain evaluations of news entertainment assert that Jon Stewart’s ironic frames make people shy away from politics. However, almost all “professional media productions shape and distort more complex realities” (Bennett 279). *The Daily Show* takes a critical lens to traditional broadcast news, and the consumption of Stewart’s criticism alone can also “distort” a viewer’s perception of the political arena. Nonetheless, Jon Stewart has been able to change the way viewers interpret politics and news, and he is a prime example of a contemporary media critic.

Furthermore, the Frontline Documentary *Digital Nation: Life on the Virtual Frontier* explores society’s total immersion in technology. Technology is a tool that has the ability to reach millions and author Henry Giroux claims, the “vision of the good society has now been replaced with visions of individual happiness characterized by an endless search for instant gratification” (Giroux 9). Frontline introduces the notion that younger generations need to be

stimulated more so than ever before. The world requires participants to remain actively engaged and will not ask audiences to prioritize memory or wait passively. Society now requires its members to be fluent in technological communication and be able to solve problems independently. Overall, children in recent generations have grown up in a fast-paced, growing technological world and do not have a choice but to keep up. The documentary introduces the notion that traditional forms of education and communication cannot be abandoned, but rather that change needs to be accepted. It amplifies the idea that it is vital to not only learn but also teach with the idea that things are constantly transforming. Despite some critic's hesitancy toward technological advances, the documentary argues that society will be better off if they are willing to explore and be open-minded.

Ultimately, the Internet encourages people to do more research on their own. "Technology challenges us to assert our human values" (Turkle *Frontline*). Based on this notion, active participants on the Internet are contributing to the breakdown of the hierarchies in traditional institutions. Although the government plays a role in traditional news' agendas, neither institution can currently keep up with the pace of the Internet. Despite attempts of traditional structures to centralize information and control audience views, the Internet counteracts those efforts. It provides the opportunity for engagement in information acquisition that challenges news programs' authority in media. The wide access to research and information has a democratizing effect on society.

Overall, the character of Howard Beil in *Network* reflects some reality when it comes to how audiences can create agency. He claims that humans are incapable of truth but are very capable of taking action. *Network* pushes the notion that viewers cannot change the nature of

television news but can take action by voicing their opinions. He encourages audiences to realize their value and stop automatically consenting to the entertainment media provides.

Critics argue that democracy is dying and the idea that this country is dedicated to its peoples' freedom is finished. Television tells society what they want to hear and are willing to peddle anything for the truth because the value of the dollar means more to corporations than the benefits of truth to viewers. Unfortunately, television dehumanizes society and compels it to obey rather than challenge. It's a society that is mass-produced and programmed to succumb to the commodification of information. James Watson's idea of media being society's watchdog is reflected through a *balance* between the traditional broadcast news and satirical news dialogue. So the truth *can* be a funny thing when accompanied by some evidence of accurate reporting. Ultimately, society needs a balanced diet of new forms of mediation but also needs to be cautious to avoid becoming consumed by media and technology.

In conclusion, critics claim that traditional broadcast news needs to return to the age of honest reporting, however, there is no evidence that a "golden age" of news coverage ever existed. Every program, even *The Daily Show*, is willing to call out their competitors on shortcomings but fail to realize that there is no such thing as true and objective reporting. In Plato's Allegory of the Cave the prisoners of the cave know only the world through shadows projected on the cave wall. Although one prisoner leaves the cave and returns in an attempt to share his discoveries with the remaining captives, they can only hear his echo and see his shadow. They can never truly understand the existence of the world but that does not make it any less real. Similarly, the American audience can never truly obtain reality through news but they must gain perspective through someone else's lens. They are subjected to merely the shadows of the truth through messages polluted by the predispositions of networks. A series like the *The*

Daily Show might also include flaws that affect a democratic public, but at least it aims to defend a society against media that appeal to a false consensus.

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