

What's So Funny?

A television historian and media critic examines the powerful effect of TV comedy on politics.

By Bernard M. Timberg

Beyond the question of the "liberal" and "conservative" bias so prevalent in the news looms a larger pattern. The nation experiences a crisis, a series of contradictions. The crisis precipitates massive comedy and news coverage and a national debate ensues. Some kind of consensus is eventually forged within the echo chamber of the comedy/news process, and life returns to normal. Or almost normal. There are always a few unresolved issues left lingering in the air.

In the marketplace of ideas and entertainment today, topical comedy no longer simply supplements or comments on the news. News and comedy work together. The result is, to put it more accurately, ComedyNews, not news alone, and it is ComedyNews that frames the central debates and provides the building blocks of public opinion.

The full force of this first came home to me in the days leading up to the war in Iraq. Day by day, while the trumpets of patriotism blared on TV and in newspaper headlines, I found I had to have my daily fix of the Jon Stewart *Daily Show*. My 17-year-old son joined me. It was my antidote, and his, to the daily news, and in this we were joined by approximately a million other viewers of the Comedy Central.

ComedyNews gave me nourishment as straight news starved me. The ComedyNews shows (Jon Stewart's. Bill

Maher's, Dennis Miller's) complemented the information I was getting on the Internet, from the foreign press, from NPR and CSPAN. They raised some of the same questions and critiques-but did so in a humorous vein. They were, in fact, the only places on commercial television (that sanctioned center of American public life) where I could count on intelligent reflection concerning, and wicked laughter at, the excesses of the American media system itself.

I realize that I was watching these shows as someone who had opposed the war from the beginning. Those who supported the war might have been more comfortable watching Bill O'Reilly or Fox News rather than Bill Maher on HBO, listening to Rush Limbaugh rather than Jon Stewart, or enjoying Dennis Miller's rants against wishy-washy liberals. But all of us, for the war, against it, or on the fence, were participating in the same giant ComedyNews machine-an echo chamber that included the monologues, skits and commentaries of late night comedians as well as the reasoned prognostication of news and foreign affairs analysts.

The voices of comedy news I was hearing on television – of Jon Stewart, Bill Maher, Dennis Miller and their guests – were not just more entertaining than the traditional news, they were more substantial as well. I was finding an honesty in the political discussions of

these shows that was lacking in "straight" news. The hosts were not trying to hide their opinions behind a veil of objectivity that did not exist. What I was seeing in *ComedyNews*, was more fun, more enlightening, and I was learning more than from the newscasts I was watching.

If a metaphor might be used, it was as if real-world events (the concrete steps taken by the Bush Administration in the build-up to the war in Iraq, for example) plucked the strings of a giant guitar. The first strings struck represented first responders – the reporters and comedy commentators who could

be counted on to respond to the news events in precise and relatively predictable ways. Then came the follow-up commentary by columnists, editorialists, polemicists, cartoonists and wits of all kinds – on radio and TV, on the Internet and in the printed press. These were more varied.

News events amplified in the sound box were, for example, a contested national political election (the Florida Presidential elections of 2000), a debate before the UN (Colin Powell's presentation justifying the Bush Administration preparations for war), a soldier's capture and rescue (the Jessica Lynch story), a political stump speech (Howard Dean's famous "I Have a Scream" speech), or a series of shocking



Jon Stewart, host of *The Daily Show*.

reports on torture and prisoner abuse in Baghdad. The last four happened within a year of each other, and proved how rapidly even a topic as difficult as torture could be turned into a news and comedy trope.

After the first responders, all the other comedy and news sources that kicked in constituted the sound box of the guitar, picking up and reverberating the sounds of the initial commentary. It was an imperfect sound box to be sure—more sensitive to some tones than others, and prone to blending tones together without, at a certain point, any limits or effort to reproduce the original sound. There were some discordant notes, but within a relatively short period of time the sound that emerged from the box

sounded good and seemed coherent, without deeper examination.

But was the crisis that precipitated the ComedyNews cycle truly resolved? Usually not, or only seemingly so. The media (now pronounced almost universally in the singular, as it accomplishes its collective mission) had accomplished a small miracle. Through a synthesis and convergence of views, through a process of normative reasoning in newspaper articles and editorials, through jokes we all came to know and laugh at together because they represented the "common sense" of the nation, a consensus emerges. The consensus allowed the nation to go on, to live through this period of sharp questioning of its central values, to come to terms with a social fact, a contradiction, an unresolved paradox perhaps, and go about its business. What the media had done, in fact, was to construct what Levi-Strauss called a society's of myth: "a logical model capable of overcoming a contradiction, which is impossible."

Let's take a take a look at a single example of how this process worked in the ComedyNews machine's processing of the Howard Dean "I Have A Scream" speech.

Dean was the one outside-the-Beltway anti-war candidate who seemed to have a chance to win. His campaign ended abruptly in a series of stunning primary defeats, the first of which was in the Iowa caucus in January 2004. What started out as an impassioned political stump speech on the day the results became, when the media was finished with it, one of the final nails in Howard Dean's political coffin.

In the days before the Iowa primary

Dean, the front runner, had been caricatured unmercifully, by his opponents and by sources in the press, as a "loose cannon," a guy who was frequently "out of control," who "shot from the lip." His "I Have A Scream" speech seemed to confirm this, and it was followed by a torrent of news and comedy commentary that led to a consensus – Dean was just not right for the job.

There was only one problem with the "I Have a Scream Speech" that seemed to show Dean so obviously and completely out of control. The video that people saw over and over again on all of the networks and comedy shows (replayed, by one count, over 200 times in the two days following the speech), was not what people saw and heard in the arena that day in Iowa at all. It was a media-created effect – the product of a filter-mike. This kind of mike, as Diane Sawyer pointed out in her careful report several days later, filters out surrounding sounds. The mike makes it appear as if the speaker is speaking alone. The filter mike can turn an impassioned collective roar – as a camera within the arena showed it – into a crazy, wild, individual "scream." And it could make Howard Dean look crazy, out-of-it, deranged.

How could something that was really an illusion created by a microphone play such a crucial role in a political campaign? Because it created a moment on the screen that was funny; because it was an irresistible "get;" because it played perfectly to the theme then providing the base line in the ComedyNews machine. The lesson was clear. Comedy could build you up, and it could also tear you down

In the progression that had occurred from the national elections of 1992

through the elections of 1996 and 2000 and into the 2004 campaign season, national politicians learned that they had to come to terms with comedy. In 1999, George W. Bush's jokes and folksy charm

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had captivated the camera (and filmmaker Alexandra Pelosi, the daughter of Democratic Party leader Nancy Pelosi) in "Journeys with George," broadcast first on NBC and then HBO.

By the time of the 2004 elections, not just Bush but all the candidates had been compelled to master the comedy curve. In an earlier era Nixon had done his bit on *Hee Haw* and played piano on the Jack Paar Show. A much more natural performer, Bill Clinton, had appeared on MTV and put on dark glasses and to belt out a saxophone tune on the Arsenio Hall show. But somehow it was different now. The now the term "poli-tainment" rose up in the lexicon. Time magazine media critic Richard Zoglin used it to describe Michael Moore's work in his cover story on "Fahrenheit 9/11." And those who didn't play by the rules of this new form of politics, who didn't ride the curve of ComedyNews to the election polls, were, like Howard Dean, destined to fall off it.

Robert Thompson, resident television critic of the Newhouse School of Communication at Syracuse University, had for some time argued that late-night comedy hosts like Jay Leno and David Letterman constituted a new "Fifth Estate." Though Thompson was competing with others in his use of this term-it had also been used to refer to the rising power of broadcast journalism, and the new reach and power of the Internet-I think he was on to something.

Letterman and Leno, through their history of network dominance, were still the first-tier national comedy jesters. But now there was a burgeoning second tier. Political comedy and comedy commentary on the news had become a staple of HBO and the cable networks.

Polls showed that many Americans, especially young Americans, were like my son and me, taking in a variety of sources but getting their television news from Jon Stewart and the comedy channels – not the traditional news networks. And there was another, more subtle Zeitgeist shift going on. The spin, the liveliness, the urgency – where people looked for trends in the culture – had passed from the well-worn, relatively safe jokes of Leno and Letterman to a new edgier brand of comedy espoused by faux news hosts like Jon Stewart, Bill Maher and Dennis Miller, and Sacha Baron Cohen, the English television agent provocateur who appeared ersatz announcer, bull-in-the-china shop reporter and talk show host on *Da Ali G Show* on HBO. The fringe-time surrealistic political comedy of the Conan O'Brien occupied a space somewhere between the traditional late-night network comedy and the avant-garde cable shows.

Were these television comedians and news/comedy humorists simply the descendants of Mark Twain, Thomas Nast, H.L. Mencken, Will Rogers, Lenny Bruce and Richard Pryor? Or was something different going on? And what about the political candidates themselves? What was happening to them as they were compelled to participate in this comedy sport?

During the 2004 election season, one by one they came into the lion's den of

the late-night comedy talk: Howard Dean, Wesley Clark, Al Sharpton, Dennis Kucinich, John Kerry. Republicans came too. Bob Dole had paved the way in earlier campaigns. By now Rudolph Giuliani, mayor of New York, was a regular on *Saturday Night Live*. Even George W. Bush joined the fray – though he was careful to be Presidential about his exposure. They would, one by one, pay obeisance to the kings of comedy and prove themselves to have what the American people apparently wanted them to have – a certain comfort zone that they could impart, a sense of humor, a sense that there was a "real person" behind the political persona.

Comedy was clearly no longer peripheral to the political process. Comedy now was not just about the news; it often *was* the news. For example, when early in John Kerry's campaign Bush joked about the Democratic candidate's waffling, it made front-page news in the *Washington Post*. Later, when the President tried to defuse Democratic criticism by joking about the missing Iraqi weapons of mass destruction while searching under his table at a Press Association's annual roast, Kerry's response was immediate. "Not Funny, Kerry Says," was the next-day headline.

Looking back, it was the OJ Simpson case that set the stage for the rise of ComedyNews. It followed the full blown news event/media event/crisis/debate/consensus model I described earlier. When the jury reached a verdict in the OJ Simpson case in early October of 1995, the country was braced for a tidal wave of publicity, but nothing prepared the nation for what followed. The OJ Simpson verdict seized and held the

attention of the country for days – virtually stopping all normal work on the day it was announced. It precipitated a debate on celebrity, race and criminal justice that went on for months.

While news experts debated, and late-night comedy hosts lay back and delivered, both were coming to the same conclusion. The comedy shows were, in effect, playing the same joke, again and again. These jokes were all based on the same premise. Yes, OJ was guilty; inexplicably, race and mistrust of the police had trumped the obvious evidence.

Some voices – especially African-

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American and women's-movement voices – stood out against this "consensus." Some of those voices (including talk-show host Tom Snyder) supported the jury's verdict, based on the evidence it had before it. Others persisted in asking what happened to the issues of gender and domestic violence, and why those issues had been eclipsed by the debate over race and police procedure in the final days of the trial. But by and large these voices were forced to the margins, buried on the inside pages of opinion journals.

In the new consensus, such questions were beside the point. Leno and Letterman's jokes were echoed by thousands of others on the Internet and in the comedy clubs. The consensus that emerged from the ComedyNews echo chamber was far from solid, but it allowed public discourse, the ComedyNews machine itself, to move on. By dint of repetition and a focus on the trivial, comedy hosts, journalists and

commentators had reassured the public.

Three years later the Bill Clinton-Monica Lewinsky scandal gave the ComedyNews machine its greatest single boost since the invention of television: a sex scandal and a cover-up too juicy for words (and demanding daily pictures). Clinton sex jokes were not just good for days or weeks after the headlines subsided; they are still being told today. Letterman managed to slip one in to his monologue after Clinton's rehabilitation speech at the Democratic national convention in June 2004. The jokes of national comedy commentators were deemed as "truthful" as the news, maybe more so.

So what is the situation today? Could Robert Thompson be right? Could the future he predicted be upon us, with the First Estate, in medieval times the monarchy but in modern parlance the President, locked into a mortal engagement not just with the Fourth Estate, the news establishment, but with a powerful new Fifth Estate as well? Indeed, in the realm of credibility it appeared that TV newscasters were going down as comedy commentators went up, and that during the 2004 Presidential election year, it was ComedyNews, not news alone, that represented the new balance of power in American politics.

A frequent contributor to *Television Quarterly*, Bernard Timberg is the author of *Television Talk* (University of Texas Press 2002), which received the top *CHOICE* magazine award for academic publishing. This article is part of a book in progress on the role of humor in American politics. Mr. Timberg thanks Dan Amundson, Tom Schatz and Horace Newcomb for their counsel.