

# Fake News

One man's experience on *The Daily Show*  
with Jon Stewart. By **John V. Pavlik**

In the spring of 2005 I became something of an accidental celebrity on campus. I was a guest on *The Daily Show* with Jon Stewart. Since being on the show I have had students ask me for my autograph. I've seen attendance at my occasional public lectures swell significantly. Students have interviewed me for campus publications and television about what it's like to be on *The Daily Show*.

How did I, the chair of a department of journalism and media studies, come to be on this popular show specializing in "fake news"? What was it like being on a show which research has shown 21% of Americans 18-29 years of age say is a primary source of their news? By way of comparison, only a slightly higher percentage, 23%, of this age group report the major television evening news programs serve as a primary source of their news.

## How It All Started

As a department chair at Rutgers, the state university of New Jersey, I have seen significant funding cuts to our budget in recent years. These cuts have made our job increasingly difficult, sometimes forcing us to cut key programs, cancel classes and seek innovative alternative funding opportunities.

One unique opportunity developed in the fall of 2004 when the campus daily student newspaper agreed to sponsor the offering of our advanced reporting course, which we had been unable to offer the previous semester because of state funding cuts. In exchange for its support, the paper would be permitted to enroll a half-dozen of its reporting staff in the class, even though they were not majors in our department and might not have met all the prerequisites. Instead, the instructor of the course, a seasoned journalist with more than 20 years of daily newspaper reporting experience and a veteran journalism teacher in our department, would review each student's qualifications and decide on a case-by-case basis whether each should be admitted into the course.

I was pleased we were able to make this novel arrangement since otherwise we would not have been able to offer the class. Nevertheless, from the outset, I made clear to the editorial leadership of the student paper that this arrangement was an experimental one and might not be one we would want to repeat. I indicated that we would review the course at its conclusion and determine whether we would offer the course again with the sponsorship of the student newspaper (some \$5,000 per semester). Moreover, there might

be significant changes in how we would structure and teach the course. An important part of my job is to not just to find ways to offer our curriculum in an increasingly financially challenging time but to make sure that curriculum is of the highest possible quality.

At the conclusion of the course, it was clear that the class was a success. Ten of the 18 stories done by students in the course were published in the student newspaper, most running on page one. Not one of the stories published was challenged for accuracy. One of the stories, a series on tuition hikes, won a third-place award in the investigative and enterprise reporting category in the New Jersey Press Association's Better College Newspaper contest.

Yet the course had its problems. Some students were not properly identifying themselves when conducting interviews. I knew this first-hand because one student interviewed me for a story she said she was writing for the student newspaper but never mentioned she was also doing it as part of a class assignment. Some students were also relying extensively on email to conduct their interviews. I knew this because a student in the class attempted to interview me this way. Although email has its place in modern newsgathering, it does not and should not replace face-to-face interviewing or even audio interviews conducted over the telephone. Email can be used when following up with a source, or when other attempts to conduct in-person or phone interviews fail and deadline is fast-approaching. Otherwise, nuance and other important aspects of an interview can be lost. On the other hand, email responses from sources can guarantee accurate quotes, and the

value of this cannot be underestimated.

Overall, the biggest problem with the course, however, was that the students were settling in to a comfort zone that I wanted to break them out of. The advanced investigative course is our highest-level undergraduate reporting class. These students might not take another reporting course before graduating, and I wanted to make sure they were challenged to get beyond the comfort of the campus. In this course as in our many other reporting courses students do much of their reporting on campus, covering campus stories.

After the conclusion of the semester, I reviewed the course with the instructor and discussed changes that needed to be made to improve the course, including getting the students to fully identify themselves, not over-rely on email to do their interviews, and to get students off campus for their reporting. This last change I felt was the most important, because it would insure that our students would not graduate without ever having conducted at least one investigation off-campus. This would be vital to them in pursuing their professional careers as journalists. Beginning reporters need to know where city hall is. They need to know how government works. They need to know how to pursue a story beyond the ivy covered walls of the campus.

As exciting as this story might have been, it never would have captured the attention of *The Daily Show* without a bit of additional drama. The drama came in the form of a student who did two investigations in the course, the first of which was published in the student paper. It dealt with the use, or lack of use, of student course evaluations in various academic departments and by

faculty. She interviewed me for this story.

Her second investigation, a critical examination of the university's athletics program, was rejected by the student paper as being too opinionated. The paper's editors asked her to make certain changes, particularly adding balance by expanding the sources used, but she declined. The editors also offered to publish the article on the op/ed page, but she again declined.

### ***Inside Higher Ed* alleged that the university was censoring its students. This was completely unfounded.**

Then my story started to pick up steam. An online education news source (*Inside Higher Ed*, <http://www.insidehighered.com/>) caught wind of the developments, and decided to run a story suggesting a link between the student paper's rejection of the athletics story and my separate and unrelated decision to focus future offerings of the course off campus. It was alleged that the university was censoring its students, banning them from reporting critically about the campus, particularly the athletics program. This was completely unfounded. The student paper is independently run, and I had no contact with the paper or its editors since the beginning of the semester. Further, the student paper has recently run other articles critical of the athletics program. My decision was completely my own, and was not the result of any pressure from the university, the athletics department or central administration. Focusing off campus was entirely intended to improve the

course by getting the students to cover a wider range of stories than just the campus. After further discussion, I modified my decision so that students could cover the campus, as long as they also did at least one off-campus investigation. This is the approach we are continuing to use in the course.

After the story ran online, the state's press picked up the story's scent. Within days, reporters from a half-dozen of the state's newspapers called me for an interview. They wanted to know why we were censoring our students. I tried to explain that we were not, but most had already made up their minds and only wanted to get a good quote from me.

### ***The Daily Show* Gets Interested**

Since our campus is located just a few miles from New York City, producers for *The Daily Show* caught wind of the swirling controversy, and decided this was rich fodder for a humor piece that would appeal to college-age students, a prime component of the show's audience. An assistant producer called my office and asked if I would be willing to be interviewed on the show. I have a policy of accepting all media interview requests, so I said yes. The assistant producer asked me if I could just tell him a bit about the situation, and so I did. I briefly summed up the background of the course and how it came to offered with the support of the student paper, how we had decided in advance to review the course at the end of the semester, and might make changes, how and why. I explained how many of the students in the course had stories published, and how the editors'



**"Correspondent" Ed Helms**

decisions were completely independent of me or the department, that there was no censorship and no connection between my decision to modify course and the paper's rejection of the athletics story. The assistant producer told me that this was exactly what they would like me to say on the show. I knew the program was a comedy show specializing in satirizing the day's news and thought he was no doubt being at least a bit a disingenuous in order to discourage me from getting cold feet and changing my mind about being on the show. I was curious to see how they would frame things for the greatest comedic/satiric effect. I figured he was simultaneously trying to get as much background on me as he could, how I

was likely to talk about the situation. He would report back to his fellow *The Daily Show* producers so they could plan their attack.

## **The "correspondent," Ed Helms, is a stand-up comedian. He has no background in journalism.**

Over the next two weeks producers and assistant producers from the show called me several times, conducting additional "pre-interviews." The lead producer on the show, Stu Miller, explained how he was in fact an experienced journalist. He had studied journalism as an undergraduate student at New York University, and had even been editor of NYU's student daily newspaper. Then, after graduation, he spent several years as an assistant producer for CBS News at the network level. He never said anything funny, and never said anything to imply he was planning a comedy bit, although obviously I knew he was. He went out of his way to impress me with his journalistic credentials, and used various techniques and terminology common to television news. He talked about the "pre-interview", "the "interview", and the "correspondent" who would interview me. After scheduling and rescheduling the interview a couple of times, we finally settled on a date in March when the "news" team, as he called them, could come to campus and conduct the interview. Coincidentally, the date was during our campus spring break, and I explained that there would not be many students around, but they

said that was ok and would not be a problem.

The day finally arrived and I waited in my office for *The Daily Show* news team to arrive at 4 p.m. as scheduled. They did in fact arrive at 4:30 p.m. and began to set up. It seemed relatively small team for a national show, with one producer, the correspondent, Ed Helms, a camera operator and a sound/lighting operator. As the technicians began to set up, the producer, Stu Miller, and I chatted. He started with reminding me of his news credentials, and then asked me a few friendly softball questions about the story to loosen me up and help me relax. Meanwhile, the “correspondent” avoided me. He paced outside my office in the hallway. Other than that, the situation reminded me very much of another time when I had been interviewed about Internet rumors many years ago by Lesley Stahl of CBS News’ *60 Minutes*. But, it was peculiar that Helms seemed to be actively avoiding me. He seemed like an actor trying to get into his part. On *The Daily Show* web site ([http://www.comedycentral.com/shows/the\\_daily\\_show/index.jhtml](http://www.comedycentral.com/shows/the_daily_show/index.jhtml)) Helms’s official biography explains his background is in stand-up comedy. “For years Ed worked in the comedy trenches as a stand-up comedian, eventually earning regular spots at NYC’s top comedy clubs and an appearance on the Fall 2002 season of Comedy Central’s Premium Blend.” He has no background in journalism.

After about 20 minutes, the set-up was complete and the interview began. I was seated in my office and Helms sat opposite from me with the single camera shooting over his shoulder at me. From this point on, it quickly became clear that this was a fake-news

comedy show and not real news. Just before the first question, the producer handed me a release and asked me to please sign. He said without this signed release, they could not proceed. It was a standard release and I signed. Actual television news programs do not require guests or interviewees to sign a release, unless they are legal minors.

Then, also unlike a typical news interview, the correspondent clearly had no idea what he should ask me. Instead, Stu Miller handed him a list of questions, or rather, a numbered list of questions, from 1 to approximately 30. Miller had a copy and he sat just outside of the camera’s field of view. Helms said, now what should I ask? Miller responded by stating a series of numbers, such as 7, 9, 14. Helms would then ask question 7, and I would answer. Then he would ask question 9, and I would respond. Then he would ask question 14 and I would speak. Then Helms would say, I don’t know where to go from here, what should I ask? The producer, the “journalistic” brains of the operation, would then identify another three or so questions by number only...obviously in order to keep me from knowing what Helms was going to ask and to keep me in the dark as long as possible, hoping to get me to answer with as little preparation as possible, perhaps laughing, pausing or clearing my throat in a way that they could later edit to make me look silly, sinister or stupid.

After roughly three hours of the “interview” the crew then re-set up, pointing the camera at the correspondent. He was then going to re-ask the questions, this time for the camera and the microphone. Notably, the questions he asked this time did not

correspond precisely to the questions he had actually asked me. The wording was somewhat different (e.g., “do you expect me to believe that” versus “do you really expect me to believe that”). They were sometimes asked in different sequence (e.g., 7, 9, 14 versus 14, 9, 7). Sometimes, he would ask the question three or four times, each time somewhat differently, trying different inflection and tone. Miller would coach him, telling him to ask it this way or that way (e.g., one time accent “really” and another time accent “that”). It was clear to me that they were making sure that they would have the best possible phrasing to edit for greatest comedic effect back at the studio. In some cases, entirely new questions were asked. Some were cleverly orchestrated and prepared sight gags, some slapstick.

At one point, the producer pulled out his cell phone and made a phone call. A moment later Helms’s cell phone rang and he answered it. It was the producer calling him. But Helms pretended it was someone else. As he extended his arm in my direction, apparently attempting to hand me his cell phone he said, “It’s for you.” But, quickly he said, “No, wait, it’s your student...don’t answer it.” He pulled the phone back, stood up, ran to my office door, opened it, and tossed the phone out, all the while the camera operator trying to catch it on videotape. Later, Helms retrieved his phone, unharmed, and I was impressed by its durability.

The final three-minute piece featured about a minute of my interview, a couple minutes of the student whose athletics story had been rejected by the student paper, and another few seconds of correspondent Ed Helms throwing a stack of newspapers into a garbage can.

One particularly interesting segment featured Helms leading our student into the “athletics” department, explaining to her that he would show her how to do investigative journalism. He walked up to the receptionist and said, I’m here to interview the athletics director. The receptionist said, I’m sorry, he’s in a meeting. Helms simply said, oh, ok, and turned around and left with our student in tow. This was meant as ironic humor, a commentary on the pathetic state of investigative journalism in the real world of television news. But, what made the segment truly funny—but funny only to those in the know—was the fact that the supposed athletics department office Helms visited was not actually the athletics department. It was a fake athletics department, apparently an office at a Viacom property in Manhattan, Viacom being the parent company that owns both Comedy Central (of which *The Daily Show* is a part) and CBS. Another ironic although not necessarily funny twist was the fact that the crew that visited the campus forgot to follow one of the basic rules of television news, one even beginning television-news-reporting students know to follow: shoot some B-roll (or background video). *The Daily Show* crew neglected to shoot any campus B-roll which they could use to establish the location as Rutgers. Consequently, two days before the segment was scheduled to air, they called me with a frantic request: could I messenger them some B-roll of the campus? They would pay for the messenger. I said sure, and our top-notch broadcast instructor, Steve Miller, got them some campus B-roll shot by one of our best broadcasting students. When the piece aired, the B-roll was a key part of the segment.

Stu Miller, the lead producer, never answered my question about his use of a particular piece of terminology during the interview. Several times he referred to “the tell.” I’ve since asked him several times to explain just what he meant, and his response was he couldn’t remember saying that and implied he didn’t know what I was talking about. From how he used it during the interview, I suspect it means a question or phrase they use

from the correspondent to set up a joke or piece of irony, something that helps gets to the true facts. In his 1965 novel, *The Source*, James A. Michener describes an ancient archeological site in western Galilee “the tell.” It is a site that reveals the truth of the past. Perhaps this was the producer’s intent. Unfortunately, I don’t think he’ll ever tell.

Copyright © 2005 by John V. Pavlik

---

Before joining the Rutgers School of Communications, Information and Library Studies as chair of the Department of Journalism and Media Studies in 2002, John V. Pavlik was professor and executive director of the Center for New Media at the Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism and professor director of the School of Communication at San Diego State University.