

# Laughter Helps Interpret the News

*The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* is an ombudsman that calls attention to the successes and failings of our democracy. | **By Kristen Heflin**

*Humor is something that thrives between man's aspirations and his limitations. There is more logic in humor than in anything else. Because, you see, humor is truth.* — Victor Borge

**H**umor and parody have long been used to make comments about society that would seem crass without a punch line. From Borge to Belushi, comics have poked fun at our world and called attention to our problems. Much as Richard Pryor shined a light on race relations in the 70's, Jon Stewart and *The Daily Show* expose the failings of our democracy today.

Since 1999 Stewart and the cast of *The Daily Show* have served up nightly laughs and, more recently, intensely critical commentary on our press and politicians — commentary that is often lacking in traditional news outlets. Although Jon Stewart and the cast say things few journalists would ever dream of, the show does more than make

viewers laugh: it exposes the workings of political and social institutions, giving viewers valuable insight into the way our democracy functions.

After spending a year researching, watching and analyzing *The Daily Show*, I have found that it consistently issues some surprisingly harsh indictments of our political and media institutions. In a sense, the show is an ombudsman that calls attention to the successes and failings of our democracy. It produces its own brand of investigative journalism, one that tears off the façade of talking points and exposes the inner workings of the press and politics.

## **Not just a funny monkey**

Using humor and parody, the show criticizes the traditional news media for not fulfilling its civic duty. In a sophisticated democratic society like ours, the media have an important role to play. The media should strive to provide innovative, substantive and diverse discourse on the state

of our government and other social institutions that affect us all.

*The Daily Show* frequently criticizes the press for not fulfilling this important role. Using clips of media coverage and commentary, Stewart often blasts the traditional television media for not giving viewers the tools to process important information about our society. The show's criticisms usually portray news programs as either left-right yelling contests that pretend to offer analysis or as avenues for politicians to air pre-scripted talking points.

One clear example of Stewart's opinion of the press comes from an episode following his now infamous appearance on CNN's *Crossfire*. During his appearance on the show, Stewart tells the hosts the program is "hurting" America by featuring partisan shout-fests instead of substantive analysis. Stewart's commentary surprised the hosts and the clip of his intensely critical assessment of the program was one of the most popular Internet downloads of 2005.

During the first *Daily Show* episode following the *Crossfire* eruption, Stewart tackles the press again. This time he criticizes the news media for their continual focus on Mary Cheney's lesbianism instead of focusing on the important issues of the presidential election.

He sarcastically says, "Now that the debates are over, both candidates have staked out their positions on domestic policy, the war in Iraq, the war on terror and the media can finally help the American people focus in on the important issues that will help them make an informed decision on their choice for president."

A montage of clips then follows, showing various television news personalities talking about Mary Cheney's sexual orientation. When the clips are over, Stewart says, "Media good, no criticism, media good. Funny monkey. Funny monkey."

This comment is a slight jab again at the *Crossfire* hosts whom Stewart told he was not going to be a "funny monkey" as well as the news media in general whom Stewart is condemning for not being critical.

Another demonstration of the show's assessment of traditional news programming is a segment called "Great Moments in Punditry as Read by Children." This segment features young children reading transcripts from partisan debate shows like *Hannity & Colmes* and *Scarborough Country*.

Often the kids are reading the actual words of arguments between the pundits and their guests, making the conversation sound childish. This practice points to the absurdity of the pundits' words. This absurdity is reinforced when the children laugh at the ridiculousness of the script they have to read.

These examples highlight the show's criticism that political news talk shows and traditional news programming lack substance. Though the commentary is often humorous, the show continually calls attention to the failure of the news media to provide insightful analysis to prepare citizens for active involvement in public life.

### **Talk the line**

Politicians have a love-hate relationship with the show. Many have appeared on the program to discuss their policies in a fresh way that appeals

to a tough young target demographic. Some have been victims of a clip montage that exposes a personal or political hypocrisy. Others have been portrayed as partisan shells who spout rhetoric without regard for the truth.

**The Daily Show points to the failings of a system that rewards conflict instead of compromise, excess instead of moderation.**

The show criticizes this rhetoric and the talking points widely used by politicians, often equating such language with deception. It comments on the dangerous outcomes of the groupthink that stems from highly-charged partisan politics. The show also points to the failings of a system that rewards conflict instead of compromise, excess instead of moderation.

*The Daily Show's* coverage of the 2006 State of the Union speech touched on these criticisms. In an opening segment, Jon Stewart sarcastically remarks, "It's no secret the administration is reeling from a difficult year and this was Bush's chance to reassert his leadership by leaving behind familiar rhetoric and boldly outlining a new direction for the nation."

Following this comment, is a segment titled "Talk the Line," which features a series of clips from the speech where the President is using what Stewart believes to be standard administration talking points: "We're on the offensive in Iraq...on September the 11th, 2001 ...the offensive against terror networks . . . make the tax cuts permanent...

the Patriot Act...Social Security... September the 11th...May God bless America."

After the montage of clips, Stewart looks disappointed and quips, "Or I guess you could stick with the old hits.

No one really goes to see The Stones to hear the new s-t, I know that." This quip shows Stewart's frustration with the president relying on rhetoric instead of presenting new and actionable ideas.

The show doesn't limit its criticisms to one political party. In fact, in the same program he calls attention to the talking points of the Democratic Party with a clip montage from the Democrats' rebuttal speech. This segment calls attention to the number of times the Democratic governor of Virginia, Tim Kaine says, "There's a better way."

Stewart doesn't let this rhetoric pass for substantive analysis either, saying, "So if you know that 'better way' please send it to Democratic Headquarters, Box 18, Washington, D.C. and hurry, the elections are nine months away." Stewart later remarks that Kaine's comments lacked "passion, insight or any sight of carbon based life."

**The Daily Show is a new form of subversive journalism that coats serious inquiry with a thick layer of sarcasm.**

Another example of *The Daily Show's* critical stance on the current political atmosphere was a piece following a 2004 presidential debate called "Principle Spinner." In this segment, correspondent Ed Helms asks representatives from both political parties who they think won the debate.

Sarcastically he says, "Thankfully

there just happened to be a cluster of political professionals on hand whom I could count on for reasoned analysis and insight.” However, when Helms asks about the outcome, both Democrat and Republican campaign representatives insist their candidate won the debate.

Helms then becomes visibly upset saying, “It was almost as if everyone I spoke to had an agenda.” After receiving conflicting information from both Joe Lockhart, a Kerry campaign advisor, and Ed Gillespie, Republican National Committee Chairman, Helms breaks down yelling, “My head is spinning!” at political advisors. Helms then melts into a confused tantrum shouting, “This isn’t a real discussion!” and “Nobody’s being honest with you!” The segment ends with Helms passing out on the floor in front of a crowd of reporters.

These clips demonstrate *The Daily Show’s* opinion of the political spin and rhetoric that take the place of frank discussion about issues. Also, since the show portrays both Democrats and Republicans behaving the same way, its criticism is not limited to one political party.

By exposing the way political messages are constructed and showing them as manipulated versions of factual information, *The Daily Show* criticizes the politicians and political institutions that perpetuate this behavior. Again this criticism points to campaigns and political parties as providers of false and distorted information that does not benefit democratic discourse.

These nuggets of idealism, expressed

through humor, have made the show a powerful new force in politics and journalism. The show provides scathing analyses about our democracy that would sound preachy without humor. It could be argued that *The Daily Show* is a new form of subversive journalism, one that coats serious inquiry with a thick layer of sarcasm.

*The Daily Show* does not pretend to give the most accurate facts about current events, although facts sometimes sneak into the joke. Still, the show does something for its viewers that few news programs can claim. It provides insight into how our social institutions work and teaches viewers to think, question and discover for themselves.

**While the American news media constitute the only business protected by law, the First Amendment cannot protect the press from the pressure to please advertisers and investors.**

---

This approach is a step beyond traditional journalism. In a time when factual information is available on-demand, in a variety of forms, traditional news media outlets are no longer the primary source of factual information. To stay relevant these outlets need to evolve. They need to rethink the role of news.

In a democracy where people no longer feel like their vote will change failing political institutions, the news media should inspire citizens to create their own solutions. The news should facilitate discussion, giving citizens the tools they need to address problems at the grassroots level. The news should also hold politicians accountable for

their behavior.

So, if the traditional news media are failing, how did it happen and how can it be fixed? The answer may not be simple, but it may be hilarious.

### **Business vs. democracy**

There is increasing friction between the business and civic interests of the traditional news media today. The proliferation of news options and consolidation of media companies have created a competitive business environment for news organizations, which must retain advertisers to maintain a healthy bottom line.

While the American news media constitute the only business protected by law, the First Amendment cannot protect the press from the pressure to please advertisers and investors. In the fight between commercial and community interests, it can be argued that the traditional news media are behaving more like a business and less like the watchdog of public affairs.

In a government run by the people and for the people, having citizens know enough about their world to make decisions about their society is imperative to a well-functioning democracy. Today several trends point to the news as failing to serve the public interest. These trends are troubling for many reasons.

When the news media behave as commercial enterprises, treating citizens as customers, news tends to turn to entertainment instead of debate, animated pundits instead of in-

depth analysis. Shows that emphasize conflict, scandal and personality, like *The O'Reilly Factor* and the now extinct *Crossfire*, are packaged as news, but provide little substantive examination of current issues.

Another troubling tendency is that politically relevant material often appears as stories about personal conflicts, integrity and moral values. This trend is demonstrated by pundits who sling insults at each other and talk about candidates' personal values instead of issues.

### **The Pew Research Center found that 21 percent of young adult viewers ages 18-49 get their political information from television comedy programs like *The Daily Show*.**

Still, the civic responsibility of journalists has not been completely ignored. The proud tradition of the Fourth Estate is still alive, bubbling under the surface of flashy graphics and personality contests. It is not too late to revive the watchdog role of the press — it is still the ideal to which most journalists strive. The challenge is how to negotiate these seemingly opposed business and civic obligations to produce informative programming that will still lure an audience and improve the bottom line.

This challenge requires creativity and critical thought. It requires a new concept of journalism, one that embraces the value of entertainment while still searching for truths. Entertainment doesn't have to be devoid of analysis and critical thought can be amusing.

*The Daily Show* is one example of

this new concept of journalism that can bring in advertising dollars while still providing the critical and substantive analysis necessary for a healthy democracy.

### **What me, a journalist?**

With parody and wit *The Daily Show* with Jon Stewart has made an indelible mark on politics and journalism. From interviews with presidents to commentary on news clips, the show uses humor to provide a more critical look at our democracy than most traditional television news programs.

While Stewart and *The Daily Show* cast repeatedly shake off the notion that the program is news, a recent study by the Pew Research Center found that 21 percent of young adult viewers ages 18 to 29 get their political information from television comedy programs like *The Daily Show*.

Whether Stewart and traditional journalists like it or not, a growing number of viewers are getting their news from non-traditional sources. *The Daily Show* may claim to be “fake news,” but behind the skits and jokes is substantive analysis of how government and society functions.

This entertainment combined with scrutiny of our public institutions cannot be dismissed as just light programming. It is a new type of journalism that provides valuable information about our democratic society to a group of people who are increasingly disinterested in watching traditional television news.

*The Daily Show* uses humor to get to the heart of what news should aspire to do — expose the way society works. The show inspires reflection instead of telling people what to think. It generates questions instead of forcing answers.

In a recent interview with *Daily Show* cast member, Lewis Black, he called people who compared the show to traditional broadcast news programs “insane.” However, he insists the show gives viewers the tools to question what they see.

“I think the show teaches people how to watch the news with a jaded eye,” he said.

In other words, *The Daily Show* teaches viewers to think for themselves, to question our society’s failing institutions and to seek the solutions. Who knew laughter could be so dangerous to the status quo?

---

Kristen Heflin recently received a master of arts in journalism from the Grady College of Journalism and Mass Communication at the University of Georgia where she conducted her thesis research on *The Daily Show*. She will join the PhD program at Georgia in the fall as the doctoral assistant to the George Foster Peabody Awards.