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The Value of Truth and Truthiness: Comparing *The Daily Show* to Mainstream News

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Comparing The Daily Show To Mainstream News

Submitted to the Department of Political Science of Allegheny College in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Bachelor of Arts.

I hereby recognize and pledge to fulfill my responsibilities as defined in the Honor Code and to maintain the integrity of both myself and the College community as a whole.

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Introduction

Before I took my first class at Allegheny I knew the subject of my senior project would be. Freshman year, I sat down and outlined what this project would look like. As I became more familiar with the comp and how it works the shape of my project changed, but the subject has stayed the same. I wanted to write about *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*. The reason being, *The Daily Show* changed my life.

I first started regularly watching *The Daily Show* during my sophomore year of high school. I was on the verge of flunking out with my teachers complaining that I was very bright but I was also lazy and unmotivated. Sophomore year I suddenly changed. Even in subjects I hated or struggled with I began to excel. I got involved in politics—specifically democratic campaigns, National Honors Society, theater, and I created the school’s literary magazine. I ended up graduating high school with a 4.0 GPA and scholarships to every school I got accepted to—which was everywhere I applied. None of my teachers could account for my sudden motivation, but I knew. I changed because I started watching *The Daily Show*.

Before *The Daily Show* I had no aspirations, I really didn’t care about anything but my immediate experiences. More than anything else I loved comedy; I had (and still have) a collection of stand-up CDs and DVDs that put the record collections of most audiophiles to shame. I started watching *The Daily Show* for one reason, because it was funny. However, laughter was not all I got out of watching. Seeing Jon Stewart and his team of correspondents crack jokes about politics, the government, and all matter of current events taught me about what was happening in the world around me. What I learned outraged me. The world was fraught with problems and the people we depended on to solve them were incompetent, selfish, or evil. It seemed like the people around me were totally ignorant of what was going on. I came to...
understand that if the world was going to improve at all I had a responsibility to contribute. This attitude led to my change in lifestyle and I have always been grateful to *The Daily Show* for giving me that. However, I also knew that I couldn’t be the only person who had gained something from *The Daily Show*. I wanted my senior project to prove that *The Daily Show* could help others in the same way it helped me.

Discussing *The Daily Show* as a serious political actor is not a new idea. Comedy and politics always had a very close relationship. *Comedy at the Edge* by Richard Zoglin explained the socially transformative influence of stand-up comedians like Richard Pryor, George Carlin, and Steve Martin. Comedian and regular *Daily Show* contributor Lewis Black, in his autobiography *Nothing’s Sacred*, claimed comedy is what kept him sane when the world around him started to come apart after Kennedy’s assassination, “humor is how we find comfort in the totally illogical, for it is the bridge back to the logical” (Black, 2005, p. 58). “Soft News Sources,” non-news sources of information, have been exiting the attention of political scientists and media scholars especially in the past decade. For instance, in 2002 *The American Political Science Review* published an article about how soft news sources broadened public understanding of foreign policy (Baum, 2002). *The Daily Show* specifically has been called out as an important political actor. The Pew Research Center did several studies which suggested that *Daily Show* viewers were just as informed as news viewers (Pew Research Center, 2007). NPR hosted a discussion devoted to exploring the relationship between comedy and politics (Winstead & McKay, 2008). And *The Daily Show* since Jon Stewart took over in 1999 has won 13 Emmy awards, a special recognition from the GLAAD Media awards, an Orwell Award for “Distinguished Contribution to Honesty and Clarity in Public Language,” a Television Critics Association Award for “Outstanding Achievement in News and Information,” a Satellite Award
given out by the International Press Academy, and Two Peabody awards. *The Daily Show* is widely recognized as both a great comedy program and an accomplished member of the news media.

Ultimately I chose to answer this question: “Does The Daily Show inform and inspire critical thinking in student viewers better than the news?” I decided to focus on students for two reasons. The first is as a student I wanted to know what the show may have done for me. The second is the research I did leading up to the project suggested *The Daily Show* had most of it’s positive effects on the student demographic. I also wanted compare *The Daily Show* to the news. I wanted to see if it was possible that *The Daily Show* did more than introduce me to current events and politics. I wanted to see if by watching *The Daily Show* if myself and others were learning more than people who just watch the news.

In order to address my central question it is essential to first distinguish *The Daily Show* as a unique force. There are plenty of comedy programs on television that draw on politics and news events for material. There are also different opinions about the effects of political comedy on viewers. Some say that political comedy increases awareness and deepens our understanding while others maintain that it just makes viewers more cynical about leaders and the political process. Chapter one will establish a difference between satire and parody. It will explain that, as a satire *The Daily Show* is more likely to inspire the positive effects of political comedy than the negative ones. It will also explain that satire is more likely to provide real information and encourage critical thought because of the way it is structured.

My second chapter will explain why *The Daily Show*, even more than other satirical programs, is likely to inform and increase critical thought in its viewers. Comedy Central is a network that has branded itself by producing satirical programs. The Daily show is but one of
many programs on Comedy Central that has won political recognition for its satirical content. However, the show’s structural elements make it better suited to informing viewers as well as causing them to think critically about issues.

With *The Daily Show*’s validity as a political voice established, and its methods explained I will begin the comparison to the news. Chapter three will address what *The Daily Show* is and under which circumstances it has been most useful. It will reveal what scholars have discovered about the show’s ability to inform and critically engage viewers and explain what the show’s creators intend for their audience to come away with. This will provide a basis for evaluation and give insight into what effects the show is having on viewers.

My fourth and final chapter will explain the results of an experiment I created to specifically address my central question. While my research brought to light *The Daily Show*’s potential to outperform the news I needed to find what students themselves were experiencing when they watched the show. By quizzesing students who watched clips from episodes of *The Daily Show* and CNN about what they saw and how it made them feel about the subjects which were discussed my experiment closely examined what students were taking away from both the news and *The Daily Show*. The results provided a reasonable answer to my central question as well as some interesting insight into how people use the media.

My conclusion will of course provide an answer to my central question. It will also include my thoughts on what this means for continued study of the o political effects of comedy on politics.
Chapter 1
All Comedy is Not Created Equal: Satire vs. Parody

Asking if *The Daily Show* is capable of outperforming the news in key areas provokes another question: “Hey, isn’t political comedy actually bad for politics?” Unfortunately, this question is actually fairly difficult to answer. Both perspectives on this argument have valid claims. What’s worse is there is just about the same amount of evidence on either side. An objective observer would have to conclude that comedy is both good and bad—which is not exactly a compelling conclusion. Obviously there is a need to dig deeper; for both claims to be true there has to be some distinction between comedy that is helpful to viewers and comedy that misleads them.

Understanding this difference is essential to addressing this project’s central question. If *The Daily Show* (TDS) is to be compared to the news it first has to be established that one can get any value at all from a program like TDS. If political comedy shows have the potential to do more harm than good it is useless to compare them to the news; as any critical thought these shows inspire would be negated by the destructive nature of the medium. To address this concern this first chapter will establish that satire and parody are distinct forms of comedy and that satirical shows like TDS are generally more valuable to politics. Once this difference is established the central question can be faithfully addressed.

To start, this chapter will investigate the claims on both sides of this discussion. The section first going over what supposed negative effects comedy has on viewers and their attitudes towards politics. Then in section two the other side will be considered, outlining the proposed benefits of comedy programs. In section three this chapter will introduce a conceptual difference between satire and parody. It will then go on to explain the qualities of parody. Section four will
explain the qualities of satire. The final section will draw a conclusion about the positive and negative associations of satire and parody.

**What Are the Criticisms of Political Comedy?**

**Viewer Apathy**

A good place to start is with comedy’s opponents, those who say that comedy is corrosive the political system. How can it possibly be a good idea to publically ridicule politics in a country who’s very existence depends on continued political participation? As it turns out, there is a link between most late night comedy shows and voter apathy; in fact Russell L. Peters refers to comics like Leno, Letterman, and O’Bien as “evangelists of apathy” (Peterson, 2008, p. 10). The United States Election Project, a website dedicated to studying voter turnout, show that since the 1960s voter turnout has been on fairly steady decline, dipping below 55% in the 80s. We do see a significant upswing in turnout for the 2008 election, but even then it is still below 65%. If you think of that in terms of a letter grade America has about a C-, which is nothing to be proud of. Is comedy solely responsible for these poor numbers? Of course not. However, politics is discussed frequently on popular late night programs and most of the time it is not positive, “the mainstream late-night comics actually present an extremely bleak and cynical view of democracy” (Peterson, 2008, p. 12).

The simple go-to joke of the late night comic is that politics is stupid and hopeless. Politicians are dishonest, idiotic, or just plain evil and people who believe in the political system are naïve, brainwashed, or well… just plain evil, “they don’t criticizes policies for their substance, or leaders for their official actions; taken as a whole, they declare the entire system—from voting to legislating to governing—as an irredeemable sham” (Peterson, 2008, p. 14). This trend is not the only cause of apathy, but it is a part of the culture of apathy. Public faith in American politics
has suffered a great deal in the modern era. Events like Vietnam and Watergate inspired distrust in government and most late night comedy programs draw on that distrust for material. As popular programs they dictate the attitudes of the culture, even to those not totally apathetic to politics are still affected, “even if we continue to believe, we tend to be embarrassed about it” (Peterson, 2008, p. 15). In this circumstance popular entertainment seems to be a large part of a trend that is undermining the foundation of democracy by killing civic participation.

**Bad Information**

Another criticism of entertainment is the way it can distribute and perpetuate dis/misinformation alongside actual news. This is not a criticism of the way late night shows run entertainment gossip alongside legitimate headlines—it is about the actual corruption of legitimate news for the purposes of entertainment. The 2000 presidential race between Al Gore and George W. Bush was a rocky time in political history and a fantastic time for late night comedy. Despite the rich wealth of material provided by the at-times ludicrous events which took place during the 2000 election late night couldn’t stay away from one phrase: Al Gore invented the internet. That quote did untold damage to Gore’s reputation—even today it is something people refer to when they think of him. The problem? Al Gore never actually said those words. In an interview with Wolf Blitzer, Gore said that with his policies, he took the initiative in creating the internet. To be fair, Gore was playing up his role in the launch of the internet. But there was some truth to that statement.¹ What should have been one of Gore’s shrewdest policy decisions became a major detriment to his campaign. A large part of the blame for the unnecessary damage to Gore’s image and career rests with late night comedy for broadcasting and rebroadcasting a misquote.

¹ This is a politically charged issue and it is hard to find a credible bias voice on the matter but it has been investigated to some degree **Invalid source specified.**
The issue here is not that comedians saw Gore’s quote as a target for mockery, after all, as a public figure Gore is most certainly a legitimate target of criticism; by constantly referring to the phrase “I invented the internet,” comedians gave it legitimacy. In a world where people believe things when they see them, making something visible makes it true. Popular late night comedy’s only real agenda is to draw in more viewers; however, these programs possess the same, visibility as the news media which is theoretically bound by journalistic principals. No matter where one stands politically, Gore’s unfortunate internet sound bite is evidence that these programs can be a corrosive element to the distribution of accurate information, which is essential to the political process.

**Soft News Demographic**

Finally, late night entertainment is partially responsible for creating and maintaining a demographic known as the “low information voter.” Like most popular political science buzzwords “low info voter” doesn’t come with a text-book standard definition; essentially, it means a person who votes based on very little or poorly supported information(Kliff & Smalley, 2008). This demographic gets most of its news from “soft news” sources, or programs that feature news but are primarily for entertainment(Baumgartner & Morris, 2008, pp. 279-81). A person who votes for a candidate because they appear to be an honest hockey mom, votes against someone because they believe that person is secretly a Muslim, or opposes a healthcare bill because they think it includes death panels is considered a low info voter. The main drivers of the low info voter category are organizations that distribute information without actually distributing information; this includes pundits like Rush Limbaugh or Glenn Beck on the right and really anyone on Air America radio on the left. Programs that assume prior knowledge and discuss issues without any real context to understand them are a breeding ground for low info
voters. There are information outlets that have the same effect without intending to influence anyone, at the top of that list is topical late night comedy.

**What Are the Benefits of Political Comedy?**

**Greater Circulation of Information**

Despite all of those arguments, comedy has had positive effects on politics as well. One phrase that gets tossed a lot around this issue is “I get all my news from *The Daily Show.*” That is supposed to be a negative statement as University of Wisconsin Professor of journalism and mass communication, Paul Brewer, points out “observers find this notion a ‘troubling thought’ because they regard late night comedy as a ‘poor substitute for more traditional news’” (Brewer & Cao, 2008, p. 263). While it is not exactly cause for celebration, it is worth examining the character of the person who only gets their news from *The Daily Show.* According to a Pew Research poll, viewers of *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report* are on par with those who watch mainstream news; in fact “on par” is a bit of an understatement. *Daily Show* and *Colbert* viewers are some of the most well informed in the study, beating out amongst others CNN (Pew Research Center, 2007). This raises an interesting question: if *Daily Show* and *Colbert* viewers are able to go toe-to-toe with viewers of cable news then is their influence really a harmful one? If a program performs the function of news does that make it news? This question has obvious ties to the central question of this project. TDS is frequently called “fake news.” It is a label the creators fully embrace and refer to frequently, however there are those who take issue with it,

> to describe *The Daily Show* as ‘fake news’ is problematic—not only because it assumes some quantifiable distinction between what is ‘real’ news and what is not, but also because it serves to downplay the significance of this important new model of journalism. (Young, 2008, p. 243)

At best we are dealing with a blurred line. What can be said is: there is information on TDS and Colbert and if someone watches they, are getting it.
Returning to our character that only gets their information solely from TDS, it is important to remember, this person’s defining characteristic is that they are not getting their information anywhere else. It is not as if watching The Daily Show or The Colbert Report prevents one from watching other news programs, checking news websites, or reading the paper. The person who gets news from TDS is still getting news.

**Taking on Tough Subjects**

Politics is a pretty tough field to negotiate, it is rife with taboos. Some of the most important issues can never be discussed openly. Race, gender, sexuality and religion are all overtly present in our society however they are almost never discussed in political terms for fear of backlash. Our Black president cannot discuss race without it being interpreted as accusatory and supreme court nominees can’t openly express their opinions about important issues like *Roe v. Wade*. The only safe venue for difficult issues on television is in comedy (Lewis, 2006). The same presentation that to some makes TDS “fake news” makes it a perfect venue for discussing issues like race.

Especially after the 2008 election, race has become an increasingly important issue bubbling beneath the surface in current events. However, race is only featured in the news after a scandal breaks. However, there are plenty of comedy programs that deal with race and media perspectives on race on a regular basis; *South Park, The Simpsons, Chappell’s Show, and The Boondocks* are all programs that address race frequently (Haggins, 2009). The comedy aspects of these programs disarm viewers who would normally be resistant or offended by controversial issues. Like these other shows, TDS and Colbert dress up taboo subjects and make those discussions available to a public which avoids those subjects at all costs. Because these issues
hold an important place in society, they need to be a part of public discourse; comedy provides an outlet for difficult issues to reach the surface of public thought.

**Venue for Dissent**

The final and most important function of comedy is its readiness to ask questions of authority. Democracy, at least a healthy democracy, depends on the ability of citizens to think critically about politics. Whether one is a democrat, republican, or something else deciding who to vote for or what one wants out of politics is difficult. Each side has its own facts to back up their claims and these facts often contradict one another, making the truth a relative commodity (Young, 2008). The news does little to help citizens here; in attempt to appear unbiased the media broadcasts information and arguments from both democrats and republicans without investigating the validity of their claims. The news still has plenty of good information, but there is a lot of dis/misinformation that sneaks by unchallenged. This has caused frustration for journalists and the viewing public (Young, 2008), (Baumgartner & Morris, 2008). This is where comedy can again aid the political process.

Comedy programs in general can help people evaluate politics by providing a new context for the same information. Playing a clip on the news presents information as the truth. Playing the same clip on a comedy program presents the information as something to be laughed at. Changing the context in this manner changes the way that information is processed. It is scary for someone on the news to tell you that the new health care plan includes death panels; it is funny, even absurd to hear that said on a comedy show. This is true for almost all comedy programs that deal with current events *The Tonight Show, The Late Show, Real Time With Bill Maher*, and of course *The Daily Show* and *Colbert Report*; all of these shows can provide a new context for news events. TDS and *Colbert* go a step further by pitting current news clips against
archived clips—putting the new statements political figures make against what they have said in
the past. This recontextualization gives us a peek at the analytical components of comedy. In
order to make a joke, a situation must be analyzed and understood first. As Baym puts it in
“Serious Comedy,”

Programs such as The Colbert Report and The Daily Show suggest that the serious and
silly are blending. Interweaving in powerful ways and challenging a host of assumptions
about how we can, and should talk about politics. (Baym, 2008, p. 22)

When people watch political they are watching—at least in part—an analysis of politics.

The Problem of Parody

There has to be a reason why comedy can do so much to harm the political process at the
same time it provides so many benefits. The answer is we are looking at two separate forms of
comedy: parody and satire. While both are valid forms of comedy as far as politics goes, parody
is a negative influence and satire is positive.

Parody is the most socially acceptable and therefore the most prolific from of comedy on
television. Despite popular belief the two comedic forms are quite different “confusingly,
everyday vernacular often treat parody as synonymous with satire, but not all parody is
satirical”(Gray, Jones, & Thompson, 2009, p. 17). Russell Peterson, author of Strange
Bedfellows makes a similar distinction between types of comedy but he calls parody “pseudo
satire.” Because this essay is using parody as a comic style the really important part of this
definition is the “how.” Webster’s defines parody as “1: a literary or musical work in which the
style of an author or work is closely imitated for comic effect or in ridicule 2: a feeble or
ridiculous imitation.” When making a parody, a writer calls on themes or features of something
he is trying to mock, places them in and unlikely context or exaggerate them, for comic effect.
Parody is popular because it is easy to produce and unchallenging to interpret.
Parody is the style seen most often on *The Tonight Show, The Late Show*, primetime sitcoms, and variety shows like *SNL* or *MAD TV*. Parody is not popular just for its wide appeal, but for its total lack of potential controversy. This is especially obvious with political material; politicians are reduced to a set of easily identifiable characteristics and the viewer is bombarded by repetition of those characteristics over and over again. As Peterson says, “one of the tell tale characteristics of pseudo-satire is a focus on personalities to the exclusion of policies and issues”(Peterson, 2008, p. 25). Therefore, Bill Clinton is lecherous, Bush is stupid, Cheney is evil, Hillary is power hungry and frigid. These jokes have been told millions of times with very little variation on every major late night show—even the good ones.

Political figures also get tied to certain events or scandals through parody. For example, Al Gore’s inventing the internet gaff was made worse by parody. Parody is politically safe because it never addresses any real problems, it just criticizes character flaws. Parody can be applied universally, if there is danger that a comedy program appears to have an agenda, they can just add more stock jokes until there is an even number of jokes about Clinton’s sexual appetite and Bush’s inability to speak English (Compton, Political Punditry in Punchlines: Late Night Comics Take on the 2004 Presidential Debates, 2008). The jokes get broader than that, politicians in general are dishonest and politics itself is a waste of time. This is how parody breeds apathy.

**Satire: The Quintessential Anti-Hero**

Satire is one of the most feared and misunderstood forms of comedy. In ancient Greece it was thought to be a weapon that could be used to smite evil individuals; however, the people who were able to punish evil in this way were regarded with suspicion. Plato himself suggested that satire be penalized by law along with other “magic incantations” (Caufield, 2008). Although
today we know satire is not a form of witchcraft, it is still very provocative. For that reason network TV avoids satirical comedy, provocative can mean negative publicity. As explained in the introduction to *Satire TV*,

> For reasons that have as much to do with the political economy of network television as with the particular demands of satire places on writers and audiences alike, satire has been one of the mediums most underused forms of political discourse (not to mention entertainment. (Gray, Jones, & Thompson, 2009, p. 11)

According to the Second City Training Center in Chicago, “satire makes fun of something, usually a social, cultural, or political target. To prove a point or show a weakness. Parody mimics, satire undermines” (Second City Training Center, 2009). With this definition, it is clear how active and targeted satire is. The writers of *Satire TV* offer an additional definition which references how combative and interactive satire can be

> Verbal aggression which some aspect of historical reality is exposed to ridicule… [satire] involves at least implied norms against which a target can be exposed as ridiculous, and demands the pre-existence or creation of shared comprehension and evaluation between the satirist and the audience. (Gray, Jones, & Thompson, 2009, p. 12)

Satire simply does not work if the audience does not work alongside the comedian to evaluate the world they live in. It comes to a mutual understanding between the audience and comedian—which is what makes satire so provocative.

> Parody plays on the familiar, ultimately reinforcing what we know. Satire exposes flaws in the familiar causing us to question what we know. As *Satire TV* puts it, “Satire is provocative, not dismissive…” (Gray, Jones, & Thompson, 2009, p. 13). This is what makes *The Daily Show* valuable to politics. Questioning the flaws in society, which are normally overlooked, prevents society from becoming sedentary. Although satire undermines society, it is ultimately constructive because it focuses on searching for real problems, where as parody invents or exaggerates perceived problems. This all relates back to apathy.
Both satire and parody perpetuate the idea that politics is full of flaws; but because the flaws referenced in satire are real they can be addressed. If the president makes a bad decision he can be held accountable for it. If the president has some fundamental character flaw that causes him make poor decisions over and over, then you are trapped until he is out of office. Parody creates a feeling of powerlessness which makes apathy easier than actually engaging in politics. In addition to creating a sense of apathy, parody perpetuates it.

Parody rewards the apathetic. According to parody all politics is corrupt, Republicans and democrats are just the same devils with different names, and individual politicians are lying scumbags or completely incompetent idiots, society believes “politics is icky” (Peterson, 2008, p. 13). To participate in a system so dysfunctional, in any capacity, would be incredibly stupid. Mocking a stupid system gives us strength and makes us right “whenever we laugh at someone whose comportment or behavior is somehow ‘wrong’… we reinforce what we consider to be normal” (Peterson, 2008, p. 16). Satire on the other hand discourages apathy. There is no subject that is beyond the ridicule of satire, including whatever audience is present. If the audience of satire is apathetic then satire will turn its gaze upon them, but because apathy is unproductive, it is also a target for satire.

**Conclusion**

Satirical material is inherently valuable to politics while parody is actively harmful. *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report* are satire through and through providing good information and healthy, meaningful criticism. Unlike the news which is a window to the world where the viewer is separate from what they see, TDS and Colbert are a mirror. The viewer is made aware of the problems in society and how those problems relate to them. The ability to recognize and relate to problems is a huge part of forming critical thought. Is it just *The Daily Show* and *The
Colbert Report’s status as satire which makes them valuable? While knowing the difference between satire and parody provides a strong foundation for evaluating TDS more information is needed before it can be judged on its ability to distribute information or inspire critical thinking.
Chapter 2

Comedy Central’s Culture of Satire

The Daily Show and The Colbert Report are special and it definitely has something to do with them being satirical programs but there is much more to the story. Comedy Central, the station which broadcasts both shows, has an extensive line up of satirical programs. Comedy Central’s satirical shows are some of the most popular programs on the network. Many of them have been recognized by the media as well as the academic community as important political agitators. There are qualities which The Daily Show alone possesses that makes it more prone to inform viewers as well as induce critical thinking. In order to answer the central question of this project it is important to understand how something like TDS came to be; as well as why TDS is different from other satirical programs.

This chapter will start by explaining why network TV is partial towards parody and how large audiences and a desire for unbiased content hold back mainstream television. Section two will examine the other satirical programs on Comedy Central. That’s My Bush, Lil’ Bush, Chappelle’s Show, South Park, and The Colbert Report are all examples of what makes Comedy Central a satire network. However, just being satire does not put these programs on the same level as TDS. The third and final section will highlight the structural elements which allow TDS to turn cutting satire into an educational tool for political thought. Once we understand Comedy Central and some of its other shows which feature political satire, we can identify what gives The Daily Show the potential to inform and stimulate critical thought in viewers better than the news.

Satire and Network Television

Television as a whole used to be a lot simpler than it is today. It may sound like the nostalgic ratings of an older generation but it’s true. Until the 1980s, there were only three big
TV networks: NBC, ABC, and CBS. What happened in the 80’s? In 1986 Rupert Murdock and Barry Diller created the Fox Broadcasting Company, the network which would turn “the big three” into “the big four” (Gray, Jones, & Thompson, 2009). Of course Fox was not an immediate success and stayed relatively low on the radar for a while after it started up. What happened to make Fox the fourth big network and allow it to change the face of TV? The short and smug answer is satire. The long answer is *The Simpsons*.

In 1989, Fox added an animated sitcom to its prime time line up called *The Simpsons*. Both the idea of a mature animated sitcom, let alone a primetime animated show were pretty out there. However, Fox, a low rated network which showed only niche oriented programming really had nothing to lose (Gray, Jones, & Thompson, 2009). Unexpectedly, *The Simpsons* became wildly popular and went on to become one of the most lucrative franchises and the longest running sitcoms of all time. Gray puts it best saying, “Perhaps no single program is as important in creating the televisual space for the satire TV boom as *The Simpsons*” (Gray, Jones, & Thompson, 2009, p. 25). He goes on to say that what the book *Satire TV* calls the post-network TV “could also acceptably be described as ‘post-Simpsons TV’” (2009, p. 25). The reason *The Simpsons* was successful is obvious, it was something audiences had never seen before. It was satire.

After Fox took off as a network television changed and the big three were no longer untouchable, with their primetime shows facing serious competition from niche cable networks. This bit of history is important for understanding what distinguishes Comedy Central from Network TV. What really separates Network from non-Network TV is the ability to effectively broadcast satire and satirical programming is what ended the Network monopoly on programming.

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2 PBS was started up in the 1970’s but it could hardly be called big.
Bigger Audience, Bigger Problems

*The Daily Show* in 2008 averaged around 2 million viewers\(^3\) (Starr, 2008). Viewership of network programs in the same time slot range from 3 to 4 million viewers (The Futon Critic, 2010). If *The Daily Show* has nearly half as many viewers as its network competitors why is it important? The top rated program on Comedy Central, *South Park*, has a viewership of only 3.1 million (Leonard, 2006). Compare that to the top rated network shows which compete for numbers up to 15 million and it becomes clear that Comedy Central is playing a completely different game (The Futon Critic, 2010). Comedy Central does not market itself to the broadest viewing public, they are aiming to market to a smaller but specific audience. What does that mean for their programming? Well, in an interview I had with former head writer and executive producer of *The Daily Show* David Javerbaum; when asked if there was difference working for TDS and Comedy Central rather than network he said “Absolutely, [we have more freedom]. we almost never have problems—that are so trivial—that they have on networks. We are very lucky to be left alone” (Javerbaum, 2010). Because TDS has a smaller niche audience and cable has fewer regulations than network the show as a whole enjoys freedom (Gray, Jones, & Thompson, 2009). In other words, network TV produces material for people to watch and Comedy Central produces material and people watch it. The programs coming out of Comedy Central are satirical because they have an audience which seeks out that kind of material. Satire is not safe, established ideas get challenged and people are likely to be offended. A channel trying to appeal to 15 million people cannot afford to offend anyone. Comedy Central has a history of airing shows like *South Park* which draw criticism from all kinds of interest groups, particularly conservatives and Christians. For the networks, those people are all potential customers. It is in

\(^3\) This is the latest average, finding a accurate rating for this year is difficult because of how jealously guarded Nielsen data is. The number hovers between 1.5 and 2 million.
the best interest of network TV to have non-offensive programs while opinionated and potentially offensive is sort of Comedy Central’s shtick. Appealing to viewers is not the only thing holding network back. There is a non-binding programming regulation that the media and network have fallen in love with called “equal opportunity offending.”

The Mistake of Equal Opportunity Offending

Satire is also more prevalent on Comedy Central because of the philosophy behind their programming. Network TV, in attempt to be fully politically neutral has adopted the idea of what Peterson calls being “equal opportunity offenders” (EOO) (Peterson, 2008). Essentially, to networks EOO is what separates good clean fun from political activism. While it is permissible to air jokes about the president or a political party it is only acceptable to do so if equal time is spent airing material about the opposing party. This is a very loosely interpreted idea as it is always acceptable to insult the Green Party or a hopelessly unpopular candidate like Denis Kucinich because you are not likely to offend large amounts of people by doing so. EOO means not rocking the boat, so “equality” only matters for Democrats and Republicans.

The result is the titans of network late night are constantly struggling to find a balance in their material by “… doling out the punch lines equally to ‘both sides’” (Peterson, 2008, p. 105). EOO is an unwritten rule of TV comedy. Although there are no official guidelines telling writers what they can and can’t put in their shows the media tends to go after shows that are perceived to be preferentially harassing one party over another, “Jon Stewart, for example, ‘has repeatedly insisted that he’s non-partisan,’ his jokes about the incumbent ‘have started to seem like a sustained argument with the president” (Peterson, 2008, p. 11). While this sort of negative press doesn’t matter to The Daily Show, network follows it closely. Josh Compton, in an essay about network late night coverage of the 2004 debates, points out how meager the EOO system
actually is. The number of jokes about each side may be the same but the content is not the same. Kerry was the projected winner of the first debate in 2004 and after it was over network talk shows made fun of Bush for losing. They made fun of Kerry too, however, and because he did well, they had to use old, familiar jokes about him being a flip flopper and using his wife’s money (Compton, Political Punditry in Punchlines: Late Night Comics Take on the 2004 Presidential Debates, 2008). The problem with this is, although the substantive criticism was made of Bush, the jokes about Kerry were repeated more often so where there was no problem before late night created a problem. EOO produces weaker material because the jokes are just lip service and repeating old jokes lends substance to them so the candidate who has fewer problems is bizarrely at a disadvantage.

Comedy Central’s most successful shows have no regard for EOO. The Daily Show, The Colbert Report, and South Park thrive on controversy; while Mind of Mencia, a Comedy Central show that lasted two years before being cancelled prided its self on being EOO. In fact the personal website of the show’s host Carlos Mencia, describes him as an “equal opportunity offender” in its title (Mencia). EOO is not Comedy Central’s style, it is even less so the style of The Daily Show. Javerbaum has a problem with EOO, “we don’t try to have journalistic integrity because we don’t have to. We try to have comedic integrity and not tell hack jokes” (Javerbaum, 2010). He is not only resistant to the problems that come with EOO but the very idea that EOO should be a requirement “it’s not your job to report both things equal. That is not your job. You are shaming yourself. [Equal time] is not objectivity. Objectivity is objectivity” (Javerbaum, 2010). EOO is not a concern for Comedy Central leading to better jokes and more substantive commentary.

Comedy Central: The House That Satire Built
Appealing to large diverse audiences and actively attempting to maintain an EOO status limits the kind of material that can appear on network which means ultimately, no satire. In the past shows like SNL were network outlets for satire, however, the days of controversial material on network are over (Gray, Jones, & Thompson, 2009). Today cable is the home of satirical content and Comedy Central, intentionally or unintentionally, uses satire as a flagship. Comedy Central is famous for much more than TDS and Colbert. It has been host to many satirical programs that have made ratings, headlines, and history. Looking at some of Comedy Central’s other satires will help clarify what is special about The Daily Show.

That’s My Bush: A New Approach

Comedy Central is undoubtedly a niche network which they recognize; this has taken their programming in some pretty interesting places. TDS is a show slanted for a liberal audience but it is not uncommon to find a show that appeals to one demographic more than others. Comedy Central has produced shows that are, quite obviously tailored exclusively for a liberal democratic audience. The 2000 sitcom That’s My Bush, was a 50’s family sitcom style show about Bush, his family, and staff. While short-lived and not particularly popular, it was significant, “the series became the first bold move by the network in satirizing a sitting president in a not-so flattering manner” (Jones, 2009, p. 38). Try to imagine how bold a move this was, it was not like TDS, frequently drawing on Bush for material, this was an entire series dedicated to satirizing one administration. Matt Stone and Trey Parker, the creators of South Park, also created That’s My Bush. Characteristically mixing subjects of satire Stone and Parker intended That’s My Bush to be commentary mostly based on sitcoms. However, was by no means gentle on Bush. The second episode, “A Poorly Executed Plan,” combined the sitcom device where a character acts tough to impress old friends and criticism of Bush’s execution record. In the
episode Bush accidentally kills a prisoner by pouring cleaning products into his lethal injection mixture. The discussion of Bush’s reputation for signing prisoners to death as Governor of Texas was legitimate substantive satire; however, the character of Bush is bumbling, incompetent, and ignorant. That’s My Bush mixed the valuable elements of satire with the corrosive elements of parody. That’s My Bush is representative to Comedy Central’s willingness to be an oppositional force and test the limits of acceptable satire. After and partially in response to 9/11 Comedy Central cancelled That’s My Bush. This wasn’t their last venture into programming that was exclusively critical of the Bush administration.

**Lil’ Bush: Satire in Concept**

In 2007 Comedy Central added Lil’ Bush to its line-up. In defense of That’s My Bush, for all its short comings it was a wonderful commentary on sitcoms. Lil’ Bush was what Peterson calls “pseudo satire.” The show was a culmination of all the jokes surrounding the Bush administration. Lil’ Bush was not commentary or criticism so much as it was catharsis. Airing at the end of the Bush administration, Lil’ Bush, an animated show about Bush and his staff as kindergarteners, was the low point of Comedy Central’s criticism of the Bush administration. In a way it was still satire as it encompassed everything that was wrong with Bush’s administration and policies but it came far too late to be relevant. Both That’s My Bush and Lil’ Bush while not among Comedy Central’s better programs were indicative of Comedy Central’s willingness to explore radical forms of satirical programming.

**Chappelle’s Show and the Limits of Satire**

One of the shining stars of Comedy Central’s satirical collection, that many viewers felt left the air too quickly, was Chappelle’s Show. A sketch comedy show created by comedian Dave Chappelle and Neal Brennan. It had three seasons with only 33 episodes; but it had a
massive cultural effect. *Chappelle’s Show* revolved mostly around observations on race relations. Race is a difficult subject to talk about in any context. With comedy it has to be handled delicately. That may sound strange considering how much comedy there is based on race but it’s true. Racial themes in comedy can easily turn crass. Most comedians who draw on race as a primary subject are performing parody. Chappelle offered insightful, sensitive, and hilarious satire on race.

Chappelle introduced most of his sketches with an observation about societal behaviors. In a season 2 sketch called “Black Bush” Chappelle introduced his sketch by saying “If the president were black we would not be at war right now. Not because a black person wouldn’t have done something like that, just because America wouldn’t let a black person do something like that without asking a million questions” (Chappelle, 2004). The skit goes on to show us a world where a black man was making all of the decisions that Bush did. The black president in Chapelle’s sketch was a thug stereotype and most of the humor was oriented around that. However, he effectively communicated his criticism of Bush Administration decisions and, as we know today, his observation about a hypothetical black president was shrewd. Obama has been questioned by the media and public for every step he has taken, often for absurd things like the legitimacy of his citizenship, his religious beliefs, his supposedly “socialist” policies and even his ideas about racial politics. Chappelle’s observations were clever and of course funny.

The problems with the show, which eventually led Chappelle to quit at the height of his popularity were the catch phrases, characters, and racial stereotypes which often distracted from the points Chappelle felt he was trying to make. At the time, not many of his fans understood why he was quitting and he drew a great deal of criticism. The truth is, in quitting Chappelle proved he had more integrity than almost any performer working today. Chappelle respected

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4 A Chappelle fan myself, I’ll admit at the time, I thought he was just unable to deal whit his success.
satire as an art and when he felt his message was no longer getting across to his fans he knew it was time to stop.

In her essay *In the Wake of “Nigger Pixie”* Bambi Haggins examines why Chappelle left his show. It came down to an introspective moment during the filming of season three of his show. In a sketch called “Nigger Pixie” where people where haunted by embodiments of racial stereotypes which tried to coerce them into acting in stereotypical ways. On the set filming the sketch Chappelle had an epiphany, “it was Chappelle who questioned whether this use of internalized racism as a part of broad satire was crossing an ideological line” (Haggins, 2009, p. 234). Originally Chappelle was a match for Comedy Central for all the right reasons as the co-creator Neal Brennan explained “We went to a place, Comedy Central, that sort of needs us and gave us a lot of freedom… We didn’t get a lot of money, but that was the trade-off—you get control” (Haggins, 2009, p. 236). Ultimately it wasn’t network control that was the problem, it was control of the audience. As Higgins explained

… his acknowledgment of his powerlessness and his complicity in producing comic discourse that could be—and was—mobilized in myriad unintended ways, eventually made it impossible for him to continue his relationship with Comedy Central”

…While one might assume a $50 million paycheck might go a long way in terms of assuaging the comic’s anxiety about the broader impact of superficial [mis]readings of his subversive comic texts and how his racial satire was (or was not) being read, this wasn’t enough. (Haggins, 2009, p. 247)

Haggins places blame on Comedy Central for airing the “Nigger Pixie” sketch. This is the double edged sword of a network like Comedy Central. It presents the freedom to broadcast ideas that other networks won’t, however, it has little concern for how those ideas are received by the people who watch. That concern falls to the comedian. Chappelle recognized this, and for that reason, chose to stop producing his show before it caused any more damage.

*South Park* and the Importance of Getting the Joke
South Park is Comedy Central’s biggest success, earning the highest ratings the network has ever seen.\(^5\) It is known for offering biting satire of society in general as well as shocking violence, immaturity, and vulgarity. Of Comedy Central’s satirical programs South Park is probably the most interesting. Make no mistake, South Park is not The Daily Show—it is not toeing the line between news and entertainment. South Park is caught between substantive satiric criticism and meaningless shock humor. Even episodes that feature insightful satire enter into the realm of bad taste. South Park because of the number of subjects and ideologies it attacks eludes political labels, “nailing down the politics of South Park is a tricky—perhaps ultimately futile exercise” (Thompson, 2009, p. 214). One could say that because of this political neutrality South Park is an EOO. Unlike network EOO programs which are made criticized less for their universal criticism South Park manages to alienate everyone, “South Park’s style and content can be dismissed by conservative watchdogs as moral depravity and by academic critics as postmodern nihilism that lacks depth” (Thompson, 2009, p. 214). Ethan Thompson, in his essay Good Demo, Bad Taste, Thompson dissects South Park’s structure claiming that the satire appearing on the show mimics that of the carnival\(^6\) holiday (Thompson, 2009). According to Thompson Carnival is a perverse and humorous reflection of life that was supposed to make all people equal. Philosophically this sounds a lot like satire.

If South Park is carnival satire in an animated sitcom and it has caused critics to misread it to the point where reviewers feel it is either grotesque or valueless then what sort of message is this show sending? Thompson chose to analyze the episode “Douche and Turd.” The basic plot is PETA forces the school district to change mascots, the kids are upset by this because “If we

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\(^5\) The Jeff Dunham Show technically had more viewers on its premier night, 7.2 million, when South Park’s all time high was 6.2. However The Dunham Show’s 7.2 comes from double counting of the show’s premier and the encore of the premier which ran later that night. For that reason I am suspect of Dunham’s “record” numbers.

\(^6\) European Mardi Gras
chance our mascot, that means the eco terrorists win” (Stone & Parker, 2004). To express their anger the kids write in nominate “Giant Douche” and “Turd Sandwich” as new candidates for a school mascot. However, the kids get into an argument over which is funnier and it comes to a heated vote. Stan—one of the main characters—believes that even in protest voting between a giant douche and a turd sandwich is moronic. His friends and family hearing that he refuses vote, ostracize him for failing to take part in the process of democracy. Puff Daddy’s organization, Vote Or Die, becomes involved and attempts to kill Stan for abstaining from the vote. He agrees to vote only until he begins to resent being coerced into voting. After being banished from town for refusing to vote, Stan finds the PETA group living in the woods and attempting to breed with animals. Eventually, Vote or Die tracks Stan to the PETA camp and shoots them while Stan escapes. He returns to the town explaining in the show’s moral, “I learned that I better get used to having to pick between a douche and a turd sandwich, because it’s usually the choice I’ll have” (Stone & Parker, 2004). Reviews of this episode were mixed because critics were not certain of the message being sent. The hero of the story is a character who didn’t want to vote for a valid reason and his decision to vote in the end was weakly motivated. Thompson had a different interpretation,

This episode of South Park articulates a critique of contemporary political discourse as dominated, on the one hand, by extremist organizations removed from the mainstream and, on the other hand, by the condescending public relations campaigns that, through their claim of political disinterest, stand for nothing. South Park, through its carnivalesque treatment of these, poles, suggests that there ought to be a vast, reasonable, democratic middle. (Thompson, 2009, p. 227)

That is certainly one interpretation of what happened on the episode. When Stan was contemplating voting and he realized his friends were doing everything they could to get him to vote their way he said “You didn’t want me to vote, you wanted me to vote for your guy!” (Stone & Parker, 2004). This could defiantly be seen as a call for a reasonable, democratic middle.
However, Thompson admits that this message was lost on the media “Rather than acknowledging that political involvement is about thinking before it’s about voting, CNN fell into the myopic trap of seeing television viewing as either a distraction from or a mere prelude to meaningful social activity” (Thompson, 2009, p. 229). This leaves the “Douche and Turd” in a limbo state. While Thompson may be correct in his interpretation, it seems to have escaped the notice of the critics. This calls into question the messages coming across to the audience. South Park is a brilliant program and some of the best satire on TV let alone Comedy Central. However, its carnivalesque nature may be overshadowing its message.

**Stephen Colbert: Speaking Truthiness to Power**

Then there is The Colbert Report. While the main focus of this investigation is not on Colbert, The Report is very much a sister show to The Daily Show. It provides an interesting counterpoint to figures in politics and the media. Colbert performs a different function but it is in many ways an extension of the conversation started by Stewart at 11:00. While The Daily Show is joking seriously, The Colbert Report is seriously joking. Colbert makes an effort to be visible and subtle at the same time. His satire comes from his character. A passionate, egotistical, argumentative, conservative pundit who is always looking to attack the left wing as he self-mythologizes. Stephen Colbert is the nuclear bomb of irony. He attacks the right by merely existing and he attacks the left in vicious in-character critiques of left-wing ineffectiveness. Colbert speaks truth to power and everyone else along the way. Colbert is probably best understood through his brazen and brilliant performance at the 2006 Whitehouse Correspondent’s Dinner.

More so than The Daily Show, The Colbert Report is a political agitator and his Correspondent’s Dinner performance was one of his peak moments. Though this shouldn’t over
shadow his other achievements in 2006 he showed the world the true power of satire.

Juxtaposed against the Bush impersonator act earlier that night, the audience of news casters and politicians, and of course the presence of President Bush himself; Colbert’s performance was the ultimate satirical criticism. It effortlessly displayed the potent force of satire when compared to the essentially meaningless parody of the Bush impersonator. His cavalier self-aggrandizement of his own ignorance spoke directly to the pundits and politicians who seemed to value their opinions over facts

That's where the truth lies, right down here in the gut. Do you know you have more nerve endings in your gut than you have in your head? You can look it up. Now, I know some of you are going to say, "I did look it up, and that's not true." That's 'cause you looked it up in a book. Next time, look it up in your gut. I did. My gut tells me that's how our nervous system works. (Colbert, 2006)

He also went after the press for their failure to present a challenge for the political establishment, “write that novel you’ve been kicking around in your head. You know, the one about the intrepid Washington reported with the courage to stand up to the administration? You know, fiction!” (Colbert, 2006). And with biting lines such as “I believe the government that governs best is the government which governs least and by this set of standards we have set up a fabulous government in Iraq,” his critiques of the president—to the man’s face—could not have been more brutal (Colbert, 2006). His ironic, friendly “I’m on your side” approach to everyone in the room elegantly expressed every hostile feeling the American public (at least the liberal American public) had towards politicians and the media. Colbert’s satire is unmistakable, that is unless you mistake the Colbert character for a real person, and this is where the power comes from.

Stephen Colbert boldly explains the emperor is not wearing any clothes by proclaiming “I am not wearing clothes.”

7 Like two years later actually running for president ironically.
8 Which is quite possible as the character has given several interviews, written a book and many articles for various periodicals.
What The Report is not is an instructional tool. *The Daily Show* provides an exploration of the media and political world; *The Report* is an exploration of the unseemly characters found in that world and the way they react to us and the rest of the world. If you learn from *The Daily Show* your reward is the biting satiric relief provided on *The Colbert Report*.

**What Makes *The Daily Show* Stand Out**

Comedy Central is a unique network. It has benefits, creative freedom and a lack of concern for network self censorship. It has drawbacks too as a television network it does not have to care about the quality of its programming—just who is watching it. As David Javerbaum said “No, [I don’t think satire is different on Comedy Central] I think Comedy Central is owned by Viacom and Viacom owns MTV and whatever they can air we can air—we just appeal to a different demographic” and the demographic in question has a debatable ability to understand and be influenced by satiric material (Javerbaum, 2010). The satirical programs on Comedy Central vary in quality and have mixed levels of success in communicating their messages. What makes *The Daily Show* special? How they use the freedom that comes with being a Comedy Central show to convey their satire in a clear way that uses humor without losing the point.

**It’s All in the Timing**

Satire can do so many wonderful for politics, granted it can be difficult to find the political messages behind the violence and grotesquerie on a show like *South Park* or subvert the stereotypes being shown on *Chappelle’s Show*. How can a program maintain a comic edge and still be host to a satiric discussion? To understand this we need look no further than *The Daily Show*. Although it is often compared to late night talk shows on network TV or other cable talk shows like *Real Time With Bill Marr* and even news segment sketches like SNL’s “Weekend
Update,” TDS is playing a whole different ball game. Javerbaum has a good explanation for TDS’s success

The basic unit of our show is not the monologue—[which is] just a set up and a punch line. Because we have the time we have evolved a format—Jon has evolved a format—were we can take five or six minutes and really evolve a thesis and make a point. We use evidence—sound bites and video clips—to prove our point and the jokes are a sweetening mechanism for it. (Javerbaum, 2010)

Most of the shows that are compared to TDS are limited in one way or another. Part of that handicap comes from time. If most of the political events discussed on a program happen in a two minute of monologue at the beginning of the show and share time with other current events, like celebrity news, then the effectiveness of the show for political discussion is questionable. It goes further, The Daily Show doesn’t just have more time, it has more consistent content. It was one of the first things Javerbaum mentioned when describing that difference between The Daily Show and network, “It’s more, politics is 80-90% of what we talk about on the show” (Javerbaum, 2010). Chapter 3 will discuss this more but that number is not far from the truth.

While Leno, Letterman, and Kimmel comment on politics almost every night, The Daily Show spends almost all of their time on politics and news. These two time factors lead back to that wonderful format, “I think we stand out because our format is very different and it took a long time to evolve into that” (Javerbaum, 2010).

**Thesis Driven Content**

When thinking of another comedy show and how it comes to be—even a satirical comedy show—how often does the head writer describe the process like this “I think we try to use it to make a point, to make arguments. We try to use our material to have a thesis and make a point” (Javerbaum, 2010). TDS writers don’t try to be political activists as will be explained later but they do try to discuss issues.
Taking an example, on October 29, 2009, *The Daily Show* opened with a segment about Fox News accusations of Obama starting a “war” on Fox News. They introduce the subject by showing a montage of clips with Fox news casters mentioning a war on Fox, thus providing the context. Even a viewer who does not regularly watch Fox News or know anything about the network can be made to understand the situation. Then they play a clip of White House Communications Director Anita Dunn which supposedly started this war. Jon screams sarcastically calling out the restrained nature of Dunn’s critique of Fox, “Fox often operates, almost as either! OH SH--! Them’s qualified, almost, somewhat, not necessarily fighting but certainly words” (Stewart, et al., For Fox Sake!, 2010). Then another clip montage is shown where Fox News commentators claim that the statement was censorship, going as far as to say the Whitehouse is like a kabala and is similar to the Soviet Union. Jon again sarcastically addresses the Fox, “Oh my god, so Fox News is the voice of America and Obama is Stalin. Hey, that makes me Yakov Smirnoff!” (Stewart, et al., For Fox Sake!, 2010) Stewart then calls out one of the Fox commentators for his hypocrisy by showing a clip of him praising the Bush administration for writing a letter with the same message as Dunn to MSNBC in 2008.

At this point TDS introduces their main thesis, “One question that didn’t seem to come up in all of this is ‘Yeah, what is Fox?’” (Stewart, et al., For Fox Sake!, 2010). Fox responded to the Whitehouse criticism by reminding the Whitehouse and their viewers that the criticism was aimed at Fox’s opinion programming and not their news programming. Stewart and his staff pose the question to viewers “what part of Fox News is actually news?” Pulling up their programming schedule, Stewart shows that news runs for “nine newsy hours a day” (Stewart, et al., For Fox Sake!, 2010). Stewart points out that the rest of Fox’s programming block, the shows that Fox is best known for like Hannity, O’Riley, and Glenn Beck are not actually news
according to their network. He then introduces the Fox “news” team. The Fox personalities who are listed in the station’s news block rather than their opinion block. Ironically the montage shows these people… well editorializing is a generously light way of putting it, “President Bush spent much of his eight years in office fighting terrorism. President Obama undoing some of those efforts” (Stewart, et al., For Fox Sake!, 2010). He goes further to discuss the mechanics of the Fox machine pointing out that criticism from the opinion side of Fox is part of what allows the news side to say that criticism is occurring. Stewart finishes by criticizing the Obama administration for failing to strongly insist that Fox is biased. He ends his segment with a quip directed at an Obama administration employee who said that the administration would “speak truth to power” by reminding her the administration was the power, “It’s your job to fuck up power, it’s Fox’s job to fuck up truth” (Stewart, et al., For Fox Sake!, 2010).

This sort of segment could never be on any other show but any other network. It took eleven minutes for Stewart to introduce his subject, state his thesis, and prove his point. No other show has the time to address a subject like that and follow through with a well reasoned argument. While this is definitely politically charged, it is not political activism. Stewart does not tell his audience to do anything, he points out that Fox as people think of it is not news; it is opinion and entertainment programming. He makes this point by allowing the clips of Fox personalities and the statements made by the president of Fox speak for themselves.

The Jokes Make You Laugh the Clips Make You Cry

Of course this argument was made possible by one device which is essential to The Daily Show’s brand of comedy: the video clip montage. Every point and every joke Stewart made was punctuated and supported by series of clips from Fox. These clips do a number of things for the

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9 The only exception being possibly The Colbert Report; however archived clips are used more frequently on TDS than on Colbert.
show and its viewers. First they provide context, when introducing a story like the Fox News analysis TDS starts off with a clip to bring the user up to speed. The next is to provide evidence it is easy to say Fox News isn’t news and it is even easier to make a joke about it. However, when one has a series of clips from Fox which corroborate those claims it’s not just making a joke it’s making a point. The clips which support the jokes Stewart makes help the viewer understand that what they are watching is serious and real. Finally, these clips are jokes themselves. Almost every night there is a segment where Stewart does not even have to say anything for the audience to laugh at his clips. It is highly unlikely that people are watching the news and laughing their heads off. Once these clips are taken out of the context of being news and put on TDS for ridicule they become funny. That is partially because TDS allows viewers to take a second look at news programming and really listen to what is being said. It is like the psychological meta-picture of the rabbit and the duck. Upon first inspection the picture is of a rabbit but after it is pointed out that it could also be a duck it is hard to not see it. The Daily Show turns news rabbits into comedy ducks in a poignant way that really doesn’t exists anywhere else on television.

The headlines are just one way TDS unfolds a thesis. Both the show’s correspondents and guest commentators put together sketches where Stewart plays the straight man. The jokes are still supported by a clip or issue that Stewart introduces but are generally more comedy focused than political. If there is a thesis it is usually just expands a single point about a single issue.

**Why So Serious? Explaining The Daily Show Interview**

The final distinguishing feature of The Daily Show is the interview. Most late night comedy shows only have political guests on during the campaign season, when said politician

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10 If they are something is seriously wrong with them.
has been involved in a scandal, the political figure has made a wildly popular power point presentation like Al Gore, or if the politician is famous for some other reason like Arnold Schwarzenegger. The Daily Show and Colbert Report feature almost exclusively politically significant guests with few exceptions. This is partially owed to the freedom granted to the show by Comedy Central. According to David Javerbaum, they are the result of the tastes of Stewart himself “Jon likes to have people that he’s interested in. Either a topic or a person that interests him” (Javerbaum, 2010). There are a fair amount of actors and other entertainers who appear on TDS but according to Javerbaum they are less frequent and only occur when the network intervenes or when Stewart is interested in talking to them, “When the time comes that we have to have an actor or actress on we try to get the better ones” (Javerbaum, 2010). This kind of freedom has let TDS play host to interviews that can’t be found on any other comedy show.

It is easy to pick out a “serious” interview on The Daily Show. Candidates who appear on TDS during the election season are usually treated very lightly; they explain their issues, tell some bad jokes, have some friendly tet-a-tet with Stewart and leave looking pretty good. However, there are some guests who don’t fare so lucky and often they are the kinds of people you would never expect to see on a comedy show. The tone for serious interviews is much different, there are very few jokes and the audience is applauding more often than laughing. Stewart’s questions drive at testing the guest’s assertions rather than explaining them. The tone can be very tense and even a little uncomfortable. According to Javerbaum the writing staff has come to recognize these interviews and is deeply involved in the preparation, “those interviews are driven by Jon. Once we have someone like that we put in a lot of effort. All the writers get involved in preparing for that interview without any jokes at all” (Javerbaum, 2010). These
interviews are completely unique to The Daily Show and, rival interviews featured on legitimate news programs.

Javerbaum insists that they are the result of Stewart’s passion for serious issues “No one else is gonna have John Yoo on their show. Jon really cares about those interviews and he puts a lot of thought into them” (Javerbaum, 2010). That quote was in reference to the January 7, 2010 interview with former Deputy Assistant Attorney General John Yoo, who argued with Stewart over the definition of torture. The summary of that interview alone is enough to prove how truly different TDS is. One will simply not find Jay Leno hosting a twenty-six minute discussion of the definition of torture. To Stewart these interviews are not really entertainment they are an incredibly serious responsibility, “For that particular interview Jon was very disappointed with himself, he thought he over-intellectualized he felt over prepared. He was not happy with it at all” (Javerbaum, 2010).

Stewart’s Approach to Comedy

So what is it about The Daily Show that makes it special? Clearly the creative freedom, subject matter, allocation of time for different subjects, investigative approach, use of video archives, guest selection, and handling of serious interviews are the features that set the show apart. However, Javerbaum said this was a format that the show evolved. The Daily Show existed before Jon Stewart was a host and it wasn’t making the same kind of waves. This format started to develop after Stewart took control of the program in 1999. Chapter 3 will have a deeper discussion of The Daily Show’s creators’ perspective on the show and its serious political qualities. But Stewart’s general theory of comedy is very telling about how the show operates. In an interview on NPR’s Fresh Air Stewart explained his theory of what makes people funny, “It’s not that you realize you are funny. It is that your brain works in a certain way… for some reason
your brain defaults to a joke” (Stewart, Fresh Air, 2005). Stewart believes that he is hard wired to see humor where other people don’t. Unlike the other shows in the late night category The Daily Show is not trying to write comedy—they are discussing serious issues in a funny way.

Javerbaum when describing the Show’s process said,

I think we help develop critical thinking. I really do. We try to have critical thinking, for the greater part of our day we are sitting around thinking, talking about what we are going to do on the show. We try to do it as constructively and critically as possible, not snarkily or sarcastically but objectively. That is the foundation for what we are going to write that day. (Javerbaum, 2010)

Earlier in his Fresh Air interview when discussing the infamous Howard Dean Scream Stewart mentioned that the overly funny or ridiculous situations in news are not as helpful as those which most would consider completely mundane. In looking at these statements we can see that The Daily Show approach to comedy is not to find it but produce it. The subjects on the show are not funny, the arguments they make are not funny but the way they present these issues and arguments is. The Daily Show constructs comedy and network shows as well as other Comedy Central shows like Lil’ Bush reflect what is inherently humorous. This approach to comedy is what ultimately created the show’s unique format and elevated The Daily Show from a satirical variety show to a potential rival to traditional journalism. It is clear that TDS can inform viewers while inspiring critical thinking. The question is: Do they do it better than the news?
Chapter 3
How “Fake” is Fake News?

_The Daily Show_ is unlike any other comedy program. Because it is satire, and because of its’ intriguing format which seamlessly blends comedy with intelligent discussion; it has inspired a great deal of excitement in academics. As a result, it has been called many things: a new forum for political discourse, a new form of journalism, and in some cases just plain journalism. Being something new and exciting, it is easy to get carried away when discussing _The Daily Show_. However, in order to address the central question of this project a direct comparison between _The Daily Show_ and the media must be made.

This chapter explains how _The Daily Show_ is distinct from the news, and what allows it to act as a rival for the news despite being different. Understanding what TDS is and how it works will provide a basis for evaluation which is essential for answering the central question of this project. It is impossible to compare TDS if we understand the two as acting in the same way and performing the same function. The reason TDS would have more success informing and inspiring critical thinking in its viewers is the show’s unique approach to news—not any similarities. First, the chapter addresses how one could mistake TDS for journalism. Then a difference will be established by examining the duties and expectations of the news and how they can’t be fairly applied to _The Daily Show_. Next the chapter will continue to develop the difference by looking at what divides TDS and the news structurally. After that an examination of the guiding goals and philosophies of the news prevent it from meeting our expectations and how _The Daily Show_’s allow it to surpass expectations. Finally the last section will discuss what _The Daily Show_ is, how it benefits viewers politically, and under what circumstances it is most
effective. This ultimately sets up the final chapter which will investigate the claims in this one with an experiment.

**How Does TDS Resemble the News?**

The news is the fourth branch of the American government. While the previous statements not technically true, it cannot be denied that our modern democratic processes have evolved to depend on a public which is familiar with what is happening in the government, the country, and the world. In a country of 300 million people who are expected to govern themselves it is essential that information about the government and just about everything else be available to the public at all times. Luckily for American democracy, news is available everywhere in the paper, in magazines, on the radio, on the internet, and of course, on television. Today television news is available 24-hour in the United States thanks to CNN, MSNBC, and the Fox News networks.

24hr. cable news dominates the world of journalism featuring information about events in the US, in the world, politics, justice, entertainment, technology, health, life style, travel, and business. In this way the news can be said to be very similar to TDS. A programming study done by The Pew Research Center found that the subject matter on *The Daily Show* is remarkably similar to that of cable news. It bears a resemblance as well, featuring the same events, a

![Graph](image-url)
distinguished anchor, correspondents, flashy graphics and of course interviews. Looking at it in this way there is little separating television news from *The Daily Show*; as media Scholar Patricia Moy puts it “despite discussions of what constitutes satisfactory levels of information, there is little debate that citizens use the media to learn about public affairs,” and *The Daily Show*, through mimicry, acts like that media (Moy, 2008, p. 297). The distribution of information, however, is only a part of what the media is expected to do as a fourth branch of government. In these other responsibilities both *The Daily Show* and cable news come under scrutiny.

**Is it Fair to Hold TDS to the Same Standards as The News?**

What could be wrong with the news? The news media of today has overcome many of the struggles it faced historically. There is very little concern over distribution as nearly every home in the US has a television (Elert, 2007). There is not much of a concern over missing important stories either, as news is now able to be broadcast 24hrs. a day. Despite these impressive achievements according to Jody Baumgartner and Jonathan Morris in “*The Daily Show* and Attitudes Towards the Media,” public trust of and satisfaction with the news media has been declining since the 1970’s (Baumgartner & Morris, 2008). In addition to providing the public with up-to-date information the news is also obligated to hold its’ self to journalistic standards. The media is also supposed to be a watchdog filtering out dis/misinformation while seeking out valuable new information. Modern media faces several severe accusations from its critics:

1. That it lacks investigative authority it once had, “the media have become a timid institution that is more interested in profit and notoriety than being a public watchdog” (Baumgartner & Morris, 2008, p. 318).

2. It presents Stories in an overly dramatic and hyperbolic way (Young, 2008).
3. It has an overarching liberal or in the case of Fox conservative bias.

4. According to mostly the younger generation its presentation is scattered, confusing, or just plain boring (Rottinghaus, Bird, Ridout, & Self, 2008).

These criticisms will be explained in further detail later in the chapter when TDS and 24hr. news will be compared on a structural and philosophical basis. For now, it is only important to recognize that modern news is facing a long list of grievances.

If The Daily Show was viewed as a news organization it would face the same scrutiny. How would TDs be received as a journalistic entity? The most obvious criticism is the show’s bias. The Daily Show, while not intentionally selling an political ideology according to Javerbaum, has a very clear liberal slant (Javerbaum, 2010). During his interview with Jon Yoo, Stewart was clearly defending a liberal position on torture in the United States, and during 2004 Stewart was often accused of being “harsh” on Bush and soft on the democratic opposition (Baumgartner & Morris, 2008). The Daily Show’s presentation of news is extremely editorial, and while that doesn’t stop some news organizations, it does hold them back journalistically.

In addition to reporting with a bias The Daily Show doesn’t actually distribute news in the same sense as a real news organization would. TDS bases its programming on what is happening in the news, rarely does it send out agents to collect new information. TDS takes the stories which appear in the regular news day and re-prepares the same information in a different way. There is no “journalistic investigation” to speak of.

The Daily Show also features many segments which are blatantly not news. Segments like “You’re Welcome” with John Hodgeman and “Back in Black” with Lewis Black bring fake authorities onto the show who make absurd claims. For instance, in a recent “You’re Welcome”

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11 If it does the stories are usually not very relevant on a national level.
Hodgeman claimed the only legitimate winter sport would be throwing athletes off of a cliff to see if they survive.

Finally and perhaps the most damning criticism of *The Daily Show* as a form of journalism is that it’s audience does not see it as journalism. In “It’s better Than Being Informed” researchers performed a study which focus grouped students who watched *The Daily Show*. While many of the students agreed that they learned from the show overall, they did not think of it in the same terms they thought of news, “If I want to watch the news I won’t watch Jon Stewart” (Rottinghaus, Bird, Ridout, & Self, 2008, p. 289). In another article, scholars Paul Brewer and Xiaoxia Cao, compiled several polls which suggested “Americans do not see late night comedy shows as legitimate news sources or forums for public debate” (Brewer & Cao, 2008, p. 268). Even if TDS is a form of journalism it is not being viewed as such—even by people who admit to learning from it. These criticisms would be pretty damning if *The Daily Show* was a journalistic entity. However, when applied to a comedy show they are pretty absurd complaints.

While *The Daily Show* is compared to journalistic institutions, frequently comments on journalism, features the same information as journalistic organizations, and has a format similar to television news, it is not journalism. Looking at it in terms of journalistic standards is a mistake as it really takes away from what *The Daily Show* actually is. If one instead considers *The Daily Show* as a comedy program which provides information like the news, consistently makes well reasoned criticism of the modern media and politics, and hosts intelligent discussions of contemporary political issues with political experts, then it becomes evident that there is something more to TDS.

**What Are the Structural Differences Between TDS and The News?**
There are basic elements in the format of *The Daily Show* and the News which make the two effective at performing very different functions. Understanding these differences will clarify how TDS is more prone to encourage critical thought and even more effectively inform certain viewers. The first division is in content. Considering the information from the previously mentioned Pew Research Center study *The Daily Show* and cable news look similar—their top two subjects being US foreign affairs and election politics. However, around 14% of TDS’s programming is devoted to coverage of governmental affairs,\(^{12}\) 8% is about the media,\(^{13}\) and around 4% is about race, gender, or gay issues.\(^{14}\) While *The Daily Show* does not cover many disasters—which account for 6% of cable news programming—it does cover some subjects that the mainstream media would never consider adding to their lineup unless there was no way to avoid it.

Week after week *Daily Show* correspondents Wyatt Cenac, Larry Wilmore and occasionally Stewart himself tackle the issue of race. When Cenac or Wilmore are on the air the graphic beneath them reads “Senior Black Correspondent.” This is an invitation to contemplate the place of these issues in society. After Harry Reid said Obama was a viable candidate because of his light skin and laced of a “negro dialect” the media was quick to take up the scandal as a story. In response Reid went on what cable news called an “apology tour” getting face time with his African American supporters shortly after, the scandal disappeared from the news, except on *The Daily Show*. Cenac went to Las Vegas to attend a luncheon lecture, one of the stops on the “apology tour,” and discovered that not only did Reid fail to attend the lecture but there was not going to be an apology—it was a political rally. Upon realizing this Cenac shouts “He calls us negro so we have to throw him a lunch and reelect him?” (Cenac, 2010). While other news

\(^{12}\) 8% on cable news  
\(^{13}\) The media is not even a top 10 subject for cable news.  
\(^{14}\) Again, not a top priority for cable news.
organizations saw fit to condemn Reid and report on his attempt at redemption. *The Daily Show* examined exactly what was going on in the scandal/apology process. This raises some interesting questions about how race is handled politically and in the media. There is a clear protocol for politicians to make amends for racial gaffes. Issuing a statement explaining, condemning, and apologizing for the comment along with a several rallies which cater to the offended group and statement from a major political figure of the race in question accepting the apology, and the scandal is history. TDS’s coverage of the “apology tour” was an investigation, not just a mention. This approach has clear links to critical thought.

TDS does not only discuss racial issues but points out how hopelessly lost the mainstream media is when attempting to tackle the same subject. For example, by Chris Matthews made a comment concerning Obama’s 2010 State of the Union; referring to it as “post racial” and going as far as to say he “forgot Obama was black.” In response, Wyatt Cenac began his a segment with an insightful deconstruction of the media coverage of Obama’s speech ending it saying “oh my god I forgot I was black!” (Cenac, 2010). After that, Cenac said he couldn’t focus on analysis; stopping Stewart from discussing the issue saying “I’m sorry Jon I couldn’t help thinking of how much of a Jew you were when you said that” (Cenac, 2010). Although *the Daily Show* has two cast members who are referred to as “Senior Black Correspondents,” somehow the meaningful discussions of race happen on TDS. Because of a willingness to investigate, TDS provides more in depth information on racial stories. This calls back to the central question—TDS better informs because it features better information. At least on racial subjects.

The media it’s self is a frequent target of satire on TDS. Aside from the obvious elements of TDS programming which mock the media, the show frequently features segments which

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15 In this case, Barack Obama.
investigate and criticize cable news. Apart from shallow self promotion as “the best” or “most trusted” news team or channel there is not much relevant discussion of the media on the news. This is one of The Daily Show’s most essential functions, providing a space for healthy criticism of the news. There are a few problems with the news and The Daily Show painstakingly searches through clips both new and old to expose them. This February there was a blizzard on the east coast which became a major news event. TDS covered it as well, however, for the first part of the segment Stewart struggled to find a name for his segment as all of the ridiculous titles like “Snowmageddon,” “Snowpocalypse,” and “Snowtorious B.I.G.” had been used by all the major news outlets already. Eventually settling on the name “Unusually Large Snow Storm” Stewart continued his coverage of the media’s coverage of the storm by doing, “a weather report that combines the human touch and eye-witness account of a celebrity so random—it would be nearly impossible to duplicate. I am going to call baseball hall of famer Kal Ripkin… ‘s wife—Kelly” (Stewart, et al., Unusually Large Snowstorm, 2010). In pretending to call he finds that she has already spoken about the storm with Fox News. Stewart’s message here is simple, the coverage of this snow storm by the media is already so absurd that it is hard for even his comedy program to appear more over the top, “cable news takes their weather coverage seriously, perhaps more seriously than anything else they cover” (Stewart, et al., Unusually Large Snowstorm, 2010). TDS’s critique goes on as he turns from discussion of the storm to how the storm has allowed opponents of global warming to voice their opinions on the air.

Stewart plays montage of clips from Fox News where reporters mention how ridiculous global warming is as an issue when snow storms are still so bad. For his own discussion of the storm and Global Warming issues Jon cuts away to his correspondents Aasif Mandvi in New York City, Samantha Bee in Australia, and Jason Jones from “somewhere dark.” Stewart begins
his discussion with Mandvi who suggests that because there is frozen water falling from the sky all of Al Gore’s lies have been exposed (Stewart, et al., Unusually Large Snowstorm, 2010). Mandvi then punctuates his point by bringing up a graph which shows consistent cooling over time—the graph which started in August and ended in January did show a clear drop in temperature, “It’s a little thing called science” (Stewart, et al., Unusually Large Snowstorm, 2010). At this point Bee chimed in from Australia saying “I know global warming is real because where I am it’s hot… it’s 90 degrees, in February. Start building the Arc boys, the flood’s a’ comin’” (Stewart, et al., Unusually Large Snowstorm, 2010). As Bee and Mandvi start arguing over the existence of global warming Jones appears and claims “[Where I am] it’s dark and it’s only getting darker—this proves global darkening!” During this segment Stewart plays the straight man attempting to reason that we can’t base our assumptions about the weather on day to day data. This sketch effortlessly illustrates the tendency of the media to over dramatize mundane stories as well as substantiate unfounded claims by repeating faulty logic. The Daily Show managed not only to tell the story, there is a blizzard, but point out how it was told and how it was misused by certain political actors.

The next formatting difference between cable news and The Daily Show is time. Cable news runs for 24 hrs, The Daily Show only has about 22 minutes four times a week. The result is a very different use of time. The news often has too much time on their hands, and scrambles to fill it with unnecessary and overly flashy angles on stories which are not that important. A perfect example is Fox News talking to Cal Ripken’s wife about the blizzard. It would be very difficult to argue that the American people needed to know what Kelly Ripken thought about the blizzard. However that is not the only problem with the inordinate amount of time allowed for cable news. Sometimes there is so much happening at once that it is difficult to organize all of
the information into a coherent story. Cable news is trying to deliver so much information to its viewers that some segments are shallow and lack the depth they deserve. Dannagal Young points this out in “The Daily Show as the New Journalism,” quoting a criticism Stewart made of Wolf Blitzer’s *The Situation Room* “Being in *The Situation Room* hurts me! It’s too much information it feels like non-sequiturs” (Young, 2008, p. 214).

*The Daily Show* working against time constraints is selective about the stories which appear on the show. This leads to longer thesis-driven and evidence based segments that Javerbaum described in chapter two. The same format which made *The Daily Show* stand out as a comedy program is a benefit to them in the world of news; longer segments about a few stories lead to a more relevant and coherent message. This is part of the reason younger viewers are retaining more after watching *The Daily Show* “younger viewers who watch late night comedy programs for Political information are more likely to recognize and recall political information” (Compton, More Than Laughing? Survey of Political Humor effects Reasearch, 2008, p. 43). This point is driven home by “Better Than Being Informed” as the focus group mentioned “…they watched because the news was presented in a more simple or easy to- comprehend manner” (Rottinghaus, Bird, Ridout, & Self, 2008, p. 288). *The Daily Show*’s effective use of the economy of time simply produces a better product.

The final formatting difference between cable news and *The Daily Show* is how the two handle the acknowledgement of the past. Simply put, TDS does and the news does not. In the 24 hr. news cycle stories live and die at a rate that many would find dizzying. When a story disappears from the main news cycle as far as cable news is concerned, it disappears forever. This is not true for *The Daily Show* which bases a large amount of its content on exposing hypocrisy by pitting old news footage against new news footage.
In a recent segment called “Crumbums & Fatcats” Stewart showed footage of House Minority Leader John Boehner calling for democratic leaders who may have known about a harassment scandal\(^\text{16}\) to “suffer the consequences.” To which Stewart responded, “Boehner’s ethical stand would carry slightly more weight if he had not just a few years prior expressed the exact opposite sentiment when asked if the Rep. Speaker Denny Hastert should face consequences for covering up Mark Foley’s sext-messaging page’s scandal” (Stewart, et al., Crumbums & Fatcats, 2010). He then showed footage of Boehner denying Hastert’s knowledge of the problem. Today, it is understood that Hastert did know about Foley’s misconduct. He went on to show Democrat Nancy Pelosi denouncing the Foley scandal against footage of her brushing aside the Massa scandal. This use of archived clips holds representatives accountable for their words. This simple device exposes a world of problems in congress but the news never uses it. Daily Show producer David Javerbaum expressed frustration over the media’s failure to use old clips in the same way “The idea of bringing back old clips to show hypocrisy—that’s not a comedic construction… they should be using it. They don’t. That’s to their [discredit]” (Javerbaum, 2010). If the job of the media is to provide the public with vital information to use in order to make informed decisions, then *The Daily Show* is unquestionably outperforming them.

The structures of *The Daily Show* and cable news grant the two different strengths and weaknesses. Cable News, being a billion dollar industry which broadcasts 24 hours a day is better at providing a wide variety of stories immediately. The television news media also has the resources and the access to produce new stories and is responsible for general public awareness. *The Daily Show*, has fewer resources and only repeats stories from the current news cycle. However, working with a manageable time budget they provide greater focus and analysis of

\(^{16}\) Congressman Eric Massa’s alleged groping of a male staffer at his 50\(^\text{th}\) birthday party.
specific news events. *The Daily Show* also considers new stories against old ones, providing a more complete context for evaluating events. The differences go deeper than the basic structure of these programs though, the core philosophies and goals of both *The Daily Show* and cable news reveal why *The Daily Show* is successful in areas the cable news media is not.

**Our Expectations of the News and Why it Fails to Meet Them**

Cable news networks have essentially two goals. The first is fairly comforting: to bring viewers the latest, most accurate, most insightful, and important news possible. To the media’s credit, this is a goal that CNN, MSNBC, C-Span, even Fox News and many news organizations abroad strive to achieve every day. A world without journalistic organizations striving to distribute the truth is not a comforting thought. However, 24 hr. networks have a second goal: to get and keep as many viewers as possible. This is where the trouble starts. Referring back to the list of complaints about cable news almost all of them except for confusing and boring can be connected to the pursuit of more viewers. When watching a story a news organization—any news organization—wants the viewer to think three things:

1. The story is important.
2. The story is exciting.
3. And it is all best explained in one place.

While all news organizations start out with the noble goal of informing the public, and that for the most part is what we expect of it. As Geoffrey Baym explains in “Serious Comedy,”

*Modernity gave rise to the familiar notion of the press as the Fourth Estate, or a light of public inquiry that could hold democratic leadership accountable for its actions and perhaps speak truth to power.* (Baym, 2008, p. 25)

However, despite their intentions and our expectations, the reality of competition for profits and viewership gradually changed the role of news from a public service to a cash cow. Baym
explains, “For network television… news and public affairs programming were seen as directly contrasting with the aesthetic-expressive content that filled the rest of the television landscape” (Baym, 2008). In other words in the beginning everything on television was entertainment except for the news. In order to create a separation between news and entertainment—to preserve the status of news as a serious public service—news followed strict rules. For example, Richard Salant of CBS, in his official book of standards, wrote that news must be clearly separated from entertainment programming and producers were forbidden from using entertainment techniques on the news adding “our field is journalism, not show business” (Baym, 2008, p. 25). This separation was fairly well preserved until the rise of cable news, the internet, and competition between corporate news conglomerates lead to a radical change in philosophy as Baym describes:

In economic terms, technological multiplication and audience fragmentation have been countered by conglomerate—the consolidation of ownership and the integration of formerly independent media companies. Now, housed under the same corporate umbrella, once-distant media outlets are encouraged to share resources, personnel, and agendas in the name of economic efficiency. At the same time in effort to chase shrinking audiences, contemporary media conglomerates have abandoned earlier institutional arrangements such as the wall between news and entertainment, and increasingly seek to reinvent programming to appeal to narrowly defined demographic groups. (Baym, 2008, p. 27)

From Baym’s account of the evolution of news it is easy to see where the complaints about cable news are coming from. If an organization is having a slow news day an unusually large snow storm becomes “Snowmageddon.” When reporting on the election the anchor’s words are accompanied by flash graphics and clips of dramatic footage all deigned to tell the viewer “what happens here is important.”

The perceived bias? It would be difficult to claim that one organization is more bias than another as the conversation of bias in the media is essentially a “he said, she said” argument. Though organizations like Fox News and MSNBC would stand to gain a great deal by framing their stories in ways that would appeal to a certain audience; maybe not going so far as to alter
the news but instead changing the way it is presented. On Fox a tea party protest might be a story about citizens using their freedom of speech and on MSNBC the same story might be about a disruptive march on Washington. Being the station that delivers the news in a way that a certain group of people like to hear is another strategy for securing viewers. Maintaining that your presentation of the news is the only unbiased and therefore legitimate presentation is just shrewd business.

As for lacking investigative authority, this complaint comes up most often during presidency’s which are not media friendly. The Bush administration was famously cloistered to the media, going so far as to pre approve questions at press conferences (Baumgartner & Morris, 2008). Jon Stewart frequently voiced his disapproval of this arrangement, claiming that this was the press acting out of self interest in order to preserve their access to the president, “it’s incredible to me that people [in the press] are playing along with it… they say [it’s because] they’re afraid of losing access. You don’t have any access. There’s nothing to lose” (Baumgartner & Morris, 2008, p. 319). Stewart’s criticisms aside the reality was if a member of the press did go off script there was the potential for his organization to lose access to presidential press conferences. In order to stay competitive news organizations had to play by the rules. Again the press’s shortcomings are a symptom of chasing profits and viewers.

Philosophically speaking the news media starts out with good intentions. At their core, the 24 hour news stations just want to broadcast the news. It is in their secondary identity as profit driven media conglomerates that their goal becomes skewed. It is spelled out in their company slogans, Fox News’s job is not only to bring you the news it is to but to be "The Most Powerful Name in News." MSNBC has to also be "America's Fastest Growing News Channel." CNN’s goal is best spelled out in their ironic financial news slogan "CNN = Money."
How Does TDS Act as a Rival To The News?

It is natural to wonder if *The Daily Show* is not news but distributes the same information as news, provides more depth in content than news, presents its self more coherently than news, and generally does a better job of being a critical voice than the journalistic media—what are they doing and what is their goal? An examination of their core philosophy from the mouths creators of TDS themselves; will shed some light on how the show manages to make fake news better than real news.

While *The Daily Show* is not journalism it is undeniable that it has a great deal in common with journalistic enterprises. Jon Stewart said of the show, “The Longer I’m doing this I’m coming to learn that entertainment, politics, and the media are really juggling the same balls. We’re all going for ratings, so we function by the same rules. What’s a political poll except a focus group for a television show?” (Morreale, 2009, p. 104). Stewart’s observation is an eloquent summation of the status of news and entertainment. As Baym argued the wall between the two has eroded to the point where it is difficult to distinguish what the news is doing from what entertainment is doing. The difference between *The Daily Show* and the news is TDS is actually an entertainment program. The fact of the matter is entertainment integrates news better than news integrates entertainment, “attempts to attract viewers by ‘livening up the News with entertainment are becoming more transparent and responses from potential viewers are quite negative” (Baumgartner & Morris, 2008, p. 318). *The Daily Show*’s only real job is to be a humorous television program, a point which the show’s creators remind interviewers all the time,

- “I don't think... I think we see exactly what you do see. And… but for some reason, don't analyze it in that manner or put it on the air in that manner” (Stewart, Bill Moyers Interviews Jon Stewart, 2003).
• “We’re separate, we’re peripheral… we’re not actually news” Stewart via (Young, 2008, p. 244).

• “We try to be funny and that’s our primary goal. We have comedy jobs, we’re not political activists” (Javerbaum, 2010).

• “Ultimately I’m judged on whether or not the show is funny. If people get a certain insight from the comedy that’s wonderful, because we’re trying to do jokes about things we care about and certainly our point of view is inherent in it. But the idea that somehow we fail when we don’t live up to journalistic expectations is a misreading of what we’re doing” Stewart via (Young, 2008, p. 257).

The only obligation Jon Stewart and his writers have to their viewers is to be funny. As Javerbaum pointed out in his interview the show’s writers are not above making dick jokes, in fact they love to make dick jokes. In the ratings game The Daily Show is competing against other comedy programs, not news programs. The political content of The Daily Show—meaningful or not—is a bonus. When The Daily Show is entertaining they are doing their jobs, when the news is entertaining they are compromising their values for ratings. As David Javerbaum put it, “The name of our channel is Comedy Central. The name of FOX New is FOX News. You tell me which one is not living up to its name” (Javerbaum, 2010).

Now to complicate matters, The Daily Show is a comedy program but they are unlike any comedy program on the air. Whether they intend it or not viewers are learning new things from the show, viewers are subjected to poignant discussions of news and politics, the show features nearly the same content as the news, and the viewers are as knowledgeable if not more so as viewers of news. It is time to pull back the curtain and look at what allows The Daily Show to do all this while claiming to be “just a comedy program.”
To start out it would be prudent to recognize that despite the show’s “fake news” label they do not actually make things up, “… we don’t make things up. We just distill it to, hopefully, its most humorous nugget. And in that sense it seems faked and skewed just because we don’t have to be subjective or pretend to be objective. We can just put it out there” (Stewart, Bill Moyers Interviews Jon Stewart, 2003). If you are looking for a satirical organization that reports events which aren’t actually happening read The Onion. For the most part what you see on TDS is real and the stuff that isn’t is easy to spot. TDS contains real information. The show’s creator’s refusal to acknowledge or believe this fact stems from intent rather than ability. Meaning, if viewers learn something while watching The Daily Show, it’s their own fault.

The show not only distributes information but some level of prior knowledge is needed to understand the show. At least that’s what the creators expect. According to Stephen Colbert, “[viewers] wouldn’t enjoy The Daily Show if they were getting their news from us firsthand. They kind of have to know what’s going on already to get the jokes” Colbert via (Brewer & Cao, 2008, p. 272). While they do recognize that some viewers watch the show in place of the news they don’t encourage or really understand the behavior, “The comment I hear most often is ‘I watch you instead of the news,’ and I say you probably watch us and you wouldn’t have watched the news anyway. So you’re not watching us instead of the news, you’re just watching us” (Javerbaum, 2010). According to the experts, in the case of students and younger viewers in particular watching the show along with keeping track of the news produces results “making the news relevant in humorous ways was often identified as a major benefit to watching The Daily Show, and helped retain the interest of the viewers” (Rottinghaus, Bird, Ridout, & Self, 2008, p. 286). TDS was also cited by viewers as a motivation to go seek out new information after learning about it on the show. So The Daily Show accomplishes a lot as far as information
distribution: it distributes real information, and it encourages the regular consumption of information from other sources.

After real information comes the next ingredient: critical thought. Satire is inherently a form of critical evaluation therefore any program featuring satirical material is making critical evaluations. The top subjects on *The Daily Show* happen to be foreign affairs, politics, the media, governmental affairs, and the place race/gender/sexual orientation. So when watching TDS viewers are seeing critical arguments about these important subjects. Javerbaum despite his belief that *The Daily Show* has little value as a political actor did mention that the show’s material is built on critical thinking and can inspire critical thinking

I think we help develop critical thinking. I really do. We try to have critical thinking, for the greater part of our day we are sitting around thinking, talking about what we are going to do on the show. We try to do it as constructively and critically as possible, not snarkily or sarcastically but objectively. That is the foundation for what we are going to write that day.

… we have about a half dozen bright, dedicated twenty something year old guys in the bowels of our building watching TV all the time; critically, actively, thinking, remembering, making connections. (Javerbaum, 2010)

*The Daily Show* doesn’t just make argument’s either, it supports them. Those news clips are essentially quotations to back up logically reasoned arguments.

*The Daily Show* is technically a comedy program but it is better to think of them as a form of entertainment rather than specifically “comedy.” The show’s serious interviews are prepared for without any jokes at all.17 This is not because *The Daily Show* thinks of its self as a serious journalistic enterprise. Instead it is a result of Jon Stewart finding those types of discussions interesting. The show’s writers consider serious discussion of serious issues entertaining. And it is apparent form the show’s awards and ratings that audiences and critics agree.

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17 This quote appeared in chapter 2 “Those interviews are driven by Jon. Once we have someone like that we put in a lot of effort. All the writers get involved in preparing for that interview without any jokes at all” (Javerbaum, 2010)
TDS also owes some of its success to Stewart’s beliefs about objectivity “Stewart explicitly rejects that the Journalists role is to present opposing sets of facts from official sources” (Young, 2008, p. 246). Javerbaum when asked about journalistic objectivity and comedic EOO expressed similar beliefs “It’s not your job to report both things equal. That is not your job. You are shaming yourself. [Equal time] is not objectivity. Objectivity is objectivity” (Javerbaum, 2010). This approach to political commentary allows TDS to make statements that don’t appear anywhere else on television. The writers of TDS are not interested in convincing their viewers to think one way or another. In the Interview with Javerbaum he mentioned several times that he (along the other writers of the show) is not concerned with what people think of the material that goes on the show (Javerbaum, 2010). This suggests that The Daily Show works by its creators just coming together and cramming what they think is entertaining into a 22 minute time slot. If people happen to think the result is funny, provocative or informative that is merely a happy accident. This is one of the most important aspects of the show as a learning tool.

Although the staff does not care about influencing viewers they do feel strongly about what their show reveals about the media. When asked if The Daily Show was doing the job that the media should be doing Javerbaum replied “I think so. I think we don’t have to and it’s not to our credit it’s to everyone else’s shame” (Javerbaum, 2010). The very real and very big difference between the news and The Daily Show is that the news tells its audience what to think because they have to. The Daily Show gives its viewers the same information as the news, and expects viewers to draw their own conclusions despite the fact that they don’t have to.

So, What is The Daily Show?

The Daily Show has many functions but many of them are peripheral—unintended consequences of creators—whose sense of humor happens to revolve around satirical
deconstruction of current events. And who find intelligent discussions with intelligent people about serious subjects extremely entertaining. Although scholars have tried to classify *The Daily Show* as journalism, punditry, activism, or education these classifications are more out of wishful thinking and a desire to be dealing with familiar territory than actual discovery. The truth is *The Daily Show* is just satirical entertainment at its best. TDS has just stumbled on to a formula that makes it especially useful. Just because the results of *The Daily Show* are unintentional doesn’t make it or its creators any less brilliant. In fact the show being “only a satire” is part of what makes it successful. As Yong explains “ironically, without the ‘fake news’ label, *The Daily Show* would be un able to play its self prescribed role as an outsider mocking the political spectacle” (Young, 2008, p. 256). Meaning that being not serious is really the secret to the show’s serious impact. If the show were anything other than “just satire” chances are it wouldn’t be inspiring the same excitement.

The uses of *The Daily Show* are truly incredible, especially for students and young people who are just beginning to become politically aware. This is not to say the show doesn’t benefit older or more in formed viewers but most experts have found that the young are especially drawn to it. Javerbaum’s quote from earlier, “you probably watch us and you wouldn’t have watched the news anyway. So you’re not watching us instead of the news, you’re just watching us,” is a perfect illustration of TDS’s most basic function (Javerbaum, 2010). To those who don’t watch the news TDS is a way to connect with politics and current events. According to research done by Rottinghaus and his associates it can also act as a ‘gateway’ pulling previously disinterested viewers into the world of political awareness. Even for more informed viewers stand to learn something from the show thanks to its wide range of subject matter in interesting guests as one student from the Rottinghaus explained “[Jon Stewart] is more likely to get my interest, so after I
watch him I’ll go and look something up” (Rottinghaus, Bird, Ridout, & Self, 2008, p. 287). In addition to that, students have mention that TDS’s presentation is more clear and coherent than the news and studies have shown, “younger viewers who watch late night comedy programs for political information are more likely to recognize and recall political information” (Compton, More Than Laughing? Survey of Political Humor effects Reasearch, 2008). As the jokes are aimed at people who already know a little about politics the show works best with people who are informed but it can benefit those who aren’t.

But wait there’s more! The Daily Show also provides road map for critical thinking about both politics and the media. In TDS’s “Brumbums & Fatcats” Stewart went through a list of politicians who were speaking and acting hypocritically from both parties. The message of the segment was not one party is better than the other but that both deserve to be watched carefully. The “Unusually Large Snowstorm” segment pointed out the at times ludicrous behavior of the media. Stewart’s interview with John Yoo was a deeply intellectual discussion of interrogation policies in the US. Segments and interviews like these allow viewers to look at and think about their world in a way that is not encouraged by watching the news. To put it another way because The Daily Show uses critical thinking it begets critical thinking.

Finally, there is the Function which David Javerbaum pointed out “I don’t think we change minds, I don’t think anyone watches TV to have their minds changed anymore if they ever did. I think the main function we serve—and it’s not our main objective—is providing a catharsis for people who like to watch the show and realize ‘I’m not alone’” (Javerbaum, 2010). Though this function is far from unique—after all TV pundits fill this role all the time—for a young person just starting to develop a political identity a like minded voice can make all the difference.
According to scholarly analysis, several surveys and experiment based studies and careful deconstruction of the show; TDS should be the perfect tool to inform and inspire critical thinking in students. The question remains: When put sided by side who is better at informing and engaging viewers critically? 24 hour cable news or *The Daily Show*?
Chapter 4

The Experiment

Attempting to provide an answer to my central question “Does The Daily Show inform and inspire critical thinking in student viewers than the news?” I have established that, as satire The Daily Show is politically relevant, that because of its format and content it is more valuable as a source of information and political voice than even other satires, the same formatting makes it likely to feature information not found on the news, and that students in particular are the most likely candidates to benefit from watching. This demonstrates the potential for TDS to exceed the news in informing and encouraging critical thought in viewers but doesn’t prove it. In order to provide that proof I conducted an experiment which directly addressed my question.

This final chapter fully explains my experiment. The first section will cover the formation of my experiment. I will by describing the experiment, the reasoning behind its design, and my predictions for the outcome. Section one will also explain the standards I used to evaluate the data in my experiment as well as solutions I devised for problems I ran into when performing the experiment. The second section of this chapter is devoted to reporting the findings of the experiment. It will feature the data gathered by the experiment, report interesting patterns I discovered in the data, and an analysis of what the results mean.

Methods

Having limited resources and time with which to perform the experiment I decided that it would have to take place at Allegheny with a fairly limited number of students. The decision to use students for testing was ultimately based on research which suggested that students are the larger part of TDS’s audience and the demographic most likely to benefit from watching. Therefore the experiment would be on two groups of 25 to 30 students from Allegheny.
In order to measure the ability of TDS and cable news to inform and create critical thinking, I decided that two using clips from each, dealing with the same subject, would be the best way to compare the two. In choosing which station to represent the news I became concerned about objectivity. Could a bias in the content of the clip jeopardizes a student’s ability to absorb and think about the information? I eventually dismissed this concern as bias has little to do with passing on information. The information in the clips could be totally false and it would not affect a student’s ability to absorb and contemplate it. A bias on the part of the student could, however, affect their ability to seriously engage the information. So, I decided that CNN would be the best station to represent the news. Fox is widely perceived to be a conservative operation and MSNBC is a proposed liberal rival to Fox. CNN, although accused of having a liberal bias at times was the least likely to draw prejudice from either liberal or conservative students.

The clips themselves also presented a challenge. How could one be sure that the subject matter was truly the same? I eventually decided that an interview of the same person by both sources would be a perfect basis for comparison. The goal of the experiment was to evaluate TDS and CNN’s presentations. Differences in how the figure was presented, how the figure was treated, what questions were asked, even how long each interview was would not harm the experiment. Those differences were the basis of the experiment.

Interviews with former Lt. Governor of New York, and anti-healthcare activist Betsy McCaughey became the first clips for the experiment. One a four minute interview from CNN’s *Lou Dobbs Tonight* and the other a sixteen minute clip from TDS. At first I was concerned about the difference in time but I realized it was reflective of the relative presentation of both shows. CNN and Lou Dobbs felt the relevant information from McCaughey could be distributed in four minutes and TDS felt it took sixteen. This is a stylistic difference and therefore could be
responsible for any difference in audience reception. The TDS interview was technically twenty seven minutes but only sixteen were in the originally broadcast. I chose to only use the clips which were broadcast on TV.

The second set of clips were not interviews. The experiment was an attempt to evaluate both organizations as a whole and not just the quality of their interviews. I chose to use clips about Senator Harry Reid’s public apology for using the word “negro” because it was a news item that had been out of the cycle for while, but was still recent enough to feel relevant. Reid appealed to me as a subject because as the Senate Majority Leader, he is significant enough that students would have the potential to identify him without having seen the clips. The TDS clip was eight minutes and the CNN clip was four. Again, this is reflective of a stylistic difference in the programs.

Questionnaires given to the students began with a section which asked students to rate their political involvement and familiarity. This was included to avoid false results caused by one group having more politically active subjects than the other. The questionnaire, then went on to ask students to identify the subjects who would be featured in the clips, what they felt about these figures, and finally what they felt about the issues the figures were involved in. The final question invited subjects to share any thoughts general on politics. In observance of the limited rescores available to perform the experiment and the enormity the task of wrangling fifty busy Allegheny students would be; I devised a creative solution for producing a control. Students would act as their own control by filling out the questionnaire once cold\(^{18}\) and then again completing an identical copy of the questionnaire after viewing the clips. The questionnaires

\(^{18}\) before viewing the clips
included mostly questions where students were allowed to freely write in their answers as this would best allow students to reveal their thought process.

**Reasoning and Predictions**

There have been several studies and experiments performed around The Daily Show which is part of why the show has been taken so seriously. These studies may have inspired the basis for comparison to the news however, the comparison—at least for the purposes of answering the central question of my project—could not be made based on existing. In the case of the Pew Research Center surveys, the results do compare some cable news to The Daily Show. Unfortunately there are a few problems with this comparison. First, the Pew studies only measured recognition of information, not how participants understood or thought about that information. Pew also did not keep track of how politically involved the participants were, those who cared more about politics could potentially have more cause to retain that information.

Similarly, many of studies that appeared in other essays such as Brewer and Cao’s “Late Night Comedy Shows as News Sources,” Moy’s “The Political Effects of Late Night Comedy,” and Compton’s “More Than Just Laughing?” are not a firm basis for comparison because The Daily Show is lumped in with other late night shows.

Finally, the focus group in “It’s Better Than Being Informed” which took college students, showed them episodes of TDS and then picked their brains in a focus group, was still lacking. The experiment did focus on what students were thinking. It revealed what benefits students felt they gained from the show and opened the possibility of studying TDS from a viewer perspective. However, the results were mostly conjecture. While student’s opinions may have provided some insight into why they were drawn to TDS, it is questionable how much the students themselves understood what they were gaining from The Daily Show.
In order to answer the central question of this project I designed an experiment that would address subject’s thinking individually. While surveys helped establish that students are the demographic for TDS. Sociological approaches are less useful in answering my central question as it is about individual interaction. Coming up with an argument for generalization is technically the goal of experimentation but this project would be more productive measuring the capacity of TDS to compete with the news; rather than demonstrating the possibility. By addressing each subject’s interaction on a case by case basis there is more potential to learn about a viewer’s thought process, which is not possible with a survey. A focus group, like the Rottinghaus study, on the other hand presents the danger of subjects being influenced by one another. While viewers may discuss the content of TDS with others after viewing, it is far more likely that watching TDS is a personal experience and the content is processed personally. Therefore, any experiment would have to allow the viewer to process the content of TDS and the news alone. The final form of the experiment avoids many of the pitfalls that were present in previous experiments and addresses the central question as directly as possible.

Students who are part of The Daily Show group will better understand and retain the information in their clips. It will be reflected in their ability to coherently identify the figures and issues involved when answering questions.

**Standards and Complications**

Critical thinking will be reflected by complicating the issue adding their own thoughts and opinions to the discussion, asking questions indicating an interests in the issues and desire to consider the information in new ways, or questioning the validity of the material presented—a cautions to accept what they have been shown is the only perspective available on the subject.

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19 the group most likely to have a substantive interaction with the show
Even some unexpected way to suggest the topic has been seriously considered form several perspectives.

Critical thinking is difficult to quantify and takes many forms, however, what isn’t a critical opinion is immediately obvious. Simply parroting back the information or opinions in the clips is not sufficient to qualify as a critical thought. The subject—even if he or she agrees with the figures in the clips—must add their own thoughts to the issue. In addition, “this person is an idiot,” or “this issue is stupid,” would not qualify as a critical evaluation. Some logically oriented thought had to accompany an opinion issued to be counted as critical thought.

Identification of the figures and understanding of an issue were taken on a case by case basis. The subjects were evaluated based on the information available in the clips. Identifying Harry Reid as “a senator involved in a racial controversy,” counts as a successful identification “the democratic senate majority leader who was accused of racial impropriety based on a statement he made” is a more successful identification, and “the guy in the clip who said negro” would be a failed identification.

Despite both groups A (the news group) and B (The Daily Show group), being overbooked by at least ten students each, two email based reminders, oral notifications of the time and location of the experiment upon sign up, and the experiment being run twice for both groups only 21 students showed up for A and 22 for B. I decided to drop the results from subject 22B in order to even both groups to 21. Allegheny students are incredibly busy and that reality was one of the hazards of the experiment. All things considered eight total missing subjects was not a huge loss of data.

Upon, reviewing the answers of most subjects, I found a lack of in answering to bed problematic. Most the answers were preceded by “I don’t know but,” “he could be,” “I guess it
was” or something similar. A subject’s self consciousness in having their abilities and thoughts reviewed by another person\textsuperscript{20} should not invalidate their results. So I counted correct answers which were phrased like guesses.

**Results**

In this section some of the results are reviewed and explained. The questionnaires did ask students to identify their gender, political affiliation, and their outlook on a conservative-liberal scale. Upon review felt this information was ultimately a distraction as political outlook and gender have little with absorbing and contemplating information. It was also not the goal of this experiment to establish a demographic for CNN or TDS—just identify under which circumstances these programs are most effective.

\begin{center}
\begin{tikzpicture}
\begin{axis}[
    title={Profiling Breakdown},
    ytick={1,2,3,4,5},
    yticklabels={Aware, Interested, Active, Follow the news, Watch the Daily Show},
    xbar, axis on top, 
    xmin=0, xmax=40, 
    xtick distance=5, 
    bar width=10pt, 
    legend style={at={(0.5,1.1)}, anchor=north, legend columns=-1},
]
\addplot+[ybar, nodes near coords, nodes near coords align=right,] coordinates {
(23,Aware) \addlegendentry{23} 
(25,Interested) \addlegendentry{25} 
(10,Active) \addlegendentry{10} 
(25,Follow the news) \addlegendentry{25} 
(30,Watch the Daily Show) \addlegendentry{30}
};
\end{axis}
\end{tikzpicture}
\end{center}

Subjects were asked to rate themselves on 1 to 5 scales for political awareness, interest in politics, and level of political participation. I counted rating of 3 or more and the student would

\textsuperscript{20} Despite the questionnaire being anonymous.
be counted as aware, interested, or active. Of the 42 subjects who were considered for the study a little over half rated themselves as aware and interested in politics. Very few subjects rated themselves as actively participating in politics. Subjects were asked if they followed the news “yes or no.” Due to a misprint in the first round of questionnaires students were able to write in an answer for the question “do you watch The Daily Show?” This turned out to be a happy accident as it revealed that while many students say they watch TDS—due to their bust schedules “watching” does not mean every night of the week. When students are not too busy they make an effort to see the show, as subject 10B remarked “Yes. Though not much during the School year. [Because of] work and such.”

(Profiling Patterns)

People who watch TDS and follow the news
People who watched TDS and rated themselves as aware
People who watched TDS and rated themselves as interested
People who follow the news and rated themselves as aware
People who follow the news and rated themselves as interested

(SML) Harry Reid before watching the clips. Overall only seven subjects were able to identify Reid as at least as “a senator.” Only four of those were able to take it further to identify him as SML. Six of the seven called themselves politically aware. All of the subjects able to identify Reid said they watched TDS and only five watched the news. While these numbers are too small to be considered statistically significant it is interesting that all of the students able to identify Reid watched TDS.
The results on information comprehension and retention for TDS and CNN were similar.

For the purposes of identification, subjects only had to mention Reid as a senator, or “congressman.” There were a few exceptions, subject 10B said Reid was “a conservative congressman” and 18A who called Reid “a republican.” A larger study would give more definite conclusions but there appears to be a slight association between racial scandals and the right.

Most of the other misidentifications were caused by subjects only identifying him by his role in the sandal like 6A “the guy who said Obama had ‘negro’ somethings.” Both groups had five
subjects who only partially understood McCaughey’s perspective, these results were counted separately. A. example of a partial understanding is an answer like “[McCaughey thinks] the government controls too much” (8A) which captured her general outlook but really didn’t account for the fact that she was fighting to stop potential government control not stop existing controls.

The true difference emerged in identifying McCaughey. Group A had 9 subjects able to explain who she was and B had 18. However, there was a great deal of confusion in this area. Most misidentified her as a congress woman or someone involved in writing the bill. Identifying her as an outspoken critic of healthcare reform, the former Lt. Governor of New York, Chairman of the Committee to Reduce Infection Deaths, or the possible inspiration for the “death panels” debate were counted as satisfactory identifications.

Finally, the greatest difference was in critical thinking. Critical thoughts were divided into several categories to give subjects the opportunity to have their thoughts considered. Clips were considered to inspire critical thinking if they caused students to think about the issues on the questionnaire, in some way complicated existing thoughts, or thought about the presentation of the clip itself. Subjects were counted if they had critical thinking in multiple categories like 10A who was inspired to add to his opinions on health care by CNN “Same as they were before. Also, my personal reservations aside, I believe the bill deserves an up and down vote” and “[the clip] was talking about his apology. Clever manipulation CNN, very clever. “ 10A felt the need to explain where he wanted the bill to go rather than his opinions about what it should be and made an observation based on the selective presentation of the Reid issue by CNN.
Group B outperformed group A with almost twice as many subjects having critical thoughts in each subject: McCaughey, Reid, health care, race, news/media, and general politics. Displayed in the graphs “Group A: Critical Thinking Post Clips” and “Group B: Critical Thinking Post Clips” the only subjects which were close for the two were race, new/media, and health care. Even in the close subjects group B had small leads.

**Other Interesting Results**

Some of the answers which subjects wrote out partially explained why there were fewer instances of critical thinking with news viewers. Subjects 8A, 4A, and 20A all wrote statements which implied they were waiting for the news to tell them what to think. Answering, “does
McCaughey seem like an authority to you?” 8A wrote “I hadn’t heard about her until now so I suppose not.” A statement which implies that visibility denotes authority, not intelligence or ability. Along the same line 4A wrote “I guess so if she’s being mentioned.” 20A on the other hand seemed very confused when he made his evaluation of McCaughey’s authority writing, “not really at all. I felt like she misinterpreted the material but made valid points.” 20A is reluctant to fully embrace his own interpretation because it directly opposed Dobbs’ presentation of McCaughey. These statements really make it clear that some viewers expect the news to tell them what to think not just what to think about.

There were several subjects who demonstrated considerable familiarity with politics and very effectively processed the material they were shown. Subjects 10A, 13A, 17B and 18B, all rated themselves as informed and interested, three of them identified themselves as highly active. These subjects are the kids who think about politics regularly and keep track of them. Subject B17 in addition to being the only participant to identify McCaughey before watching her in the clip, wrote more than any other subject in the study. Her first questionnaire was filled with insightful observations about healthcare and her perspectives on politics. It had notes scribbled in the margins from when she watched the clips. Subjects were not instructed to do anything with their first questionnaires after finishing other than flip them over. This demonstrated a serious connection to the material and a desire to understand its messages. What is so exciting about this? 17B was watching The Daily Show and taking it seriously. In fact all four of these highly involved subjects thought of TDS seriously. 18B wrote on his second sheet in the “any other thoughts” section, “that it, [The Daily Show], is funny also funny is great—it would be necessary and watchable even if it were not.” A powerful statement which is echoed in 17B and 10A writing in “Comedy Central” and “The Daily Show” for “where do you get your news?”
A good deal of their comments were centered around the presentation of media and media figures. Both 10A and 13A discussed how material was being presented to them, 13A mentioned CNN’s crawl and graphics. 10A of course had the remark about CNN’s framing their story about Reid. 17B and 18B had numerous remarks about McCaughey’s technique as a pundit—noting her frequent emotional appeals to the audience and her refusal to leave her talking points despite apparent debunking by Stewart. I could go on parsing these students for pages but the important thing is what they represent: TDS being used to its fullest potential. Their deconstructions while defiantly informed by TDS were not simply repeating the ideas on the show. They used the approach of TDS to construct a thesis including both the topics of the news and an evaluation of the news it’s self. This skill is one of many skills that can be picked up from regularly watching TDS. These four subjects keep up with current events from multiple sources, care about politics and its effect on their world, they take TDS seriously, and it shows.

How do these examples measure against someone who doesn’t take the show seriously? 19B was violently opposed to TDS as a source of information complaining about the show throughout her questionnaire. She wrote “it’s hard to take any one seriously when they’re on The Daily Show,” and “[I] don’t think The Daily Show is a credible source for news. It’s like the Wikipedia for politics.” However, despite her saying TDS lacks value “as evidence by how little knowledge I gained from watching these clips,” she did benefit from her viewing. After seeing the clips she expanded her view of healthcare expressing the desire for more protection for doctors. Despite her constant insistence that TDS was useless for information she expanded her view on an important issue by watching The Daily Show. TDS can and will do good no matter what but it can be more effective if viewers are willing to take it seriously.
Conclusion

I will once again remind readers that the central question of this project was “Does The Daily Show inform and inspire critical thinking in students better than the news?” In the first Chapter I established that The Daily Show is satire and that satire is more valuable to politics than parody. In chapter two I explained that TDS is an especially valuable form of satire because the shows structure provides real information in a clear manner and features substantive analysis in its humor. In chapter three I made it clear that The Daily Show is not journalism it is a comedy show that is outperforming programs that are journalism. I also explained that TDS is most helpful when viewers also make an effort to follow the news and actively engage in politics. This foundation was essential to answer my central question. And perhaps more importantly it is necessary to understand my answer.

After viewing the results of my experiment it appears that TDS is not better at informing viewers than the news, it’s actually about equal. Although TDS did perform better across the board, the numbers do not make the two significantly different. The experiment disproved my prediction that TDS would be better at informing students. This came as a surprise; especially considering the studies I read which found students felt TDS was less confusing and retained information better after watching. A larger sample of students might yield different results but, after reading answers from the students I studied, I have my doubts. Students like The Daily Show which makes them more likely to watch it. They can get valuable information from TDS but—at least for learning and retaining simple facts—they would be just as likely to get that information from the news. I now believe the reason studies found TDS was good for informing students was students are more willing to watch TDS. Students are just as capable of extracting
information from the news as anyone else; they just have better taste. For the first part of my question the answer is “no.”

The area where my predictions did prove to be true was in critical thinking. With twice the number of critical thinking in every category and small leads in the other categories TDS was the clear winner. Students who said they watched TDS were more likely to have critical thoughts than those that didn’t. In addition, the group that watched TDS produced a great deal more critical thinking. This was even true for subjects who did not watch the news or TDS. I am confident in saying “yes” The Daily Show does encourage greater amounts of critical thinking in its viewers. However, I also believe there is more to it. People are more likely to use TDS to create critical thoughts if they take the show seriously. I now believe the reason students get more out of The Daily Show because as a demographic they are more likely to consider its content seriously. The best and brightest of this study watched both the news and TDS, giving both institutions respect. My final answer to my central question is: The Daily Show encourages critical thought better than the news; especially if viewers don’t dismiss the program as just comedy.

I think everyone should watch The Daily Show. Or at least some form of satirical comedy in addition to the news. America depends on civically engaged citizens to be a successful country. The culture of media and politics being the way it is now I think there is real danger in political thought becoming careless or sedentary. People need a voice to occasionally remind them they are getting carried away—or a friendly reminder that what we see on the news is only a part of staying involved in our government. More than anything else people need to keep thinking. I think satire is that tool people should be using to do that. The Daily Show is just a really good catalyst for responsible civic behavior.
Works Cited


