

THE DAILY SHOW: COMIC ACTIVISM AND PUBLIC INTELLECTUALISM

THE MOST TRUSTED TEAM IN NEWS:
THE DAILY SHOW WITH JON STEWART,
COLLABORATIVE COMIC ACTIVISM AND PUBLIC INTELLECTUALISM FOR
YOUTH

By

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Abstract

In a news industry that seems to have lost its way, *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* occupies a critical space in the public sphere, remapping traditional news categories to create a hybrid official/alternative/popular style, and restructuring audience demographics to include leftist college students and moderate conservatives, all of whom flock to a format that resolves to search for truth and to combat those who stand in its way. Host Jon Stewart is a revolutionary public figure who combines the roles of concerned citizen, comic activist and public intellectual to gain trust, moral authority, and respect from an audience tired of the split-screen debates, punditry and bullshit, and thirsty for a reinvigoration of critical analysis and political engagement.

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**The Most Trusted Team in News:
The Daily Show with Jon Stewart, Collaborative Comic Activism and Public
Intellectualism for Youth**

In a world fraught with danger and despair, comedy is a survival tactic, and laughter is an act of faith. (Ron Jenkins 1)

Political news satire has achieved a wide viewership and critical acclaim in the Canadian and British media over the past several decades, particularly the former's television series *This Hour Has 22 Minutes* and *Royal Canadian Air Farce*, and the latter's *The Day Today* and *The Eleven O'Clock Show*. While similar examples of political satire exist in the U.S.—the 'Weekend Update' segment on *Saturday Night Live* and the 'fake' online periodical *The Onion*—the American contribution to this genre has enjoyed considerably less attention—until *Comedy Central's* news parody *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* in 1999.¹ Host Jon Stewart and his crew of likeminded writers and correspondents distinguish themselves from traditional journalists, who excuse a lack of skepticism as "objectivity," and media pundits, who arbitrarily divide and label themselves politically as occupying a space on the 'left' or the 'right'. Stewart points out that the latter generate not light, but heat—not insight, but spectacle. *The Daily Show* offers a space in the public discourse which challenges and deconstructs dominant narratives, operating not only as a *reaction*, but as a kind of *solution* to the aforementioned crisis of news journalism. The show helps counterbalance the covert censorship practiced by many media people who are complicit in the nation's

¹ I use the phrases "*The Daily Show*," "the writers of *America (The Book)*" and "Jon Stewart et al." interchangeably to underscore the group dynamic underlying this comic and intellectual collectivity.

contradictory ideals of spreading democracy abroad while, simultaneously, stifling what makes a state truly democratic at home: real political dissent and debate.

Several factors, it could be argued, hinder *The Daily Show's* potential to be a truly radical or revolutionary force: first, it is complicit in the popular culture and consumer industry by virtue of its medium; and second, its cynicism ironically reflects dominant structures and thus threatens to overshadow the concept of educated hope which (according to Henry A. Giroux) is a necessary condition for promoting social transformation (Giroux, "Where Have all the Public Intellectuals Gone?"). The negative reading of the show's cultural significance, Tim Walters argues, is that:

The Daily Show is to political coverage what 'Pop Up Video' is to music videos: instead of committed and detailed analytic critique, it offers little more to the viewer than wiser and more immediate cracks about the worrying intellectual poverty of its subject than the untrained viewer himself can, who typically needs a few seconds to construct something biting about the stream of images which confront him. The bleakest reading of the effect of Stewart's work is that he essentially does precisely the same thing as the majority of his target audience does, only more quickly and with greater aplomb: he watches with outrage and bewilderment as the political spectacle reveals itself on television, and either shouts or laughs at it, since either is a better alternative than crying. (Walters, "Review of *America {The Book}*")

While I will address this criticism, I posit that the show does not intend to overthrow the existing system, leading the nation's youth in a coup against the power-bloc, but to elucidate and critique pre-established regimes of truth and pervasive political myths and misfirings. If the show were only a collection of headline puns, celebrity interviews and faux investigative reports it would be far less politically astute; however, the news analysis and political interview segments stimulate profound intellectual discussion of burning issues, creating context for such topics as the war on Iraq, the turmoil in the Gaza

Strip, the debate over Social Insurance, and the declining state of the media. In the midst of heightened security and fear after 9/11, the voicing of critical perspectives has become increasingly difficult, as the mainstream media publish few commentaries that digress from an unwavering uber-patriotism; however, the show manages to meet Edward Said's challenge to "dialectically [and] oppositionally" unearth, confront and defeat the imposed silence and the "normalized quiet of unseen power" whenever possible (Said, "The Public Role of Writers and Intellectuals"). Evoking Said's work, Henry A. Giroux adds that it is the intellectual's responsibility "to promote a state of wakefulness [in] a legacy of critique and possibility, of resistance and agency . . ." (Giroux, *The Terror of Neoliberalism* 153). Operating under the non-threatening guise of satire, the show overcomes much of the covert censorship implemented on television. Stewart et al. launch an incessant attack on the sometimes blatant partisanship of the press, repressive foreign policy abroad, revamped neoconservatism on the homefront, and increasing religious zealotry everywhere in such regular segments as "Political Punditry as Read by Children," "Mess'O'Potamia," "Race from the Whitehouse," and "This Week in God."

Jon Stewart, the show's agent provocateur, has received more attention than any other media figure over the past year—besides those journalists who retired, failed to check facts, or sexually harassed an intern. Stewart was voted 'Person-', 'Entertainer-' and 'Anchor-' of-the-Year by IWantMedia.com, *Entertainment Weekly* and *Vanity Fair*, respectively, not to mention made *Time Magazine's* list of the one hundred most influential people of 2004. His face has graced the covers of *Newsweek*, *Rolling Stone* and *TV Guide*; his book, *America (The Book)*, won *Publishers' Weekly* Book of the Year

Award and still occupies a secure position on the *New York Times* Best Sellers list; and the show has won two Peabody Awards for excellence in journalism, as well as five Emmy Awards for best writing in a comedy or variety. *The Daily Show* is where John Edwards declared his candidacy and John Kerry, along with political heavyweights Ari Fleischer, Bob Dole, Al Sharpton, Colin Powell, Bill Clinton and Henry Kissinger stopped by for interviews. Perhaps even more notable than his celebrity appeal, Stewart has also been extremely influential and acclaimed as an intellectual champion: he was declared one of the top twenty journalists most likely to influence the 2004 presidential elections; he demanded more critical debate in the public sphere from the news on *Crossfire* and, according to CNN President Jonathan Klein, contributed to the show's demise. With roughly 1.5 million loyal viewers tuning in to the show each night, *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* is, argues *The Nation* columnist Susan J. Douglas, "the medically-prescribed antidote to CNN and Fox" (Douglas "Daily Show Does Bush"). For the next generation of politically inclined youth, Jon Stewart is the anti-O'Reilly.

Over the past decade or so, the line between traditional news programs and their more entertainment-driven counterparts has gradually become blurred, with both venues reformatting their themes and approaches to suit the simultaneous rise of political content on television and the illusion of Americans' diminished collective attention span. Network, cable and twenty-four hour news programs have revamped the conventional style of television journalism to include more catchy headlines, graphics, soundbites, celebrity anchors, pundits, and tabloid-style gossip. Correspondingly, by the 1990s the hosts of late-night television programs—which began in the 1950s as nightly variety

shows complete with monologues, comedy sketches, celebrity interviews and musical guests—had begun to combine their predecessors’ brand of humor with a more political flavour, regularly poking lighthearted jabs at international and domestic leaders, scandals and conflicts. Stewart describes his show as “a recipe of the silly, the relevant, the didactic, and the bawdy . . . [a mix that] tastes delicious but still has enough nutrients” (Winfrey 238). While typical network late-night hosts maintain, at least ideologically, a ‘non-threatening’ line of attack, Stewart challenges traditional comic approaches to social and political issues through a hybridization of comedy and serious political coverage, between inane entertainment and crucial contextualization. The fundamental difference between other late-night talk shows and *The Daily Show* is that the former primarily deliver comedy, regularly using political humor as a means toward laughter, whereas the latter is organized around a critical cynicism about the news and politics and, through satire, uses humor as a means to create context, to reach awareness, and to search for some semblance of truth. The show’s success in this regard looms as a threat to traditional news anchors, some of whom consider Stewart a direct competitor and thereby prefer to categorize him strictly as a late-night host along the lines of Letterman and Leno. Network anchors Brian Williams and Dan Rather both discredit the show’s effectiveness as a political force, the former telling Stewart on air that to recognize something as a “*Daily Show* report” is an oxymoron, and the latter lumping the program in with other late-night shows: “While there are people who receive their only political news or most of it from the likes of Letterman and Jon Stewart . . . [these hosts] all watch the evening news broadcasts [and] spin off the evening news” (McClintock 28). In his

general appraisal of late-night television, however, Rather neglects the most important point: the *spin*. Unlike the “spin” politicians and partisan commentators use to distort the content of the news, *The Daily Show* spins the *approach* to the news, one that is firmly entrenched in an ironic pursuit of honesty which many of its competitors lack.

None of the major network hosts—David Letterman, Jay Leno or Conan O’Brien—declare their personal political views or party affiliations on air: Letterman claims to sit “right down the middle;” Leno keeps his personal politics private in order to avoid “tainting” the issues; and Conan O’Brien argues that Johnny Carson’s apolitical approach is the ultimate model for all talk-show hosts, since despite his routine political humour, his viewers “never knew his politics” (Sella 2-3). Late-night hosts typically restrain themselves from revealing a definitive point of view about the war and other hot issues in order to appeal to a larger audience, not to mention advertisers. While Stewart and his fellow correspondents do not openly declare themselves to be registered Democrats or Independents, their collective outrage over the current administration’s deceitfulness, international belligerence, and hypocritical homophobia and sexual moralizing firmly place them in the role of moderates, discontented with the haphazard path on which the nation is headed. Letterman, Leno and O’Brien, on the other hand, consistently make President Bush jokes, but ridicule him as a buffoon rather than a warmongering tyrant, critiquing his intelligence as opposed to his policies. The *Annenberg Public Policy Center’s* content analysis survey of late-night comedy compared material from *The Tonight Show with Jay Leno*, *The Late Show with David Letterman*, and *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*, finding that 33% of Stewart’s

monologue ‘headlines’ from July 15 through September 16 2003 mentioned at least one policy issue, compared to 24% of Leno’s monologue jokes and 21% of Letterman’s. *Annenberg’s* senior analyst Dannagal Goldthwaite Young argues: “*The Daily Show* segments are less likely than a Leno or Letterman joke to use a quick punch-line to make fun of a candidate. . . . Instead, Stewart’s lengthier segments employ irony to explore policy issues, news events, and the media’s coverage of the campaign (Long, “*Daily Show Viewers Ace Political Quiz*”). Ultimately, the show expects and necessitates that its viewers bring to the table their own knowledge and basic understanding of current political information, allowing the writers to surpass unsophisticated clichés and to establish meaningful debate.

Alongside its condemnation of the inner workings of politics and big business, *The Daily Show* is most critical of the medium of which it is, by default, a part—the news industry. The show has waged an overt assault against Fox’s blatant P.R. for the Republican Party and CNN’s increasing laziness, both of which he believes work, the latter inadvertently and the former quite methodically, to lay out and/or support the government’s agenda. Frighteningly for Stewart and other political moderates, Fox has been the most-viewed cable news channel over the past year, averaging 3.3 million viewers per day (Sharkey, “The Television War”). Despite their claims of objectivity, the major networks, predominantly Fox, and to a less obvious extent CNN, CBS, NBC and ABC, consistently betray basic journalistic principles in their political coverage. For example, although ABC claimed that overt displays of patriotism were not appropriate for its newscasts during wartime, network anchor Peter Jennings cried while reading a

letter from a U.S. officer and Diane Sawyer comforted troops at a U.S. medical facility in Germany (Sharkey, “The Television War”). Ideally, “objective reporting” would be reporting that is “detached, unprejudiced, unbiased, and omniscient—and infallible. . . . [it] would, in effect, match reality; it would tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth” (Cunningham, “Toward a New Ideal”). In 1996 the Society of Professional Journalists acknowledged this dilemma—that no reporter can be fully objective since he/she cannot know the “truth”—dropping “objectivity” from its ethics code and changing “the truth” to simply “truth” (Cunningham). In a July 12, 2005 interview with writer Matt Taibbi, Jon Stewart subtly acknowledges this quandary: he begins to say that newscasters must analyze “objectively,” but immediately corrects himself, replacing the outdated term with “empirically.”

Columbia Journalism Review editor Brent Cunningham divulges that despite its problems, the concept of objectivity has persisted for some valid reasons, the most important being that nothing better has replaced it:

Plenty of good journalists believe in it, at least as a necessary goal. Objectivity, or the pursuit of it, separates us from the unbridled partisanship found in much of the European press. It helps us make decisions quickly—we are disinterested observers after all—and it protects us from the consequences of what we write. And as we descend into this new age of partisanship, our readers need, more than ever, reliable reporting that tells them what is true when that is knowable, and pushes as close to truth as possible when it is not. (Cunningham)

Despite these ideals, however, we must search for a better way of thinking about journalistic ethics, abiding by a code that is less restrictive and more grounded in reality, such as acknowledging that journalism is far more subjective than the aura of “fair” or “balanced” implies. The Fourth Estate has been flawed since the turn of the century,

journalists faced with such controversial issues as lynching, the civil rights era, McCarthyism, Vietnam, Watergate, and the Gulf War, all of which placed them in a precarious position, somewhere between the poles of the truth and “my country right or wrong” (Cunningham). Despite the recent onslaught of books on media bias (both left and right) which seem to presuppose that such a thing as objectivity even exists, buried just below the surface in a time capsule somewhere, there has never been a golden age of journalism to which the industry can return. Instead, the very existence of *The Daily Show*, not to mention its explicit criticisms of the industry, suggests the need for long-overdue approaches to the news and information.

John Fiske outlines the difference between “official,” “alternative” and “popular” news, tracing the declining clout of the first, the limited scope of the second and, by extension, the growing influence of the last. “Official” news belongs to the “quality” press and network television—including *The New York Times*, *60 Minutes* and *Time Magazine*—which, theoretically, strive to present information as facts selected from an empiricist reality wherein lies a ‘truth’ accessible by objective investigation. This is the mainstay that has been furiously called into question since what has since been dubbed the ‘Rathergate’ incident, when CBS anchor Dan Rather used an unreliable source in an incriminating report on the President. Official news is the type most arguably in decline, its influence waning and its outmoded format losing viewers who are turning to new sources of information. “Alternative” news—such as *The Nation*, *The Progressive*, and *NPR*—circulates among privileged and educated classes as official news, but rarely reaches broader markets, often construed as elitist and biased. Finally, “popular” news—

once defined strictly as ‘tabloid’ and regularly subject to disapproval by the first two news sources—flourishes in the marketplace. This category no longer consists of just *Entertainment Tonight* and *Extra* but other infotainment/current affairs programs that reach the coveted 18- to 34-year-old demographic, including *Real Time with Bill Maher* and *Dennis Miller Live* and, arguably, “news” networks such as Fox (Fiske 47). *The Daily Show* is a hybrid of Fiske’s three types of news, its rising ratings signifying, according to *Comedy Central’s* General Manager Bill Hilary, “the increasing political and cultural relevance of [the show] and the fact that it provides an alternative voice in American TV” (McClintock 28). A popular alternative, the show could be considered even more official than its more formal counterparts since it is conscious of and works to correct many of the flaws it spots in the mainstream press; and it reshapes the audience dynamic, offering intellectual and insightful information to disparate demographic groups, from frat boys to heads of state.

Despite the overwhelming amount of popular press *The Daily Show* and Jon Stewart have received of late, not to mention the enormous impact they have had on the rest of the news media—most notably Stewart’s appearance on *Crossfire*—and the new pedagogical possibilities they offer to a widening audience, they have received little, if any, scholarly attention. I hope to make an intervention by outlining *The Daily Show’s* prototypical role in the future of the news, particularly for young people. *The Daily Show* is neither the sole venue for political content nor the final arbiter of political commentary on television; it is, however, an ethical intervention and a commitment to the promotion of public pedagogy and the public sphere. Further, it opens a space in which to articulate

critique and to intellectualize, publicly, current concepts and ideas, thus rethinking and redefining cultural politics and the publics' role within it. In the first chapter, "*The Daily Show, 9/11, the News Media and Decline*," I examine the current state of the conventional news media, particularly the television broadcast news, whose waning influence is the result of both economic and ideological limitations which together hinder its function as a democratic medium. Though I draw upon theoretical resources from the 1980s and 1990s, including Noam Chomsky and Edward Hermann's *Manufacturing Consent* and Pierre Bourdieu's *On Television*, I pay particular attention to the state of the news industry in a post-9/11 context, the turning point after which economic and ideological restrictions became less discernable from one another and more interchangeable, advertisers making business decisions largely based upon the zeitgeist of heightened patriotism, propaganda and censorship. Second, I outline the paradox between the exponential increase in the *quantity* of news, such as the onslaught of twenty-four hour networks, and the dramatic decline in its *quality*, thanks to media conglomerates, newsgathering, and groupthink. Next, I uncover the myth of the So-Called Liberal Media (SCLM) conspiracy and its equally detrimental right-wing counterpart, pointing out how our preoccupation with left-vs.-right obfuscates the larger issue at hand, halts critical debate about the real problems afflicting the news, and dissuades the public from searching for and welcoming new sources of information—or at least taking them seriously as legitimate alternatives. Finally, I examine the emergence of punditocracy as a force overshadowing established figures and drowning out

traditional voices in the news media, their sheer noise eclipsing the murmur of reasoned debate.

In the second chapter, “*The Daily Show*, Centrist, Comic Activism and Public Intellectualism,” I examine how the show operates as a revolutionary forum linking a moderate politics, subversive satire, and critical democratic debate, not simply balancing the poles of left and right, as many critics argue, but refusing to play the pundits’ game of belligerence, bullshit and spectacle. First, I compare *The Daily Show* to CNN—the self-proclaimed “most trusted name in news”—offering examples of how the latter’s post-9/11 political doublespeak, self-censorship, and passive commentary and narration waste the opportunity to create context and critical analysis. Second, I argue that *The Daily Show* picks up the slack as a centrist platform, one that does not hide under the guise of “objectivity” but openly asserts its populism, regularly expressing outrage not in an attempt to promote partisanship, but to represent a citizenry that has been denied a popular media platform for far too long. Next, I argue that unlike other politically conscious comedians, or “politicomics,” the show is part of a small movement of satirists who promote awareness over party advocacy, establishing the potential for resistance as opposed to picking sides and “preaching to the converted.” Finally, I link the show and Jon Stewart’s centrist and comic roles with his position as a public intellectual who demands the proliferation of democratic principles, including generating critical debate, widening the public sphere, and holding the nation’s politicians and newscasters accountable for their attitudes and actions. Alongside his team of writers and correspondents, Stewart carries his message to the masses from several different

platforms, including his role as interviewer on *The Daily Show*, interviewee on television and radio talk shows such as *Oprah* and *The O'Reilly Factor*, and (co)-author of *America (The Book)*.

Finally, in the third and final chapter, “*The Daily Show*, Youth, Citizenship and Democracy,” I argue that *The Daily Show*'s combined centrist, comic and intellectual approach appeals primarily to youth (18- to 25-year-olds, primarily college students and twenty-somethings entering the workforce), increasing their awareness of, interest in, and engagement with politics, and encouraging an allegedly apathetic generation to participate in the public sphere as active citizens. First, I examine youths' growing indifference toward the outmoded model offered by the conventional news alongside the ensuing need for more appealing alternatives, not in a ‘dumbed-down’ and shallow attempt to attract what is a clichéd and homogenized vision of young viewers, but in a format and content that intrigues and challenges younger demographics, offering more vibrant personality, reverence and wit. The show accomplishes this role by acting as a hybrid between “official,” “alternative” and “popular” news, offering healthy cynicism and debate in conjunction with mockery and sarcasm. In this sense, the show tackles many of the same issues as its more academic counterparts, such as PBS, but makes them accessible to a mainstream audience looking to feel not lectured, but entertained. Second, I incorporate Henry A. Giroux's work on education and argue that where schools fail, *The Daily Show* serves as an alternative pedagogical site for the dissemination of political socialization and educated hope, encouraging students to vote and to become active citizens—a role that has been reaffirmed by data that suggest that *Daily Show* viewers are

better educated on political issues than their network and cable news-watching counterparts. Third, I contend that Jon Stewart and *The Daily Show's* implicit objective is to serve democracy, not only as a diversified public sphere in which dissent is positively encouraged, but as a touchstone for the kind of news young people should and will likely demand into adulthood, even when they have outgrown the 18- to 34-year old demographic.

Chapter One: *The Daily Show*, 9/11, the News Media, and Decline

It has become a tiresome cliché to say that everything changed on September 11th, 2001. Authors continue to write book after book on the post-9/11 cultural climate. Politicians use the anthology of 9/11 rhetoric to rationalize their foreign and domestic policy. Columnists refer to 9/11 to create “context” for everything from the War on Iraq to the terrorist attacks in London to the presidential elections. Republicans try to convince Americans that 9/11 forever dismantled and destabilized the country’s national security. Democrats attempt to persuade the public that 9/11 compels them to support the nation’s emergency workers and armed forces by preserving their social security and health care benefits. And television news personalities remind viewers, in a fast-moving montage of alarming soundbites and graphics, that 9/11 is a day that is not only a piece of the nation’s history, but a part of its everyday. The paradigm really has shifted because the White House and their media messengers tell us that it has. Together, they have managed to convince the public that it is each individual’s civic duty to take an interest in national security. But sometimes even patriots deserve a break. Since 9/11, the only thing the mainstream press has purported to be of any relevance is the paradoxical oscillation between information and entertainment, including an exaggerated and sensational focus on all things 9/11- and post-9/11-related, and anything inherently devoid of any relevance at all, such as the exponential increase in the emptiness that is reality television and Hollywood gossip. *The Daily Show* relentlessly questions and toys with this dichotomy, displaying and ridiculing how the popular news media have

perfected the art of simultaneously inundating the masses with fear-inducing “hard news” alongside the latest petty (and distracting) celebrity scandals. Thus, in post-9/11 America, news people argue that they are just giving audiences what they want: full coverage of anything security-related and even more coverage of anything that is not.

The media are the engine that helps a democracy run. When the media misfire, the democracy cannot function. The authors of *America (The Book): A Citizen’s Guide to Democracy Inaction* agree:

A free and independent press is essential to the health of a functioning democracy. It serves to inform the voting public on matters relevant to its well-being. Why they’ve stopped doing that is a mystery. I mean, 300 camera crews outside a courthouse to see what Kobe Bryant is wearing when the judge sets his hearing date, while false information used to send our country to war goes unchecked? What the fuck happened? These spineless cowards in the press have finally gone too far. They have violated a trust. ‘Was the president successful in convincing the country?’ Who gives a shit? Why not tell us if what he said was *true*? And the excuses, My God, the excuses! ‘Hey, we just give the people what they want.’ ‘What can we do, this administration is secretive.’ ‘But the last season of *Friends* really is news.’ The unmitigated gall of these weak-willed . . . You’re supposed to be helping us, you indecent piles of shit! I . . . fuck it. Just fuck it (Stewart et al. 131)

After this introductory outburst in the chapter doubly entitled “The Media: Democracy’s Guardian Angel” and “The Media: Democracy’s Valiant Vulgarians,” the authors apologize in an editors’ note for the “false start” to the chapter, calling it a “momentary lapse in restraint caused by a deadline-induced Red Bull binge” (133). They go on to write that the insults were in no way meant to portray “any sense of anger and/or disappointment in the behaviour and standards of the modern media”—the modern media “a wholly owned subsidiary of Time Warner, Inc.”—in other words, their publishers (133). All jokes aside, this rant outlines the press’s conspicuous failure as a source of

information, truth, and context; it admonishes the mainstream media's fixation on and prioritization of tabloid coverage over critical and analytical discourse and debate; and it reproves corporate giants' control over the content of the news. In short, it critically examines the central debate surrounding the current state of the news media: an institution in a state of chaotic discord, many outlets of which serve as a far cry from what is (or at least should be) its most fundamental pedagogical duty—keeping the voting public well-informed on both the domestic and international fronts, maintaining the public trust, and encouraging a public sphere of active debate. The role of news is not to entertain, “but to provide the intellectual material for self-liberation” (Buckingham 26). Professor and Media Matters radio host Robert W. McChesney agrees that journalism is supposed to deal directly with upholding democracy primarily through a type of political education which functions in two ways: first, in the watchdog role, providing a rigorous accounting of people in and with power in both the public and private sectors; and second, in the pedagogical role, offering reliable information and a wide range of informed opinions on the important social and political issues of the day (McChesney, “Journalism, Democracy and Class Struggle”). Using these criteria, McChesney argues that the U.S. media system is an abject failure, serving as a “tepid and weak-kneed watchdog over those in power . . . [and] scarcely provid[ing] any reliable information or range of debate on most of the basic political and social issues of the day” (McChesney). It is not so much that the news industry is in decline from some golden age of journalism, but rather that with the exponential rise in punditry and partisan “debate shows,” traditional newscasters no longer serve a well-defined or an exclusive role. While there

are certainly respected and accomplished reporters, anchors, and producers on television—some of the most recognized including Christiane Amanpour, Bill Moyers and Ted Koppel—the media *system* as a thriving capitalist industry is an antidemocratic force, an institution whose primary function is no longer to serve democracy, but to generate maximum profit for a small number of large firms and billionaires.

But whose job is it to enforce the necessary and codependent relationship between a free democracy and a free press? Even the current American administration seems to confuse the media's role: White House Chief of Staff Andrew Card insists that the media “don't represent the public any more than other people do” and persists that “they do not have a check-and-balance function” (Alterman, “Bush's War on the Press” 11). Not only does the government lack the necessary encouragement to facilitate this process, but they seem to reject it entirely, the most basic tenets of journalism—and democracy—consistently undermined when Mr. Bush claims not to read newspapers, Cheney feels free to kick *The New York Times* off his press plane, and Ashcroft refuses to speak with any print reporters during his “Patriot-Act-a-palooza publicity tour” (Alterman, “Bush's War on the Press” 11). The White House and its supporters, media critic Eric Alterman argues, have not passively allowed this decline to occur under their watch; they have taken aggressive action, preventing journalists from doing their jobs by withholding routine information, deliberately releasing deceptive ‘facts’, bribing journalists to repeat the news in a favourable light, producing and distributing their own “news reports,” and masquerading their own political activists as ‘journalists’ working for news organizations (“Bush's War on the Press” 11). As economic and ideological factors overlap and

become blurred, journalists are restricted by several outside forces which largely dictate the content of the news—by time and financial restraints, by producers, advertisers, and corporations (any of whom could potentially be in cahoots with the government), and by the government itself.

If the government shirks responsibility to ensure the efficiency of a democratic press, then the task must be fulfilled somewhere else. In his news exposé *Bad News: The Decline of Reporting, the Business of News, and the Danger to Us All*, former CBS foreign news correspondent Thomas Fenton acknowledges that while it should be, first and foremost, the government's duty to protect its citizens, the task also lies in the hands of the news media people. Had the media created a drumbeat of segments showing the steadily rising terrorist threat abroad, for example, "we might be living in a different world now" (Fenton 5). Fenton argues that September 11th signaled the utter failure of the foreign branch of the news, a breakdown for which the members of the broadcast news and print journalism must be held collectively accountable, particularly for ignoring the Middle East, failing to serve their role as an alert mechanism before and leading up to the events on 9/11, and thus betraying the public trust (Fenton 3). Fenton asserts that as he stood in front of the television and watched as the second plane struck the World Trade Center, he knew that 9/11 was "not an accident, not an incredible coincidence, but the horrifying climax of events stretching back for years"—an uncovered or overlooked trail of events which, to him, symbolize a news gap that had been festering for decades (Fenton 1-2). While scores of journalists tracked stories about al Qaeda and other radical Islamic militants, their reports, when approved by producers and sponsors, were often

decontextualized and oversimplified, leading the public to view events as largely disconnected and random. Even worse, in the three months leading up to September 2001, Fenton explains, even as some members of the Bush administration were considering taking action against al Qaeda, the phrase ‘al Qaeda’ was not once mentioned on any of the three evening news broadcasts (Fenton 4). And once they did begin to use the term after 9/11, relentlessly in fact, this seemingly meaningless phrase dominated all discussion, as if just uttering ‘al Qaeda’ somehow rationalized going to war. Noam Chomsky argues that in a democratic society, the media “must present reasons and have a heavy burden of proof to justify why we’re going to war [. . .] to present the relevant background, for example, the possibility of peaceful settlement, and then to offer a forum to encourage debate over this dread decision” (Chomsky, “What Uncle Sam Really Wants”). Ultimately, however, before and after 9/11 news producers not only reported on just a tiny fragment of the foreign news gathered by their journalists, but also avoided much, if any, thorough debate—such information considered neither sufficiently interesting to share with viewers (the “foreign news doesn’t sell” argument) nor agreeably patriotic.

In *On Television*, Pierre Bourdieu argues that the journalistic field produces and imposes on the public a particular vision of the political realm, a representation which is skewed by an increasing desire to amuse at all costs, leaving little room for in-depth or critical coverage (Bourdieu 2). Thus, if journalists do not report on it, the public is led to believe either that it does not exist or that it is not cause for concern. In effect, Bourdieu argues, we are experiencing a depoliticization or, more precisely, disenchantment with

political issues and policies, instead focusing on the much more easily digestible scandals or spectacles occupying the political realm (Bourdieu 6). Thus, the television news, perhaps in part by the nature of its medium, is the paradigmatic expression of a dehistoricized and fragmented worldview, not to mention a general lack of interest in democracy. The news media offer an endless series of stories that all appear to look more or less the same: “parades of poverty-stricken countries”—such as the recent celebrity-endorsed crisis in Africa, for which Brad Pitt, Jamie Foxx and, of course, Bono, partake in a series of P.R. events and concerts until the public or, more aptly, the news media become bored and move on to the next (a shift that seems to have already occurred)—“sequences of events that, having appeared with no explanation, will disappear with no solution . . . stripped of any political necessity” (Bourdieu 7). The news media would, as Jon Stewart has suggested on *The Daily Show* more than once, likely claim that they are just giving viewers what they want—viewers who, due to a lack of time, interest and contextual information, no longer have high expectations from once-trusted news anchors and reporters. This excuse simply transfers laziness from the media mavens to viewers, denying the formers’ more direct and immediate influence over cultural production and reinforcing the latter’s relative powerlessness.

Economist James T. Hamilton argues that the decline of hard news (and the resulting increase of celebrity culture and soft news), is best explained as arising from economic choices rather than from human foibles or failings or, perhaps more to the point, as opposed to a mounting ideological scheme to keep real, thought-provoking news from the public (Hamilton 2). Hamilton outlines the ‘five W’s’, the questions that

underlie what becomes news and what does not: *Who* cares about a particular piece of information; *What* they are willing to pay for it; *Where* media outlets or advertisers can reach these people; *When* it is profitable to provide this information; and *Why* it is profitable (Hamilton 7). Thus, the stories, reporters, firms and media that survive in the marketplace depend on the answers to the above five questions—economic factors, Hamilton asserts, completely dictating the content of the news. Tom Fenton outlines the seven main factors he argues underlie the decline of the news media, including: the status of news as a profit earner; the deregulation of broadcasting; the decline of the industry’s code of standards; networks’ obsession with ratings; the expense of maintaining foreign news bureaus; the growth of packaging, rather than gathering news; and, perhaps the most influential factor, corporate ownership of the news media. The first six factors are determined by the bottom line of the last, corporate ownership, the leaders of which who have secured ratings and thus profits for themselves while paring down content and context, investigative journalism and analysis. In *America (The Book)*, Stewart et al. spoof several of these grievances, particularly the media’s “white knight,” corporate ownership:

During the 1980s, corporations began to bail out our democracy by purchasing as many guerilla newspaper, radio and television stations as they could. These mega-corporations became known as ‘parent companies’ because of their patient, nurturing tendencies and for the way they sat the media down and told it, ‘Hey, you’re over two hundred years old now . . . isn’t it about time you settled down and made some money?’ [. . .] By removing the investigative aspect of investigative journalism, today’s modern media finally has the time to pursue the ultimate goal the Founding Fathers envisioned for newsgathering organizations: To raise the stock price of the media empire that owns them. (Stewart et al. 151, 154)

Pierre Bourdieu agrees with the assertion that economic forces influence all fields of cultural production; specifically, he argues that the market has become accepted as a legitimate means of legitimation, privileging the pressure to get a ‘scoop’ over spending time creating context and analysis by using solid, pertinent facts (Bourdieu 28).

Bourdieu explains, however, that dominated by market pressures, the journalistic field creates and upholds invisible power relationships which help structure the entire field of cultural production, one in which “constant, permanent relationships of inequality operate,” a contest materialized between networks, producers and journalists competing for viewers and market share (Bourdieu 40). In this way, economic and ideological factors operate in conjunction with one another, news outlets adopting a particular ideological stance as a marketable means to a profitable ends. Bourdieu maintains that it is not enough to say that what gets on television is determined by the owners, the companies that pay for the ads, or the government that gives the subsidies; he argues that individual corruption “only masks the structural corruption that operates on the game as a whole through mechanisms such as [economic] competition” (Bourdieu 16-17). It is not an easily discernable or straight-forward relationship between left- or right-leaning individuals or groups; instead, the content of the broadcast news is based on ratings, the bottom line which may, in turn, get a boost from a particular ideological slant. While partisanship may draw in an audience, the networks are still likely to be flexible according to the ratings. Profit the undeniable bottom line, it is a question of what comes next—the ideological slant or the audience who demands it?

While the economic model is certainly viable, then, it must not be relied upon as the sole basis for the content on television. The observation that the public sphere only responds to money or power “and not to quiet talent or creative work” easily degenerates into a cliché that the ruling ideas are the ideas of the ruling class, reducing the diverse field of cultural studies into an oversimplified economic equation (Jacoby 5). Noam Chomsky and Edward S. Hermann pair the economic model with the propaganda model, the crucial structural factors of which derive from the assertion that the dominant media are firmly imbedded in the market system—profit-seeking businesses, owned by very wealthy people and/or other companies, funded largely by advertisers, and supported by the White House as a major source of (mis?)-information (Chomsky and Hermann, *Manufacturing Consent*). The overlapping interests of government, corporations, and mass media hinders what should be the democratic objective of the broadcast news and the ‘information’ industry more generally, allowing the powerful to exert even greater control over the flow of information and compelling journalists to yield to the dominant ideology of the moment. For example, just as the media were induced to support (or at least refrain from criticizing) U.S. attacks on small ‘communist’ states during the Cold War, they are similarly inclined to support the U.S. troops, despite severe human rights violations, torture, and abuse at Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo Bay, Saddam Hussein’s nonexistent WMD’s, and the Americans’ inability to pull out of Iraq months after elections. Despite the rationale underlying their criticisms, those who evince dissent from this suggested stance, like Susan Sontag in the *New Yorker*, are held up to widespread scrutiny and public attack.

Following September 11th, almost every branch of the news media, including journalists, social critics, and even late-night comedians, became consumed with overt displays of resolute patriotism, pride and respect, despite, and even hindering, their assumed responsibility to report objectively, ask hard-hitting questions, and poke fun at the administration. Even more conspicuously, members of the press adopted the Bush administration's anthology of buzzwords, such as "9/11," "jihad" and "al Qaeda," which are intended to manufacture fear, anxiety and insecurity, convincing the public to remain in line with the imposed agenda. Not only does this collective feeling of uncertainty exploit and manipulate Americans into believing that they should vote Republican, Henry A. Giroux argues, but "such fears can also be manipulated into a kind of 'war fever'" in which Americans rally around the president, the nation, and the nightly newscasters, without themselves questioning the information they are being fed—nor expecting anyone else to (Giroux "The Terror of Neoliberalism" 35). Taking a carefully constructed stance between respect for and ridicule of the nation, *The Daily Show* returned in full force after a nine day hiatus. Within weeks, the show was back in business, calling its post-9/11 coverage "America Freaks Out" and accompanying its reports with a parody ticker that read: "Oh God Oh God Oh God"

Besides *The Daily Show*, other news and infotainment outlets also underwent a period of solemnity and self-censorship, an inclination based, in large part, on John Ashcroft's December 2001 warning that any criticism of the administration would only aid terrorists—for such "tactics . . . erode our national unity and diminish our resolve, [giving] ammunition to America's enemies, and pause to America's friends" (Goldberg

267). In the immediate aftermath, while the industry was rightfully sensitive to the physical and emotional horror wrought by the killing of thousands, the voices of people in the arts needed to be part of a national conversation in a time of such tragedy, particularly in order to challenge those reactionaries on the far right (and, to a lesser extent, the left) who took advantage of the pain of the nation to serve their own partisan ends (Goldberg 270). In the months after 9/11, Americans were left with the illusory ‘choice’ of unwavering patriotism—“if you’re not with us, you’re with the terrorists”—convinced by politicians (aided by anchors, pundits and celebrities) that to speak out against the war or the president was to side with the enemy (Butler 2). Many journalists reacted to the events on 9/11 “as if accused of a crime of which they secretly believed themselves to be guilty,” overcompensating to appear ultra-patriotic but, in effect, failing to do their jobs (Alterman, *What Liberal Media* 206). This almost complete lack of perceptive analytical content is not a recent phenomenon—the quality of the news, as a number of critics point out, has been in steady decline for decades; however, after 9/11, top-down suppression, not to mention self-censorship, muted critical voices, potential dissidents fearing accusations of betrayal, treason, or pure un-Americanism.

Eric Alterman argues that what was wholly missing from the media’s “endless regurgitation of the horrific events” were “the voices of scholars who, while not pacifists or even (God forbid) leftists, knew enough about history and diplomacy to ask at least some difficult questions” (Alterman, *What Liberal Media* 205). In an interview with Seth Mnookin, author of *Hard News*, Jon Stewart admits that journalists are so self-conscious about their own biases—specifically left-wing bias and liberal leanings—that they censor

themselves and “no longer go on their instincts” (*The Daily Show*). If dissent is traditionally associated with liberalism or centrism, then this collective post-9/11 shutting up signifies a rightward shift of the center of political gravity in politics and the media. Even four years after 9/11, in 2005, whistleblower journalists face the unprecedented possibility (and, in one case, reality) of being imprisoned for keeping faith with their confidential sources. Ari Fleischer admitted to Jon Stewart in a *Daily Show* interview that the Bush White House is more restrictive on information than past administrations. An understatement to say the least, the White House has not only remained secretive, but has waged war on the critical press by curtailing its access to routine information—and threatening them if they happen to attain it. The confusing case goes something like this: Karl Rove—who allegedly leaked to CNN’s Robert Novak, NBC’s Tim Russert, *New York Times*’ Judith Miller and *Time*’s Matt Cooper that Ambassador Joseph Wilson’s wife, covert intelligence agent Valerie Plame, suggested that her husband take a trip to Niger to investigate Hussein’s alleged attempts to buy yellow cake uranium there—was in complete violation of the Intelligence Identities Protection Act (Navasky 24). This case epitomizes how “our ideal of an open society and the free flow of information it presupposes”—one of the founding principles of democracy—is under attack by politicians who value partisanship rivalry and spite over national unity (Navasky 25). Jon Stewart points out that the Bush administration does not want to put a cap on the news, but instead wants to poison the well, discrediting the entire business. Contrary to what Pierre Bourdieu argued in the 1990s, September 11th and the ‘war on terror’ more generally serve as the turning point after which what gets on television *is* increasingly determined

by the owners, the companies that pay for the ads and, most alarmingly, the government that gives the subsidies.

Arguably the most blatantly partisan (and the most unapologetically jingoistic) network, Fox News began its platform of uber-Americanism before 9/11 in 1996 but, naturally, upped the ante after the tragic events, becoming headquarters for viewers who share their patriotic zeal. In the process, *New York Times* columnist Jim Rutenberg argues, Fox has pushed television news where it has never gone before: “to unabashed and vehement support of a war effort, carried in tough-guy declarations often expressing thirst for revenge” (Rutenberg C1). Fox News best exemplifies how corporate owners—namely, Rupert Murdoch—can essentially determine the mandate for the broadcast news. Murdoch, a staunch Republican, owns nine satellite TV networks, one-hundred and seventy-five newspapers, one hundred cable channels, forty book imprints, forty television stations and one movie studio, reaching 4.7 billion people globally (*Outfoxed*). While his pursuits may appear to be about, first and foremost, the bottom line, there is an unmistakable ideological core, evident but denied just enough to allow the propagandistic network to pass as real news. In the documentary *Outfoxed*, former Fox News producer Frank O’Donnell argues that the network did carry legitimate news until the late 1980s, when suddenly they were ordered “from the top” to carry right-wing propaganda, planting the seeds of a continuing legacy of network-wide Republican adulation. Former anchor John Du Pre agrees: “We weren’t necessarily a news-gathering organization as it was told to us, so much as we were the proponent of a point of view.” Bill Moyers resolves that Rupert Murdoch is in a category by himself—overtly political:

He makes no bones about it. Sure, he wants NewsCorp to turn big profit, as it does. But he'll take losses on the *New York Post* and subsidize *The Weekly Standard* to advance his political agenda, which, of course, is ultimately aimed at the kind of government favoritism that boosts his corporate earning. (*Buzzflash Interview*)

His holdings, Moyers concludes, are blatantly political, Murdoch hardly confining his conservative advocacy to editorials or commentary but infusing it into Fox's news coverage itself (*Buzzflash Interview*).

At Fox, scoring ratings and pimping Republicanism are not mutually exclusive but codependent: 9/11 created a market of citizens looking to buy in bulk what Fox was already selling. Though Fox adamantly denies that it is saturated with conservative ideology, the network has discarded some of the most basic tenets and conventions that have guided television journalism for half a century. Any pursuit of objectivity, a misguided one at best, is virtually nonexistent, already eclipsed by the incarnation of a school of thought that privileges blatant partisanship, accompanied by racism, sexism, ethnocentrism, anti-Islamism, and general one-sidedness. For example, Fox News immediately took a determined stance in the War on Iraq, hawkishly reproaching their moderate counterparts who even suggested that the issue was open to debate. Chairman Roger Ailes argues: "Look, we understand the enemy—they've made themselves clear—they want to murder us. We don't sit around and get all gooey and wonder if these people have been misunderstood in their childhood. If they're going to try to kill us, that's bad" (Rutenberg C1). Similarly, Brit Hume, the anchor of "Special Report," claims that he avoided giving too much weight to reports about civilian casualties in Afghanistan since: "We know we're at war. War is hell, people die. The fact that some

people are dying, is that really news” (Rutenberg C1)? And finally, Bill O’Reilly, perhaps the most unashamed moralizer before and after 9/11, calls anyone in opposition to the war “enemies of the state” who deserve to be “spotlighted,” including pacifist celebrities who “hurt” the nation with their dovish beliefs (*The O’Reilly Factor*). As Fox’s news team “wave the flag, stroke the sentiments, [and] stir the prejudices,” they keep their viewers distracted, diverting their attention and reducing their likelihood to think critically (*Buzzflash* Interview). Most frightening of all, many viewers seem to approve: the network’s average audience grew 43 per cent immediately after 9/11, reaching 744,000 viewers at any given moment (Rutenberg C1).

Aside from Fox’s obvious Republican pandering, other networks cater to the advertisers, who often demand to be placed alongside programming reflecting incontrovertible American values, not wanting to risk offending potential consumers or creating negative associations with their products. In turn, the networks were (and still are) careful to avoid turning off potential advertisers. Noam Chomsky and Edward S. Hermann agree that the pressures of stockholders, investors, bankers, big business and the government—the media’s “white knights”—limit large media companies’ autonomy (particularly during the post-9/11 recession), coercing them to focus on the bottom line and “pressuring them with threats of withdrawal of advertising or TV licenses, libel suits, and other direct and indirect modes of attack” (Hermann, *The Myth of the Liberal Media* 12). Corporate advertising is integral to the mainstream media, the fuel that makes it run. Former *Daily Show* correspondent Steve Carell admits that *Comedy Central* has warned the writing staff not to offend advertisers since the station cannot afford to lose their ad

revenue (Donars). This type of censorship has infiltrated every arm of the American media: immediately after 9/11, voices that were in any way critical of the Bush administration or even unconvinced by Bush's rhetoric, such as host of ABC's ill-fated political debate show *Politically Incorrect* Bill Maher, were quickly removed from the airwaves. Maher, ABC's self-proclaimed "bastard step-child," suggested that the 9/11 terrorists were not necessarily "cowards," arguing that the word chosen to define them in the mainstream press may have been an inaccurate term to describe a brutal and inhumane, but certainly not cowardly, act. The demise of the show, cancelled after advertisers began to pull out of the program, best illustrates how much economic, not to mention ideological influence corporate sponsors actually have over television's content. In an interview with Larry King, Maher explained that ABC promoters and advertisers had always been ashamed of the show's politically progressive (and thus potentially threatening?) content and immediately began to withdraw financial support just weeks after 9/11 (King, "Maher Interview"). While networks increasingly make decisions based on business, they continue to uphold a degree of moral consciousness, less overt but similar to the vigilante sponsors in the 1960s who silenced the Smothers Brothers for speaking out against the Vietnam War. Maher does not believe that ABC yanked the show off the air because his comments were necessarily unethical or even unforgivingly unpatriotic; instead, advertisers no longer found Maher's token brand of honesty appealing—i.e. profitable—during the vulnerable— i.e. unprofitable—post-9/11 period, during which Americans were urged to remain in line with their president and nation (Fenton 48). Network television assumed a major role in the operation of returning to

business as usual, allowing citizens to go back to the non-threatening distractions of their regular programming, offering up uncontroversial and easily-digestible sources of “news” and/or entertainment.

Not only do advertisers influence major media decisions but, under the Bush administration, the government is beginning to serve an increasingly prevalent—and controversial—role. In *America (The Book)* Stewart and company joke:

Now, more secure in their relationship, government and the media are entering a golden age of harmony, aiding each other whenever possible. So today’s government officials, aware of the intense deadline pressure of the 24-hour news cycle, are kind enough to send their media colleagues hard news, known as ‘press releases,’ or ‘leaks,’ to be read verbatim on air. The benefits of this are twofold: The public remains informed of the good things our government is up to, and the media is freed up to use its entire arsenal for the next photogenic child’s disappearance. (Stewart et al. 151)

The writers are skeptical of the media’s lapdog tendency to report the Bush administration’s latest policies and updates without even pretending to accompany their accounts with a hint of criticism or analysis. Beginning with the 2000 presidential election, several major network players had a hand in scratching the Bush administration’s proverbial back: for example, CNN’s parent company, AOL Time-Warner, donated \$1.6 million to the Bush campaign; Viacom’s CBS refused to air “Moveon.org’s” commercial during the Super Bowl because it criticized Bush’s \$1 trillion deficit; and ABC signed a \$25 million deal in October 2002 to promote the U.S. military’s West Point Academy in short segments called “West Point Minute” during news shows *Good Morning America* and *Nightline* without being marked as advertisements and thus requiring viewers to decipher where the news ends and the ads begin (Hart and Jackson, “Fear and Favor 2001”). This type of partisanship not only

endorses censorship and extinguishes political equality, but grants the administration a free pass. Even more alarming, perhaps, than the mutual back-scratching between the government and the media, is the Bush administration's self-ascribed role as would-be journalists who, according to Jon Stewart, "realized that if you want to spin it right, you've got to spin it yourself" (*The Daily Show*)! Immediately after September 11th, Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld stood at a Pentagon podium citing Winston Churchill's famous words that "in wartime, truth is so precious that she should always be attended by a bodyguard of lies" (Bumiller 1B1). The Bush administration has assumed this role, quite literally, no longer simply concerned with protecting intelligence and national security, but instead with packaging and distributing its own brand of "news" to the public under the guise of objectivity. In a *Daily Show* interview former Press Secretary Ari Fleischer admits that "President Bush believes that he should get to make the news himself because . . . he's the president." The president's "Because-I-Said-So" mentality damages journalism's public image, hides and distorts facts, and deceives the public.

In an interview with Oprah Winfrey, Jon Stewart comments that in their pursuit of the upper hand, what the Bush administration is trying to accomplish is actually ingenious:

They're blurring the line between what's a voice of authority and what isn't. They've paid guys like Mike McManus and Armstrong Williams to go out and tout their programs and create news pieces. These guys are governmental advocates working under the guise of 'analysts'. What's more confusing than that? (Winfrey 238)

In January, 2005, *USA Today* revealed that Armstrong Williams, a prominent conservative black pundit, was paid \$241,000 to promote President Bush's 'No Child Left Behind Policy' on his nationally syndicated television show, regularly plugging the plan during his broadcasts and interviewing Education Secretary Rod Paige for TV and radio spots several times throughout 2004 (Toppo, "Education Department Paid Commentator"). Within weeks, *The Washington Post* divulged that another columnist, Maggie Gallagher, was paid over \$20,000 by the Department of Health and Human Services to back Bush's \$300 million marriage initiative, writing articles and brochures, as well as conducting a briefing for department officials, without disclosing to the public her contractual obligations. Finally, as the month of January came to a close, the Department of Health and Human Services acknowledged that it paid a third syndicated columnist, Mike McManus, also to promote Bush's marriage agenda (Drinkard and Memmott, "HHS Says it Paid Columnist"). As if paying off pundits to promote conservative ideology with public tax dollars was not quite enough, the Bush administration funded faux journalist Jeff Gannon, a.k.a. James D. Guckert, a Republican activist, to lob softball questions at White House press secretary Scott McClellan, steering him away from more difficult inquiries raised during press briefings. Despite numerous instances of Gannon's journalistic incompetence—lifting large portions of White House and Republican materials verbatim for his 'news reports'; reporting a baseless, unproven rumor of an extramarital affair between Kerry and an unnamed woman; and using a fabricated quotation attributed to Senate Minority Leader Harry Reid to ask a softball question of George W. Bush—McClellan turned to Gannon again and

again for “leading questions that often include false assumptions favorable to the Bush administration” (Alterman, “Bush’s War on the Press” 13).

Despite the potential September 11th offered for changing the way the American media conduct, research and report on the news, the overall climate has not improved. *The Pew Research Center for the People and the Press* conducted a survey in June 2002 which concluded that the public’s news habits were largely unaffected by the September 11th attacks and the subsequent war on terrorism. Reported levels of reading, watching and listening to the news, the report affirms, were not markedly different than in the spring of 2000, with only a slightly larger percentage of the public expressing general interest in international and national news, and even then “its appetite not extending much beyond terrorism and the Middle East” (“Public’s News Habits Little Changed by September 11th”). Americans’ lack of interest in foreign news continued almost unabated for two reasons: foreign coverage was no more perceptive or engaging, the news media inundating their audiences with recycled images of the smoldering Twin Towers and Baghdad bombings; and Americans were offered new but equally trivial spectacles, such as Michael Jackson’s molestation allegations and Martha Stewart’s insider trading, distracting them from urgent domestic and international issues, including why the nation went to war in the first place. And although the content of the news has become even grimmer since 9/11—photographs of the torturous crimes performed at Abu Ghraib and reports of young soldiers in Iraq and Afghanistan losing their lives—the approach has hardly changed: there is not much more development and/or explanation of context, little responsible or productive debate and, in many cases, far less objectivity.

Just weeks after 9/11, Jon Stewart asked CNN's Jeff Greenfield to explore the cultural ramifications of the tragedy, asking him how citizens were to behave. Greenfield focused on the pre-9/11 inconsequentiality of the news: "Look what we considered news two and a half weeks ago—Anne Heche going nuts, a Congressman in a sex scandal, who was getting what divorce from whom"—which was, he insists, okay because there was no reason to think there was anything on the horizon and nothing on the agenda to be taken *that* seriously. Yet somehow, once the dust of the World Trade Center began to settle, Americans quickly fell back into their love affair with tabloid news. Jon Stewart reasons that the U.S. is "a country of hyperbole Before Bush, it was Anne Heche looking into the camera . . . now we actually have something that fits our talent for hyperbole and we don't know what to do with it" (*The Daily Show*).

Between these celebrity scandals and international conflicts, the twenty-four hour networks *appear* to have a broad span of news covered. One major repercussion of the corporate obsession with the bottom line is that viewers are presented with the illusion of more news but less of the substance: twenty-four hour networks produce, as Tom Fenton argues in a *Daily Show* interview, a very thin soup. In a *Daily Show* segment called 'I On News', Stewart exclaims: "in their noble pursuit to inform America, cable news networks have overlooked the fact that 24 hours is too long to fill." He mocks CNN's approach as pure speculation as opposed to analysis, wondering what he can learn from 'America at War' at ten o'clock that he can't learn from 'America at War' at noon, when the watered-down content is so obviously recycled hour after hour, segment after segment. Stewart delivers a mock-apology—"perhaps these networks are 24 hours a day so that news

makers and news analysts have a forum . . . perhaps it's the studio and satellite guests that make the 24 hours so necessary"— his sarcastic comment immediately underlined by a clip of Larry King promoting a full hour of a whacked-out Tom Cruise as his next interviewee (*The Daily Show*). The authors of *America (The Book)* outline their version of a typical twenty-four hour news network schedule, including one hour of “forced, light-hearted banter;” six hours of commercials; one hour of “cross-promotion for on-network or parent-company affiliated news or entertainment;” one hour of “coming ups, up nexts, and still-to-comes;” and four hours of “rerun crap from earlier in the day” (Stewart et al. 138-139). ‘Twenty-four hour news network’ is a misnomer: it actually serves as a further distraction, leading the public to believe that quantity equals quality. The news industry must certainly be thriving, the audience reasons, if it is everywhere at all hours of the day. Despite the popular free market economics sentiment that competition produces diversity, “more news” does not necessarily translate into “better news” (Bourdieu 23).

Not only do the twenty-four hour networks and their evening news counterparts recycle their own news, they also recycle it from a number of other sources, including foreign news agencies, such as Knight Ridder and Reuters; ‘official’ newspapers, including *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post*; and other television broadcasters. Tom Fenton explains that while American networks once provided news coverage to the world, they now rely increasingly on packaging information gathered by someone else—namely, foreign sources—thus not checking facts against their own experts and leading to potential omissions and errors (Fenton 68). This kind of

monopolistic journalism is misleading—simply because the CNN logo appears atop the screen does not mean that the network has had a hand in verifying the presumably factual information. Pooling their resources and sharing sources to cut costs, many news agencies have succumbed to a sort of “groupthink,” resulting in “a homogenous repetitive grey sludge” of information (Fenton 76). In a *Daily Show* interview, former counterterrorism advisor Richard Clark and Jon Stewart agree that both the talk radio people and the twenty-four hour news networks across the country “are saying exactly the same thing, exactly the same words.” This type of laziness is due, in large part, to the fact that “all the reporters are traveling on the same plane, eating the same food, covering the same events, following up on the same press releases and, most of all, reading one another’s copy,” finding themselves, “as if by osmosis, sticking to the same script” (Alterman, *What Liberal Media* 151).

Individual reporters, forced to decide whether to incur the costs of creating a story from scratch or taking the path pursued by other journalists, may simply opt for the angle already developed by their competitors. This encourages their reliance on conventional wisdom and dominant narratives, reduces the likelihood that they investigate and write a unique story, and limits the number of diverse perspectives, creating, unwittingly, a monopolistic stranglehold on information. Ironically, in an era in which there appears to be more news sources than ever before, the ‘news’ is owned and operated by fewer and fewer corporate persons with ever more convergent viewpoints, providing less and even *mis*-information. Because of this practice, the networks infamously faltered during both the 2000 and 2004 elections: in an attempt to be the first ones with the scoop, several

anchors prematurely called the elections in favour of the wrong candidate. The worst part was that several other networks immediately jumped onboard, adding to the confusion and what turned out to be false information: Fox called both Florida and the election for Bush at 2:16 A.M. and anchors at NBC, CBS, ABC and CNN followed suit within four minutes, despite the fact that by daybreak there was still officially no commander-in-chief (Alterman, *What Liberal Media* 178). And while the 2004 election-day exit polling initially indicated pro-Kerry outcomes, it was later determined, of course, that Bush would reign victorious. One of *The Daily Show's* most effective strategies plays on and exposes the absurdity of this type of habitual groupthink. After the subway explosions in London, Stewart played several short news promos with ominous phrases such as “London Terror: Who’s at Risk?” and “How Prepared are We?” emblazoned across the screen. “But those are just the intros and the graphics,” he states in mock naïveté: “I’m sure that the on-air cable hosts will bring some perspective, some context and some understanding to the coverage.” Before he finishes uttering these final few words, however, a montage of successive clips from different networks begins to play on the screen behind him, with news anchors from CNN, NBC, MSNBC and Fox asking: “Are we next in America?” “How safe are we in America?” “Can we prevent a subway or bus attack in the U.S.?” and “Will we ever feel truly safe again?” Not only does this strategy expose groupthink, but it also highlights his competitors’ hyperbolic and spectacular approach.

In the late 1980s Noam Chomsky and Edward S. Hermann outlined a propaganda model, tracing the routes by which money and power are able to filter out the raw

material of the news, leaving only the cleansed residue “fit to print,” thus marginalizing dissent and allowing the government and dominant private interest groups to publicly endorse their platforms (Chomsky and Hermann, *Manufacturing Consent*). Three essential ingredients of their propaganda model, the set of news ‘filters’ which determine content, include: the size, concentrated ownership and profit orientation of the dominant mass-media firms; advertising as the primary income source of the mass media; and the reliance of the media on information provided by government, business, and ‘experts’ funded and approved by these agents of power (Chomsky and Hermann). Chomsky and Hermann explain that the mass media serve as a system for communicating messages and symbols to the general populace, not only to amuse, entertain, and inform, but to inculcate individuals with the values, beliefs, and codes of behavior that will integrate them into the institutional structures of the larger society. The official and agenda-setting media (of which broadcast news is a major part) shape the kinds of opinions the members of the public hold and determine the access citizens are granted—or denied—to information and ideas. Former editorial writer for *The New York Times* Karl E. Meyer suggests that Chomsky and Hermann may be misinterpreting ignorance, haste, and deadline pressure for some kind of determined effort to suppress an element of the story, making an A to B equation between what the government does, what the media say, and what people think (*Manufacturing Consent* documentary). The marginalization of dissident voices that results from the operation of these filters, however, occur so subtly “that media news people, frequently operating with complete integrity and goodwill, are able to convince themselves that they choose and interpret the news ‘objectively’ and on

the basis of professional news values” (Chomsky and Hermann). In a *Daily Show* interview, contributor to *The Nation* and *Rolling Stone* editor Matt Taibbi argues that most journalists do not carry with them a conscious bias but an unconscious preconception of what they are looking for in any particular story, poking and prodding until they find what they think they should disclose to the public. In short, the propaganda model does not at its core describe a conspiratorial system of control, but rather the subconscious prejudices and biases underlying the gathering and dissemination of all information by fallible men and women.

While for Chomsky and Hermann ‘elite domination’ refers to corporations, special interests groups and the White House, the members of the conservative bloc argue that the vast majority of the major networks, cable stations and newspapers are owned and controlled by a different ‘elite’—“the liberal media”—perpetuating the myth that leftist bigwigs sit around a boardroom table calling the shots that will determine the spin on the daily news. *Daily Show* correspondent Rob Corddy toys with this oversimplified notion, deadpanning:

The [liberal media] filter of which Bush speaks [was] developed in the 1950s by a secret cartel of gays and Jews who couldn’t get work in musical theatre. This cadre of Sodom-semites developed powerful filtering technology capable of removing 95% of real American values from all media content. (*The Daily Show*)

Ever since Vice President Spiro Agnew denounced news outlets that were offending the Nixon administration in the autumn of 1969, the specter of the “So-Called Liberal Media” (SCLM) has been much more often *cited* than *sighted*: “the epithet serves as an effective weapon, brandished against journalists who might confront social inequities and imbalances of power” (Solomon, “The Liberal Media Myth that Will Not Die”). Right-

wingers breed the myth, manipulating statistics and relying on misleading statements-of-fact': for example, a 2002 Gallup Poll reveals that 47% of Americans questioned believed the media are 'too liberal'. Conservative media pundits and critics have reversed the premises, however, falsely affirming the consequent so that their argument goes something like this: if there is a liberal media, then people will believe that the media are liberal. People believe that the media is liberal; therefore there is a liberal media.

Eric Alterman lists a number of politicians, dating back to the middle of the twentieth-century, who have publicly mythologized, vilified and decried the SCLM: Dwight D. Eisenhower derided the "sensation-seeking columnists and commentators" who sought to undermine the Republican Party's efforts to "improve the nation;" Richard Nixon grumbled about "a terrible liberal Jewish clique" that "totally dominates the media;" and George W. Bush recently complained that the media are "biased against conservative thought" (Alterman 1-2). While some conservatives may actually believe wholeheartedly in the SCLM, several staunch Republicans, including Pat Buchanan and William Kristol, have admitted that they only perpetuate the myth as a shrewd strategic tool, paying lip service to a tradition of media liberalism while realizing that it is, in fact, a largely unfounded lie. Buchanan admits: "I've gotten balanced coverage and broad coverage—all we could have asked. For heaven sakes, we kid about the 'liberal media', but every Republican on earth does that." Likewise, Kristol claims: "The liberal media were never that powerful, and the whole thing was often used as an excuse by conservatives for conservative failures" (Alterman 2). Chomsky explains conservatives'

rationale behind the myth of the liberal media, arguing that if the system functions well, it ought to at least appear to have a liberal bias. In other words, if the media are presented as already so extreme in their liberal opposition to the dominant structures of power, then a large segment of the citizenry is convinced of their own complacency, assuming that it must be impossible to further surpass the already radically dissident voices on the ‘left’ (*Manufacturing Consent* documentary). While spreading the myth, right-wing journalists, pundits and politicians have formed a seemingly airtight case against the SCLM, creating an unstoppable offensive line which portrays the right as somehow intrinsically unbiased or merely counters to the subversive liberals, and thus preemptively silences the opposition by virtue of their refusal to engage in any type of rational discourse. This strategy is best evidenced by Bill O’Reilly, who argues in one of his ‘Talking Points’ in May 2005 that “sure Abu-Ghraib was bad,” but not nearly as bad “as the elite media would have you believe . . . news agencies blinded by ideology [and] political fanaticism;” and by Ann Coulter, who consistently fans the flames of the pervasive myth, arguing that the “outrageous fraud” of CBS News was inevitable “given the mendacity and outright partisanship of the press” (Coulter, “Dan Rather: Fairly Unbalanced”).

Many of the underlying problems with the content and style of the news, however, actually have little to do with the simplistic solution of blaming liberal or conservative bias. Jon Stewart expresses his frustration with people who demand that the left wing needs a new station. Stewart admits that there is not much difference between the two parties and their respective champions, referring to them as “two gangs who have

intimidated rational, normal thinking beings into not having a voice on television or in their culture” (Rich E2). According to the propaganda model, both the liberal and conservative wings of the media fall within the same framework of assumptions:

Whether they’re called ‘liberal’ or ‘conservative’, the major media are large corporations, owned by and interlinked with even larger conglomerates. Like other corporations, they sell a product to a market. The market is advertisers—that is, other businesses. The product is audiences. (Chomsky and Hermann).

The accusatory finger-pointing—“The media is liberal!” and the retaliatory “No, the media is conservative!”—is futile: there are both left- and right-leaning media outlets. It is not enough to counterbalance one partisan network or journalist with a counterpart from the opposite end of the spectrum. And the question of whether or not both sides—liberal and conservative—are equally represented misses the point: slanderous repartee under the guise of a “fair and balanced” representation is a far cry from informed and analytical debate. As Jon Stewart so poignantly argued on CNN’s *Crossfire*, we are still left with little more than reactionary defensiveness, name-calling and “partisan hackery”—from both sides. Personal ambition and the quest for stardom have overwhelmed journalistic purpose, the drive for an exclusive story or the most raucous bantering taking precedence over true newsmaking. Jon Stewart admits to Bill Moyers that while journalism today is still relatively vibrant, it does not register the way it once did because of the cacophony around it (*The Daily Show*). Journalists are supposed to wake voters from their slumber, deconstructing the kind of noisy doublespeak offered up by politicians who infamously manipulate and twist language, halting real dialogue. Instead, the news media appears to be made up of fewer voices based primarily on reason and the pursuit of truth (particularly when almost anyone can pass as a journalist, from

partisan advocates to bloggers), allowing their competitors the potential to spew half-truths under the guise of objectivity—and to get away with it.

Half a century ago, George Orwell commented: “Circus dogs jump when the trainer cracks his whip, but the really well-trained dog is the one that turns his somersault when there is no whip.” Under the Bush administration, few whips are cracking yet media somersaults are becoming more routine, if not accepted and expected. Despite the blatancy of the ties between several news agencies and the current administration, few voices within the mainstream media, if any at all, bother to acknowledge, much less condemn, the mutually-beneficial relationship. Stewart et al. outline how media forums, such as *Crossfire*, *Hardball*, and the invented *Fuck You with Pat Buchanan and Bill Press*, serve as arenas in which the two political parties provide the networks with “analysts” who argue issues from “the only two valid points of view”—‘right’ and ‘left’—providing an atmosphere of over-the-top showmanship and spectacle devoid of critique or questioning:

In return for help killing time, the media agrees not to analyze the truthfulness of the debate, only which team seems to be winning. Without the input of concerned politicians and the briny think tanks they float in, today’s journalists would be hamstrung by research demands and unable to provide the speculation we’ve come to rely on. (Stewart et al. 154)

Most journalists fail to unearth this problematic relationship because it helps pave their way down the path of fame and fortune. When interest groups clandestinely leak ‘facts’ to their favourite journalists, reporters often become dependent and do not follow up with skepticism, “too busy buddying up their sources” and breaking their stories (Fenton 95). In an interview with Wolf Blitzer, Jon Stewart questions the media’s failure to exert any

cynicism when approaching what turns out to have been the false information (i.e. non-existent WMD's) that led the U.S. into war against Iraq. When Stewart suggests that this should be “the biggest scandal we’ve ever had in the country,” Blitzer adamantly defends the CIA and the Bush administration, dismissively asking “didn’t you ever make a mistake in your life?” Blitzer halfheartedly claims that he thinks the media “could have been more skeptical” but denies Stewart’s suggestion that the Bush administration intimidated the press corps into not asking tough questions. Further, he misses Stewart’s point. When the latter asks whether or not journalists should be, generally, more skeptical of the government, Blitzer responds that reporters have no reason not to believe officials, including members of Congress and the intelligence committees, who brief reporters and are able to convince any number of them that there are stockpiles of chemical and biological weapons. Just because *most* reporters obligingly take their word for it, however, does not mean that the reporting is any more objective or truthful, but only that journalists are more inclined to resort to groupthink and spread the same potentially false information.

The major problem with the mainstream media is not, then, simply a discrepancy between left and right: the problem is the disparity between truth and spin, news and propaganda, relentless investigation and unrelenting laziness. Stewart holds an unflattering view of his network and cable news counterparts who unquestioningly report the news, arguing that the reason the government and big business are able to manipulate the public so effortlessly is because “nobody holds their feet to the fire” to tell the truth. In a *Daily Show* “debate” over John Kerry’s military service, Jon Stewart and Rob

Corddry satirize this increasingly common journalistic breakdown, in which journalists report (read: repeat), almost verbatim, everything the pundits and politicians say without intervening to reach some kind of truth:

STEWART: Here's what puzzles me most, Rob. John Kerry's record in Vietnam is pretty much right there in the official records of the U.S. military, and hasn't been disputed for 35 years?

CORDDRY: That's right, Jon, and that's certainly the spin you'll be hearing coming from the Kerry campaign over the next few days.

STEWART: Th-that's not spin. That's a fact.

CORDDRY: Exactly, Jon, and that established, incontrovertible fact is one side of the story.

STEWART: But that should be—isn't that the end of the story? I mean, you've seen the records, haven't you? What's your opinion?

CORDDRY: I'm sorry, my 'opinion'? No, I don't have 'o-pin-i-ons'. I'm a reporter, Jon, and my job is to spend half the time repeating what one side says, and half the time repeating the other. Little thing called 'objectivity'—might want to look it up some day.

STEWART: Doesn't objectivity mean objectively weighing the evidence, and calling out what's credible and what isn't?

CORDDRY: Whoa-oh! Well, well, well—sounds like someone wants the media to act as a filter! [High-pitched and effeminate voice] 'Oh, this allegation is spurious! Upon investigation this claim lacks any basis in reality! Mmm mmm mmm!' Listen buddy: not my job to stand between the people talking to me and the people listening to me.

As Stewart and Corddry dramatize, the pursuit of objectivity can trip us up on the way to some kind of truth, the attainment of "both sides of the story" excusing lazy reporting.

As a result, many journalists fail to push the story toward a deeper understanding of what is true and what is false, allowing the principle of objectivity to make them passive mouthpieces of information rather than aggressive analyzers of it. While traditional news anchors, including the late Peter Jennings, Dan Rather and Tom Brokaw have been, at

least until recently, unequivocally praised as paternalistically guiding the nation, delivering the nightly news with the right amount of empathy and objectivity, it appears as if they have faded into the background as the self-anointed pundits gradually overtake and control the direction of “debate.”

Eric Alterman defines pundits as a group of commentators who, along with the White House, essentially determine the shape and scope of public debate in the mainstream media—“debate” which is most often dominated by “ignorant belligerence and sitcom-like silliness” (Alterman, *What Liberal Media* 28). One of *The Daily Show*’s most amusing segments is “Great Moments in Punditry as Read by Children,” which reduces pundits (favourites including Sean Hannity, Alan Colmes, Bill O’Reilly and Pat Buchanan) to schoolchildren, underscoring the absurdity and juvenility of their disputes. Besides a short list of “qualifications,” Alterman argues that the realm of punditry offers neither a recognizable code of ethics nor any rules of professional conduct, thus debasing the entire culture of journalism. Alterman only half-jokingly outlines the attributes which qualify someone to be a pundit, including: not being exceptionally fat or ugly; the ability to speak in short sentences and project an engaging personality; and a willingness to speak knowingly about matters about which one knows little or nothing (*What Liberal Media* 31-32). *The Daily Show* toys with the notion of often unwarranted ‘expertise’ by labeling every one of its reporters a ‘Senior something-or-other Correspondent’, regardless of his/her apparent biases, ignorance and lack of experience. For example, in a segment on the Terry Schiavo case, Stephen Colbert is introduced as ‘Senior Ethicist Dr. Stephen Colbert’, to which he replies, “well, I never actually finished my degree so I just

call myself doctor” (*The Daily Show*).

In his philosophical undertaking *On Bullshit*, Princeton professor Harry G. Frankfurt argues that this brand of partisan smoke-blowing so popular on television news epitomizes the dissemination of bullshit. Bullshit is stimulated whenever circumstances—namely television split-screen debates—provide the opportunity or require someone—pundits—to speak about topics which exceed his/her knowledge of the facts relevant to that topic (Frankfurt 63). While the honest person says only what he/she believes to be true, and the liar, correspondingly, considers his/her statements to be false,

[The bullshitter] is neither on the side of the true nor on the side of the false. His eye is not on the facts at all, as the eyes of the honest man and of the liar are, except insofar as they may be pertinent to his interest in getting away with what he says. He does not care whether the things he says describe reality correctly. He just picks them out, or makes them up, to suit his purpose. (Frankfurt 56)

Thus, the *intent* of lying and of bullshitting is inherently different—the former a well-crafted act with a sharp focus, designed to insert a particular falsehood within what he/she knows to be the truth; and the latter composed of bluffing and faking, not necessarily intended to be deceptive about the facts but to conceal his/her objectives (Frankfurt 51-54). Neither “lying” nor “bullshit,” of course, is a desirable term. Instead, pundits admittedly add their own ‘spin’ to the evening news, meeting up in “Spin Alley” to deconstruct political events from their partisan points-of-view. As Stewart points out in his interview with Professor Frankfurt, referring to “Spin Alley” is more appealing than saying: “Let’s go to Bullshit Street!” During his legendary *Crossfire* appearance, Stewart points to the audacity of the media to “literally [walk] to a place called ‘Deception Lane’,” completely undermining—and making light of—their obligation to

the public trust. *Crossfire's* Paul Begala defends the practice of spin, arguing that the pundits “actually believe what they’re saying.” He adds: “They want to persuade you. That’s what they’re trying to do by spinning. I don’t doubt for a minute these people who work for President Bush, who I disagree with on everything, they believe that stuff, Jon. This is not a lie or a deception at all.” Stewart responds that while he thinks they believe that President Bush would do a better job, “they’re not making honest arguments [so that] in their mind, the ends justify the means.” Stewart’s retort epitomizes how bullshit operates: the bullshitter will use any approach necessary to win the debate, incorporating strands of both lies and truth to back his/her case.

Former CBS correspondent Tom Fenton is outraged by this unapologetic culture of spin, one he argues acts as the cutting edge of the “dumbing-down process” that the rest of the entertainment media daily peddles, substituting fantasy for reality under the false conviction that the public is simply bored by too much complexity or truth (Fenton 108). Ironically, in a chapter entitled “Solutions,” Fenton glosses over *The Daily Show* as a light bulb in this dimming industry. He does argue, however, that the problem with the news is that Americans, particularly younger Americans, “have become too fluff-happy, too incapable of concerted attention” for more exhaustive news coverage, such as a nightly hour-long show. “Can a young demographic that tunes into comedian Jon Stewart’s *The Daily Show* for its news,” he asks, “ever come around to extended segments full of context presided over by veteran anchors” (Fenton 233)? The only mention of the show in the entire book, Fenton not only overlooks and undermines its effectiveness and influence on (but not limited to) an entire generation, but dismisses its

potential to be regarded as a kind of model for other facets of the news industry. Instead, he is preoccupied with fixing the old format while simultaneously, somehow, convincing young people that news really does matter. He does not consider that perhaps the traditional network news format is invariably outdated, unable to ever recapture the attention of a population whose collective consciousness has been inundated with decades of rapid-fire entertainment. If both traditional newscasters and the new wave of partisan pundits are hesitant or unwilling to deliver, or at least *pursue* some kind of truth, then the industry needs an alternative to the official and tabloid news—an alternative besides the already existent “alternative” media, such as *The Nation*, that reach a select demographic and can also be accused of blatant bias. It is expected that politicians spin the truth—it is what they do for a living—but the news media’s job is supposed to be unscrambling that spin. If the traditional press seems to have lost its way and partisans now lead the pack, the quest for objectivity having become a goal relegated to the past, the best alternative is news that acknowledges its political leanings or, at the very least, discredits its own role as some kind of authority. Enter *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*.

Chapter Two: *The Daily Show*, Centrism, Comic Activism and Public Intellectualism

Some of the most trusted figures on television, including Tom Brokaw, Bill Moyers and Oprah Winfrey, have nothing but praise for Jon Stewart and *The Daily Show* as an alternative source of news. Veteran anchor Brokaw calls Stewart “our Athenian, a voice for democratic ideals and the noble place of citizenship, helped along by the sound of laughter” (Colapinto 28). Bill Moyers adds that Jon Stewart, whom he dubs “the Mark Twain of our times,” is “the most astute political analyst working today [with] more moments of ‘Eureka’ in a single broadcast than a month of editorials” (*Buzzflash* Interview). Finally, in an *O Magazine* interview, Oprah Winfrey writes that “Jon Stewart and *The Daily Show* is to *Comedy Central* what Ted Koppel and *Nightline* is to ABC: the voice of reason in a world gone off its rocker” (Winfrey 189). Oprah lauds Stewart for becoming “part of the public’s consciousness during ‘Indecision 2000’.” When she asks him if he denies that he is powerful, Stewart answers: “Yes—I deny that I am powerful. Power implies an agenda that’s being acted on.” He clarifies that while he is not trying to be self-deprecating or even obtuse, what they are doing on the show is not original: “If it weren’t me, it would be somebody else. We set out to deconstruct the process [of politics] and give people a glimpse at what we think the reality is—and while we’re doing that, we tell jokes. If I didn’t do jokes, nobody would give a crap” (Winfrey 189).

Stewart and his crew of likeminded writers and correspondents, however, can comically tear the Bush administration and their wealthy cohorts from limb-to-limb while adhering to the rules of well-reasoned debate. The difference between *The Daily Show*

and other news programs is that while the latter leave many pressing issues uncovered—due to any number of reasons, from ‘patriotism’ to partisanship, passivity to pure laziness—the former openly critiques not only the Bush administration’s, but also Democrats’, centrists’, independents’, celebrities’, corporations’ and the media’s hypocrisy and bullshit. Since 9/11, some network news programs have tended only to report on what their producers and the U.S. military have allowed—displaying “images of effortless, empiric conquest bereft of death, suffering, or any other human dimension” (Wheeler 54). In its war reports, dubbed “Mess’o’Potamia,” *The Daily Show* mocks mainstream news coverage and unveils its exaggerated patriotic leanings. Although CNN and *The Daily Show* cover the same events, their approaches and methodologies are drastically disparate. For example, CNN reports:

The US military dropped a *large amount of ordinance* on a building in a residential neighbourhood of Baghdad on Monday based on *time-sensitive intelligence* that some Iraqi officials, including Saddam Hussein and his two sons, were there, U.S. officials said early Tuesday (italics added).

The Daily Show interprets events much differently:

The US military’s *whack-a-mole* approach to killing Saddam Hussein may have finally paid off. A B-1 bomber dropped four 2000 pound *bunker booster bombs* on a Baghdad restaurant where Saddam Hussein was believed to be meeting his sons. The bombs destroyed the area and left behind a 60 foot crater. Or, as coalition forces prefer to call it, a *Freedom Hole* (italics added).

The Daily Show’s ironic approach not only highlights the factors CNN virtually ignores, or at least those it covertly attempts to justify, but it also exposes the kind of doublespeak the media uses to report on U.S. atrocities, repeating the Bush administration’s words—‘time-sensitive intelligence’—verbatim, without even a hint of criticism. While CNN reminds viewers that the army was forced to act in this hasty, haphazard manner in the

name of Americans' freedom, *The Daily Show* emphasizes the U.S. military's reckless, chaotic, hit and miss militarism.

Stewart, who notoriously loathes Fox's blatantly right-wing P.R. for the Republican Party, has recently turned his criticisms away from the conservative pundits at Fox and has redirected his attention toward CNN. In a *Rolling Stone* interview, Stewart argues that while Fox at least has a point of view, CNN's ideologically ambivalent stance is a missed opportunity to provide a forum which does not define truth "through that bi-chromatic prism that is right and left" (Colapinto 64). CNN is no longer a news channel but "just a camera set up with some dude narrating," Stewart complains on his show. After a number of anchors expressed confusion concerning the colour of the smoke symbolizing the accession of a new Pope, he asks: "Are they reporters or are they just sitting in their pajamas yelling at the TV?" He also critiques anchors' robotic, affected and personality-bereft reports, asking after CNN's satellite signal failed during a report on technology: "Is anyone at CNN awake? Is it an irony-free zone?" Not stopping there, he mocks the absurdity of the twenty-four hour news ticker during his appearance on *Oprah*, a phenomenon he argues not only "adds no insight or context," but tactlessly juxtaposes horrific images of death, such as photos of Saddam Hussein's slain sons, with trivialities in the scrolling headline, in this case: "Beyonce no longer likes the word 'Bootylicious'." Perhaps one of *The Daily Show's* biggest sources of criticism is its competitors' over-attention to insignificant stories and details, the networks and cable stations reeking of tabloid journalism but refusing to label themselves accordingly. Stewart triumphantly exalted after the Terry Schiavo case: "the Schiavo feeding tube will

soon be removed from cable news,” and sardonically described the ‘Rathergate’ incident as a media-created spectacle that “dwarfed other less significant reports such as President Bush’s gaps in military service” (*The Daily Show*). Another such indignity that was left virtually untouched by the mainstream press was Dick Cheney’s lies about the alleged Prague meeting between Mohammad Atta and an Iraqi intelligence official. The vice president claimed during a taping of *Meet the Press* that the meeting had been “pretty well confirmed” when he later insisted, also on videotape, that he “never said that.” Eric Alterman acknowledges in *The Nation* that “it was left to *The Daily Show* to run the two tapes together,” mainstream journalists leaving the blatant lie virtually untouched and returning to the White House press corps the next day only to swallow more (Alterman, “Bush’s War on the Press” 16).

The Daily Show has been misconstrued—and viciously attacked—by many on the right as a propagandistic mouthpiece of liberalism. Despite its self-proclaimed non- or bi-partisanship, many pundits, already convinced of the media’s alleged liberal bias, accuse the late-night show of boosting the Democrats’ image while tainting Republicans’ (Sella 2). “The sad truth,” complains one conservative blogger, “is that if you strip away the humour, and his ‘I’m a moderate’ routine, you are left with the same old brainless and banal liberalism that doesn’t know the meaning of ‘thinking things through’” (Siriano, “Jon Stewart’s ‘Moderate Humor’”). Megan Basham of the *National Review* objects to *The Daily Show*’s “caricatures at the Right’s expense,” an inflation of “common-sense ideology into hyperbolic hilarity” (Basham, “Megan Basham on Jon Stewart”); a writer for *The New Republic* laments that the show dishes out jabs “about 80% at the Right,

[making for] predictable, trite, and boring” comedy (Sherman, “*The Onion* and *The Daily Show*: Unfunny”); and CNN’s ousted conservative Tucker Carlson lectured Stewart on his role as interviewer, accusing him of “sniffing John Kerry’s throne” (*Crossfire*). The conflation of ‘liberal’ and ‘Democrat’ is nothing new; in fact, it is a deep-seated misconception by critics on the right who make the illogical connection that since the media are secular and the Democrats are secular, the two are quite naturally allies against the faithful (Alterman, *What Liberal Media* 36). “Liberal,” in the Jeffersonian sense, means trusting the judgment of the people, alongside an acceptance of the Progressive era’s civic reform and the New Deal’s social security and civil rights for every citizen. If the majority of journalists are committed to these principles, so are most Americans (Schroth, “Liberals Fight Back”).

In this sense, Stewart most certainly has liberal—but not necessarily leftist—leanings. Instead, the show is an amalgamation of bipartisan, centrist, moderate, and, most significantly, populist thought. The following mission statement from the Populist Party of America corresponds with Stewart’s insistence on nonpartisanship:

Third parties and alternative candidates aren’t even given a chance to debate the big two parties—the Republicrats. The problem is the system. Populism will solve this problem by taking the power of this country from the elites, and putting it into the hands of the people. America is *not* a Democracy . . . yet.
(www.populistamerica.com)

Populists have no set agenda for specific political legislation or issues, instead believing steadfastly in the right of the people to choose, in bringing the rule of the nation to the nation itself, and taking it away from the few who currently control the entire system. Like the advocates of populism, *The Daily Show* is often charged with promulgating a

nihilist vision of politics; Stewart and his team are accused of counterproductively believing in nothing at all. While Stewart and the show's writers, correspondents, and producers have their own personal political beliefs, they share a desperate desire for the manifestation of true democracy and accountability in all realms, including the media, big business, and government. By refusing to choose a lesser of two evils, *The Daily Show* offers a more honest stance than other news programs, not only the ones which reduce everything, as *Crossfire's* Paul Begala suggests, to "black and white, left and right," but also the mainstream organizations that claim to adhere strictly to journalistic ethics and objectivity.

As *New York Times* columnist Paul Krugman points out, an unadulterated insistence on nonpartisanship turns every debate into a strictly two-sided issue, potentially obscuring the truth: "Does the ideal of 'nonpartisanship'," he asks, "mean that I should have mixed my critiques of Bush policies with praise, or with attacks on the hapless, ineffectual Democrats, just for the sake of perceived balance? Given what I know to be the truth, would that even have been ethical?" (Alterman, "Bush's War on the Press" 16). The 2004 *Annenberg Public Policy Center* survey indicates that despite (or because of) its populist approach, *The Daily Show's* on air political humour is actually much more balanced than critics make it seem to appear. The survey states that of eighty-three political jokes made by Stewart in a designated period in 2003, only nine *specifically* targeted Bush while the same number targeted Kerry (Long, "Daily Show Viewers Ace Political Quiz"). As Stewart reinforces again and again, it is not necessarily individual actors or policies, but the absurdity of the system that provides him with the

most material. In other words, even if the *Annenberg* survey had revealed that a disproportionate number of Stewart's jokes *had* targeted Bush, this does not necessarily translate into partisanship, but could be attributed to any number of rather obvious factors, including the fact that Bush is president and thus in the limelight more often than his liberal counterparts, and that he does, in fact, happen to make devastating decisions in the name of the American people.

John P. Avlon, author of *Independent Nation: How the Vital Center is Changing American Politics*, argues that *The Daily Show* offers a strong centrist forum to fight back against the talking heads on the left and right who have managed to secure a stranglehold on all forms of dialogue, limiting productive debate. Avlon defines centrism as the position adopted by moderate and middle-of-the-road Americans who are desperately needed to stand up and speak out in arenas from town halls, talk radio, blogs, and television to the halls of Congress, in order to put an end to the attempted hijacking which "has helped to artificially polarize the nation and hurt the credibility of all news organizations" (Avlon, "Ending the Split Scream"). Avlon praises Stewart as the comic nemesis who helped bring an end to the "long-running screamfest" *Crossfire*, providing audiences with an opportunity to perceive and reassess the "tribal mentality" that has infused American politics and media. As the dialogue becomes increasingly polarized and journalists become part of the spin cycle, the moderate majority of Americans withdraw in discouragement and disgust with no idea of where to go for the truth. "The good news is," Avlon reports on *The Daily Show*, "we're actually the majority. It's just a matter of calling it out, straightening our civic backbone, and doing what [*The Daily*

Show and Jon Stewart do], hitting both sides, being an equal opportunity offender.” The problem is not, he explains, that the American people are so polarized between left and right, amid *Air America* and Fox News; it is that both the parties and the debates are being controlled by these extremes. Stewart jokes that the problem with effecting change from a centrist position is that political moderates do not take to the streets to yell “Be reasonable,” nor are they willing to drive down to Florida with “Let the family decide” taped to their faces. The center, he concludes, “just doesn’t give as much of a shit as the crazies” who have got “teams of dudes going 24/7 thinking about how they can get it back to Crazytown.”

Besides *The Daily Show* and a small cadre of likeminded satirists, the centre does not yet seem “to give as much of a shit” as the “crazies.” Even within a profession known for its outspokenness, comedy provokes little activism, according to *Boston Globe* columnist Geoff Edgars. Those who do participate are often firmly aligned with a particular party and thus only perpetuate partisan polarity (Edgars, “Traditionalists Criticize Partisan Political Comedians”). *Saturday Night Live*, once esteemed for its subversive humour, has been discredited as offering little more than tame (and often lame) jokes. Janeane Garofalo noticed this progression explode after 9/11 when, whether determined by executive producer Lorne Michaels, NBC, or the network’s parent company, General Electric, the show completely lost its edge, counterintuitively relegating former voices of dissent to the margins and turning off politically conscious viewers (DiNovella, “Janeane Garofalo interview”). Driven by the demands of the mainstream media (the information industry in close partnership with mega corporations

and the government) most contemporary American comedy “dilutes, commercializes, and diminishes laughter to the point where it loses its force as a weapon of dissent or challenge” (Jenkins 206). The culmination of this development toward increasingly anemic American humor, Ron Jenkins argues, is specifically found in television talk shows, such as *The Late Show with David Letterman*, *The Tonight Show with Jay Leno*, and *Late Night with Conan O’Brien*, the hosts of which have taken a page from Johnny Carson’s book, completely detaching jokes from any unpleasant implications and making no attempt to engage the audience’s emotions or social conscience (Jenkins 200). Like Carson, the aforementioned hosts lump together both the trivial and the profound through glib one-liners, reassuring the audience that the war on terror is no bigger problem than the television ratings war (Jenkins 201). Jenkins critiques the format of late-night talk shows, which typically offer a parade of consumerism and draw no distinction between marketing and entertainment, commercials and guests. *The Daily Show*, however, self-consciously acknowledges its ironic dependence on capitalist support in order to critique it. In one segment, correspondent Rob Corddry dryly refers to the Super Bowl as “the night the advertisers take our black, empty yearning and spin it into dreams!” After a montage of over-the-top and misogynistic ads for everything from erectile dysfunction prescriptions to beer, Corddry disingenuously apologizes for not getting “as giddy as a school girl at a pony show over Super Bowl advertising” since “the fact that it is so horribly corrosive to the human spirit sort of dampens [his] enthusiasm.” *The Daily Show* exposes the irrationality of social conventions, underscoring our sick dependence on consumer culture, undermining corporate America, and satirically (read: strategically)

subverting the very system on which it relies for distribution in an act of bold-faced defiance.

Despite the alleged general lack of comic activism, the intersection of politics and comedy has never been so seamless, comedians basing their social critique in and around politics. In a business once proudly driven by ‘equal-opportunity offenders’, there is a growing gap divided down partisan lines, though not quite equally weighted. Conservatives have Dennis Miller and ‘The Right Stuff’, a group of right-wing comics who travel the U.S., capitalizing on the upsurge of patriotism since 9/11. Otherwise, political humour is dominated by progressives and the radical left, with George Carlin, Chris Rock, Bill Maher, and Al Franken leading the pack. Several humourists, including Howard Stern, Michael Moore, Janeane Garofalo, *Boondocks* creator Aaron McGruder, Whoopi Goldberg and the acting troupe ‘Culture Clash’ have even landed themselves slots on ProBush.com’s traitor list. These comics wanted desperately to defeat Bush in the last election, their passion for which sometimes translated into shouting and exchanging low blows on cable talk shows, performing in private fund-raisers, and using the stage, silver screen, radio airwaves and print as a personal political platform. The aforementioned comedians have been labeled ‘politicomics’ and ‘comic activists’ by fans and critics alike, the latter who protest their occupation of political territory. Mark Katz, a former speechwriter for President Clinton, argues that “comedy was born of anarchism, and now it’s moved into advocacy,” causing comedians to lose credibility among people who do not want to be forced to choose sides. *The Daily Show* occupies a position in between the likes of Bill Maher—a liberal who regularly refers to Republicans as liars

and religious zealots during his nightly HBO timeslot—and Dennis Miller—a recently converted but staunch Republican who rallies behind President Bush and war while denigrating Democrats on his CNBC talk show—without diminishing the same kind of edge and biting political critique offered by its competitors.

From Aristophanes—who mocked the dictators he believed were corroding the democratic principles of ancient Athens—to Richard Pryor—who refused to submit to the tyranny of racism—“humour undermines the forces that stifle the basic human needs for freedom, justice and dignity” and laughter offers a wave of release (Jenkins 2). What liberates the citizen, however, threatens to disrupt the power and dignity of the state. *The Guardian’s* Zoe Williams argues that politicians (and serious minds of all sorts) dislike postmodern ironicists in particular, since they unleash their criticism before the proverbial shit has hit the fan, disrupting the moral framework of political rhetoric (Williams, “The Final Irony”). At least old-fashioned protest waits until it knows it has been lied to before going into action; modern irony, on the other hand, ridicules politicians regardless. Williams argues that everything changed—albeit briefly—on September 11th, the moment upon which many were glad to declare the end of (and say good riddance to) irony. Gerry Howard, editorial director of Broadway Books, said, “I think somebody should do a marker that says irony died on 9-11-01” and Roger Rosenblatt claimed in an essay in *Time* magazine that “one good thing could come from this horror: it could spell the end of the age of irony” (Williams).

Even when Jon Stewart returned to his desk just weeks after 9/11, he offered a self-proclaimed “self-indulgent” nine-minute monologue during which he wept, choked

and stuttered, insisting: “Our show has changed. What it has become we don’t know.” That particular episode, of course, was devoid of any political or social critique; instead, the writers relied upon light-hearted and easy viewing. At the end of the episode, Stewart revealed: “I do hope that you got a smile out of the show. And if you didn’t, I’m about to introduce our ‘Moment of Zen’, which is normally a piece of disquieting footage, something eccentric or quirky.” He then crouched down awkwardly to pick something up from under his desk and proclaimed: “In keeping with tonight’s theme to get a smile out of you . . . it’s a puppy!” Although Stewart and the rest of *The Daily Show* crew opted to place irony on the backburner during the first episode, it returned, at least in *half-swing*, within a few weeks—not least because of the myriad ironies contained within the media’s coverage of the attack itself. The satirists did adjust the tone, timing, and targets of their work in adherence with a national sense of mourning. For example, Stewart et al. were careful not to undermine the gravity of 9/11 by poking fun at the events or actors directly involved; instead, the writers focused on the mainstream press’s melodramatic and non-stop media coverage, extending its thanks to the major cable networks for their over-produced 9/11-themed graphics, slow-motion footage, and pulse-pounding soundtracks, “without which American viewers would not possibly have understood the seriousness of the attacks” (*The Daily Show*). This approach allows them to launch a challenge against their opponents without being dragged into a similar “orbit of self-regarding sentiment” and reactionary rhetoric (Williams).

Americans have laughed along with performers who mock the political process for decades. Since 9/11, however, a growing number of comic venues and groups—

specifically ‘Culture Clash’, *The Onion* and ‘The Yes Men’—have relied upon a style of defiant comedy to unearth and challenge the injustices that have accumulated around them. Satire is their weapon of choice, allowing them to disassociate themselves from partisan groups and exposing—but not without pausing to poke fun at—political and social corruption. The laughter these types of comedians evoke, Ron Jenkins asserts, “is the sound of democracy coming to terms with its flaws” (Jenkins 2007). Culture Clash is a conscious comedy troupe, their material “sometimes raw and angry, sometimes joyful and silly,” both cathartic and a call for action, balancing art and activism through a series of docu-comedies about alternative American and specifically Latin American history. The members of Culture Clash reach audiences of college students and ordinary members of the community by educating and enlightening, and by flying in the face of hypocrisy and bullshit:

We’re storming all those rubber chicken banquets in Hollywood saying, Fuck you guys. You were wrong. If we’re at a big Hispanic function sponsored by Disney, what the Royal Chicano Air Force’s and the Farm Workers’ struggle taught us is that you’d better remind everybody, which we did last week, that Disney supported Proposition 187 [introduced in California in 1994 to deny illegal immigrants social services, health care, and public education].
(www.cultureclash.com)

Culture Clasher Herbert Siguenza points out: “I’m doing [this] because I want social change. It sounds corny and idealistic, but that’s what fuels me.” Such a task, he adds, is “as important as organizing a rally” (Banks, “Cultural Chameleons”).

The Onion, a farcical newspaper founded in 1988 and reaching over two million readers online, features spoofed world, national and community ‘news’, the entire paper serving as an “indictment of anything [the writers] think is dumb”—including “lies,

hypocrisy, stereotypes and various misdeeds” (Adair, “Peeling the Onion”). Much like *The Daily Show’s* nightly news format, the paper parodies traditional journalistic approaches and styles, ironically understating critical topics (“70% of World’s Population Could Use All-Star Benefit Concert”), instead satirically reporting on minor events in a sensationalistic manner (“Slumber Party Confession Comes Back to Haunt Fourth Grader”) and obsessing over fame and celebrity (“Ozzy Osbourne Bites Head off Five-Pound Chocolate Rabbit”). Their main target of derision is, of course, the mainstream media, whose often inappropriate and over-the-top coverage, particularly of 9/11, is criticized for “dumbing down” and insulting the intelligence of the American populace. One article, entitled “Who Will Bring Closure to a Grieving Nation?” reads:

Lawrence Crouch, a media-studies professor at Syracuse University, said the Sept. 11 anniversary coverage will stand as a shining example of the healing power of television: ‘Will the answer to the nation’s woes come in the form of a CNN special memorializing that tragic day? Or a Katie Couric interview with an emotional Rudy Giuliani, live from Ground Zero? Are our hours of personal reflection better spent ruminating on the fate of those lost by watching an interview with a firefighter’s widow, or by celebrating our living heroes with a rousing musical salute? It’s a toss-up, but my money is on NBC’s *Concert for America*. I understand that they have Alan Jackson on board (Siegel et al. 219).

Despite this kind of abrasive, tongue-in-cheek comedy, no one on the staff has any qualms about offending readers: that, they say, is the nature of satire (Adair).

Finally, the Yes Men are a pair who have impersonated some of the world’s most powerful criminals at conferences, on television, and on the web, in an attempt to “correct their identities” (www.theyesmen.org). According to their website:

The Yes Men agree their way into the fortified compounds of commerce, ask questions, and then smuggle out the stories of their hijinks to provide a public glimpse at the behind-the-scenes world of business. In other words, the Yes Men are team players . . . but they play for the opposing team.

Posing as Republicans driving around the U.S. in a bus drenched in red, white and blue, with an enormous picture of President Bush and the words “Yes Bush Can ‘04” emblazoned across each side, the Yes Men distribute “USA Patriot Pledges” and hope that Bush supporters and disaffected voters alike will figure out the joke at their own pace, rather than having the message thrust upon them. The faux pamphlet urges “patriotic” Americans to “stand ready to do their part, providing invaluable assistance to [their] country and President in a time of need.” The tenets of the pledge include everything from volunteering to give up “some constitutional rights” and “to have my phone tapped and internet use monitored, if necessary [in the name of fighting terrorism],” to volunteering to “allow a permanent nuclear waste storage facility to be built in my community,” “to send my children to fight for America in Iraq, Afghanistan, Iran, Syria, North Korea, or anywhere else President George W. Bush deems necessary,” and committing one’s children “to pay for the wars America is fighting to guarantee their security”—accompanied by a space allotted for each child’s name and Social Security Number. Like Michael Moore, the Yes Men go out of their way to offend, shock, baffle and, with any luck, enrage the Americans with whom they come into contact, satirically exposing the horrors being committed in their names as American citizens and at their expense as human beings. Despite their outrage with the Bush administration, however, this type of activism does not necessarily imply a particular party affiliation—i.e. Democrat—instead, it necessitates a *cause*: a populist quest for the revitalization of democracy.

Likewise, *The Daily Show* demands the democratic ideals of nonpartisanship and honesty in the media. While Stewart is admittedly a comedian whose intent is not to stand atop his soapbox spewing his own version of “truth,” he points out to *Crossfire*’s Tucker Carlson and Paul Begala: “You work for CNN,” underlining the assumption that working for “the most trusted name in news” carries greater responsibility to be held to a certain degree of truth. Stewart constantly pits his own show against his opponents’, arguing: “If you want to compare your show with a comedy show, you’re more than welcome to,” adding how frightening it is that “the news organizations look to *Comedy Central* for their cues on integrity.” When asked whether his insistence that *The Daily Show* is first and foremost a comedy and if his “I’m-just-a-comedian” excuse may be considered a ‘copout’, Stewart answers:

I think that’s always an unfair out, but 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 it is we’re doing. (Colapinto 64)

Daily Show commentator Lewis Black rants: “We fall in some sort of a crack where we look good because we’re actually saying we’re funny,” as opposed to those who are completely oblivious that they are buffoons (Grant 9). Stewart distinguishes between his show’s intentional capriciousness and other news programs’ unintentional fallibility: “We are fake. They are not. So in terms of credibility we are, oddly enough, actually about even” (Vigo 3). The show is the perfect hybrid of Horatian and Juvenalian satire—the former an anti-heroic approach in which the satirist applies “humanely constructive” criticism, infused with good humour and forgiveness, acknowledging his own faults

while criticizing others; and the latter adopting a more urgent, angry and harsh tone “filled with invective and vivid images of social and moral criticism” as well as harsh, and often vulgar language (Evans, 36). This satiric recipe for success is epitomized in *Indecision 2004: Prelude to a Recount*, *The Daily Show’s* Election Night coverage, during which Stewart’s manner ranged from a lighthearted comic to, at times, a devastated citizen, both eager to see democracy in action and disillusioned with a seemingly doomed electoral process. One minute he was engaged in jovial banter with Governor William Weld and Reverend Al Sharpton, and the next he resorted to tearing up his cue cards, the colour draining from his face as he rhymed off a list of states that opposed the gay marriage proposition and elected blatantly homophobic Senators to office.

The Daily Show’s satiric approach separates the show from other news sources and allows for opinionated commentary without succumbing to the hypocrisy the writers and host so adamantly oppose. Satirists are seldom “pessimists bent on tearing down the system,” but instead are driven by an optimistic agenda of revealing and rectifying politico-societal deformities (Kahar 2). Conservative Judge Richard A. Posner admits that “satire is the public-intellectual genre *par excellence* . . . [which] conveys social criticism with enchanting, seductive obliquity, avoiding . . . heavy-handed didacticism and explicit and therefore quickly dated prophecy” (Posner 255). The strategy is ingenious: labeling the show as ‘fake news’, Stewart defining himself strictly as a comedian, and refusing to lay out an agenda, the show opens the door for unlimited criticism of its opponents without restricting its parodic potential by adhering to

journalistic ethics. This is not to say that Stewart et al. fail to live up to these principles, but that they refuse to constrict themselves under such a deceptive label. The show's comic approach prevents a sense of pretentious preaching, allowing the writers to portray their own version of political 'truth' without necessarily trying to be 'truth tellers'. Unlike some shows, Stewart argues this his audience can watch objectively "without feeling like we're grabbing them by the lapels and shouting 'This is the truth!' in their faces" (Rich E2). To some, it may seem that the show's humour undermines its political relevance. Critic Dan French argues that the show acts like it takes shots at the powerful, but because it is recognized as a comedy, does no real damage. Further, comedian Guy Jenkins suggests that satire does not necessarily work as political propaganda since it is primarily recognized as comedy: "If you want to change the world . . . don't write satire. Become a politician, become a terrorist" (Keighron 142). Stewart agrees that while he is not "powerless [or] in a vacuum," if he really wanted to change things, he would run for office (Winfrey 189). His fans—and many critics—however, dispute this modesty: *Newsday* ranked him atop a list of the twenty media players who would most influence the 2004 campaign, surpassing traditional newscasters Tim Russert, Ted Koppel and Sean Hannity; and Bill O'Reilly lambasted Stewart in a 2004 interview, claiming: "You know what's really frightening? You actually have an influence on this election" (O'Reilly). Some of his young fans have even gone so far as to suggest that Stewart run for office in 2008 with fellow comic Dave Chappelle as his running mate.

The majority of media critics have preoccupied themselves—and the public—with the circular discussion of media bias, both left and right. Incessantly tipping the

scales back and forth, from one extreme to the other, makes for an amusing ride but rarely slows down long enough to attain balance. The debate centers on a number of public commentators on the right—Rush Limbaugh, Robert Novak, Tucker Carlson—and a growing group of concerned public figures on the left—including comedians and entertainers-turned-social-critics Al Franken, Janeane Garofalo, Bill Maher—who use popular cultural sites and media texts, including talk radio and television news programs, as pedagogical sites to influence social and political change (Giroux, “Where Have all the Public Intellectuals Gone?”). In *Dispatches from the Culture Wars: How the Left Lost Teen Spirit*, Danny Goldberg argues that many progressives with radical new ideas largely confine themselves to the ivory tower of academia, failing to reach out to a mass audience, while others express themselves in language “that might as well be Latin”—think Al Gore bumbling on about incomprehensible jargon like “Social Security lockbox” (Goldberg 12). On the other hand, Goldberg insists that progressive change *is* brewing within and emanating from popular culture and lists “a few bright spots in the nexus of culture and politics that can help point the way,” including: Michael Moore, Dr. Cornel West, Tom Hayden, *Boondocks* creator Aaron McGruder, *The Simpsons*, CNN’s James Carville and Paul Begala, *The Nation*, and *New York Times* columnists Maureen Dowd, Frank Rich and Paul Krugman (Goldberg 310). Missing from his (by no means exhaustive) list, however, is even a brief shout-out to Jon Stewart and *The Daily Show*, a forum which has played host to several of the voices of reason listed above and has made countless contributions by destabilizing the traditional arena and rebuilding political debate on television. Besides the exorbitant amount of popular attention it has received,

few academics, besides a handful of witty articles in *The New York Times*, *The Nation*, and *Rolling Stone*, have paid critical attention to how the show operates, producing new narratives which challenge and demystify the strict binarisms disseminated by the pundits on the left and right. University students and educated Americans; not to mention a growing number of Canadians and Europeans (the latter where the show airs on CNN International, throwing its ‘fake news’ status even further into question and offering a constant source of amusement for Stewart) rely on the show as one of their sole sources of news, information, analysis, context, and an overall long-overdue breath of fresh air. A professor at York University in Toronto even includes an episode of the show in his weekly syllabus, about which Stewart joked on-air that “he must have been up drinking” the night before and used whatever he had Tivo’d. It is part of *The Daily Show’s* inherent irony—and charm—for Stewart to diminish his own credibility as a reliable news source through self-deprecating humour, thus reinforcing and deriding traditional newscasters’ grave pretentiousness and, inadvertently, earning even more acclaim—and influence—as an astute media critic and concerned public intellectual with moral authority, popular appeal, a public platform, accountability and purpose.

Stewart’s position cannot be reduced to an equation of entertainer/comedian first and social critic second: he is, first and foremost, a concerned citizen flexing his celebrity muscle to bring attention to otherwise largely overlooked issues—namely, revitalizing the field of journalism as a defender of the public sphere and democratic interests. He warrants credibility in part due to his star power; however, he also commands moral authority with his ethical appeal—apart from the intrinsic merit of his argument, he has

managed to convince a large audience that he is the type of person who is worthy of belief (Posner 49). Stewart's popular appeal stretches across different demographics: he makes younger viewers feel intelligent by including them in astute political debates; he makes older viewers feel cool by intertwining the word "dude" with complex political reports; and he makes both groups feel inspired that such a countercultural public platform exists. Media critic Douglas Kellner insists that a revitalization of democracy in a capitalist society requires a democratic media politics involving a two-fold strategy: first, "attempting to democratize existing media to make them more responsive to the public interest" (such the media watchdog group FAIR, who criticize mainstream media for failing to assume their democratic and journalistic responsibilities); and second, "the development of oppositional media, alternatives to the mainstream, developed outside of the established media system," involving relentless criticism of the existing media system (Kellner). *The Daily Show* does not simply meet these criteria; besides evoking laughter, this dual function is its raison d'être. An alternative media personality whose sole purpose is to critique and expose the absurdity, hypocrisy and audacity of the mainstream news outlets, Stewart pleads with his opponents to accept the same kind of accountability he holds sacred, despite his "fake" news anchor status.

Public intellectuals not only write and think about ideas, but belong to a self-conscious group of people who attempt to directly influence social and political realities, taking the abstractness of academia and making it accessible to the larger public. In the article "Intellectuals, the New Public Sphere and Techno-Politics," Douglas Kellner distinguishes between 'functional intellectuals' and 'critical-oppositional intellectuals'.

The former are specialists in technical knowledge who serve to reproduce and legitimate the values of existing societies; and the latter are critics who oppose the existing order, denounce injustices and abuses of power, and struggle to create a better society, voicing their criticisms in the name of existing values which they claim are being violated—truth, rights, justice—and those which are said to be higher potentialities of the current state of affairs—such as participatory democracy, socialism, or genuine equality for women and racial minorities (Kellner). The domain of the critical intellectual is to write and speak within the public sphere, “to bear witness, to analyze, to expose, and to criticize a wide range of social evils,” as well as to engage in democratic debate and political dialogue (Kellner).

Judge Richard A. Posner credits public intellectuals as entertainment and symbolic goods that not only distill information—“clarifying issues, exposing the errors of [their peers], drawing attention to neglected issues, and vivifying public debate”—but also provide a rallying point for like-minded people (Posner 6). Far from there being any shortage of public intellectuals, Posner argues, we are awash in them. While there definitely appears to be an overwhelming number of such figures on television, many of them are academics moonlighting as journalists, providing expertise but not making true efforts to engage the masses, and thus are more intellectual than public; and others are talking heads, celebrity pundits and self-proclaimed experts in their fields, more public than intellectual. Judge Posner suggests that “the position, the contribution, and most precisely the social *significance* of the public intellectual is deteriorating in the United States,” a decline attributed to the failure of the market rather than individual intellectuals

(Posner 6). Posner is not the first critic to study the decline of public intellectuals in the U.S.: Howard Stearns asked “where are our intellectuals?” as early as 1921, as some of the nation’s greatest young minds fled to Europe; and in his 1987 book *The Last Intellectuals*, Russell Jacoby argues that there exists in the U.S. a “vacancy in culture, the absence of younger voices, perhaps the absence of a generation”—a crippling drought of public intellectuals, writers and thinkers capable of addressing and appealing to a general and educated audience (Jacoby 3).

Jacoby insists that “the constraints of living solely from the press—deadlines, space, money—finally dilute, not accentuate, intellectual work” (Jacoby 13). In this case, I disagree; while the number of conventional public intellectuals may very well be in decline, an entire generation is gradually emerging in new spheres. His argument of a missing generation might be challenged by proposing that the new intellectuals are beginning to thrive in journalism, the latest batch of young academics including Fareed Zakaria, John P. Avlon, and Matt Taibbi, and working for diverse sources, ranging from *The Onion* and *Rolling Stone* to *The Nation* and *Village Voice*. The term “Public Intellectual,” in the traditional sense of the word, is outdated. The *new* public intellectual is the product of evolving technology and diversifying demographics. As the clout of the conventional press is pushed further to the wayside, the role of these new intellectuals is reworked to suit the changing nature of different media, including a rise in alternative radio, cable television and internet weblogs. Douglas Kellner argues that while previously, radio, television and the other electronic communication media tended to be closed to critical and oppositional voices, in contemporary high-tech society, computers,

public access and low power television, as well as community and guerrilla radio, have opened these technologies to intervention, creating “a significant expansion and redefinition of the public sphere” (Kellner). These new public spheres have become the centers of debate, discussion, information, and participation, allowing intellectuals to engage the public, and providing the potential to invigorate democracy and to increase the dissemination of critical and progressive ideas (Kellner). *The Daily Show* does operate within the established media; however, its spot on a cable network, not to mention Stewart and the correspondents’ power to branch out into other public spheres, including the book market, television, radio and print interviews, stand-up tours and stints at the *Just for Laughs* festival, grants Stewart et al. the luxury of critiquing the media of which they are a part, operating as both watchdog and vanguard, without threatening their positions in the public arena. Jon Stewart in particular does not face the kind of overt obstacles many of his journalist counterparts do; he occupies a crucial position as a public intellectual, supplementing his work on *The Daily Show* with *America (The Book)*, not to mention numerous television and radio talk-show appearances.

While television has, Pierre Bourdieu argues, invited to the political and intellectual stage a ‘cult of celebrity’—“a set of self-promoting personalities concerned above all to get themselves noticed and admired, in total contradiction with the values of unspectacular devotion to the collective interest which once characterized the civil servant or the activist”—it has also opened the door for the likes of Stewart and his band of brothers (Bourdieu, *Acts of Resistance* 4). The show is conscious of Stewart’s oft celebrated role as the ‘cool’ anchorman and toys with the hierarchies that are seemingly

intrinsic to the information industry—including such absurd areas of expertise as “Senior Martha Stewart Correspondent” and the accompanying pretentiousness such a prestigious role would assume—thus alleviating the potential for tension between the collective and rising individual star quality. Stewart plays the comic foil, his ingenuous role constantly juxtaposed with his troupe of blubbing and bungling correspondents, whose collective idiocy parodies (hyperbolically, of course) the mainstream networks’ ostentatious preoccupation with style, delivery and format over content. The following Election Night exchange between Stewart and Rob Corddry exemplifies Stewart’s role as straight-man:

STEWART: We’re going to get caught up on the electoral map and how the nation looks tonight. All night long Rob Corddry will be manning the big board, keeping us up to date.

CORDDRY: Jon, this evening I have at my disposal every conceivable type of map or visual representation of our divided electorate. I’ve got the electoral map, the weighted electoral map—i.e. a map of the fattest voters—a topographical map . . . not sure how that one’s going to come into play but as you can see, the Rockies are . . . bumpy.

STEWART: Rob, that’s all very well and good, but can you break down some of the results so far on the electoral map?

CORDDRY: Yeah . . . results?

STEWART: The states that have gone one way or another.

CORDDRY: Uhhhh, I’ve got a treasure map. Some say left by Blackbeard himself. But that’s just a legend . . . [ominous eyebrow raise] or is it?

STEWART: Rob, why do you have all the bells and whistles? Can we just see the electoral map again?

This type of repartee between Stewart and correspondents Corddry, Stephen Colbert, Samantha Bee, and Ed Helms is a nightly feature, creating a communal spirit and reinforcing the team dynamic underlying the structure of the show. Stewart feeds the

correspondents lines, his set-ups not only making for hilarity, but allowing him to preserve his role as critical intellectual insisting that his team take issues seriously and to probe deeper than their half-assed reports. But Stewart doesn't play second banana to anyone; their roles are codependent, the seemingly reckless correspondents lampooning traditional newscasters and the relatively vigilant Stewart reminding the audience why this is so worrisome (without failing, of course, to toss in his own jokes).

As the anchorman heading a crew of likeminded writers, producers and correspondents, then, 'Jon Stewart' and '*The Daily Show*' become interchangeable as a collaborative effort in public intellectualism. In a May 2001 lecture on "The Public Role of Writers and Intellectuals" Edward Said evoked Pierre Bourdieu's concept of *collective invention*. Said quotes Bourdieu:

The whole edifice of critical thought is thus in need of critical reconstruction. This work of reconstruction cannot be done . . . by a single great intellectual, a master-thinker endowed with the sole resources of his singular thought, or by the authorized spokesperson for a group or an institution presumed to speak in the name of those without voice, union, party, and so on. This is where the collective intellectual [individuals the sum of whose research and participation on common subjects constitutes a sort of ad hoc collective] can play its irreplaceable role, by helping to create the social conditions for the collective production of realist utopias. (Said, "The Public Role of Writers and Intellectuals")

Bourdieu calls for autonomous "collective intellectuals" to campaign on behalf of those social groups excluded by elites to correct the unequal distribution of power and wealth. While Stewart does work directly with public intellectuals and academics more generally, the ideology he espouses reflects the issues pertinent to the current debate in and around cultural studies. Thus, as the designated front man, Stewart not only speaks on behalf of the show's writers, but also many of his academic counterparts in the larger media,

including such critics as Robert McChesney, Eric Alterman, Pierre Bourdieu, Jeff Cohen and Noam Chomsky, as well as many ordinary Americans, who have been, as Stewart believes, denied true democracy and due respect from the media for far too long. In fact, *America (The Book)* is dedicated to these people—“the huddled masses”—who are urged to “keep yearnin’!” Stewart constantly aligns himself with his fans, including himself as part of a larger collective in the role of fellow American citizen, something many news anchors, appearing self-important, distant, and elitist, fail to achieve. This was most evident during Stewart’s *Crossfire* appearance, after which he argued: “What they do isn’t real. It’s talking point, talking point, talking point. It’s like, ‘We all understand this is a game. Now let’s go have dinner.’ *But for those of us watching at home, it’s not a game.* It’s frustrating” (Winfrey 240, italics added). Stewart is conscious of and acknowledges his privileged role as a producer of popular culture; however, rather than become caught up in celebrity, he uses his status to show his support for likeminded individuals. After replacing Craig Kilborne and thus assuming the role of anchorman in 1999, Stewart helped retool the show from a lighthearted emphasis on celebrity scandals to a fervent concern with politics, hiring a staff of writers whose “angry passion and fiery idealism” changed the path of the show (Colapinto 62). Since Stewart took the reigns, *The Daily Show* has more than tripled its audience, reaching well over one million American viewers each night, and beating every other cable news network in the eleven o’clock timeslot, including Fox, MSNBC and CNN (Long). Moreover, its 2000 election night special was watched by 435,000 people aged 18 to 34—almost as many as the 459,000 who saw ‘real’ election coverage on the Fox News Channel; *Election Night*

2004: *Prelude to a Recount* attracted 2.1 million total viewers, earning a 1.6 Nielsen Media Research household rating as well as 1.3 million among viewers 18-49; and its post-presidential debate show on September 30th 2004 drew in a record 2.4 million viewers, the biggest audience in the eight-year history of the series (Rutenberg “Comedy Show Pulls in Youth Vote”).

Unlike other late-night talk shows, *The Daily Show* tends to make the most of its privileged role as medium between the big players—politicians, writers, entertainers—and the public. When politicians like Richard Nixon and Ronald Reagan appeared on Johnny Carson’s show, they would exchange banal jokes “as if budget deficits and nuclear weapons did not exist” (Jenkins 201). Like all guests with something to sell, politicians, including California ‘Governator’ Arnold Schwarzenegger, have used *The Tonight Show* and its brethren as platforms for public relations, the atmosphere of comic detachment making it safe for them to appear without fear of being challenged to discuss emotionally charged political issues (Jenkins 202). Whatever their intentions for coming on his show, however, Jon Stewart demands more from his guests. Besides the obligatory periodic celebrity chit chats, Stewart’s interview segments typically spark intense intellectual debate. And while politicians jump at the chance to poke fun at themselves in order to humanize their images, thus potentially boosting their standing in the approval polls, Stewart does not settle for P.R. stunts. Instead, he is adamant that they get down to an honest discussion of the issues. And nowhere do politicians turn more to discuss the issues than *The Daily Show*, which has played host to Republicans Newt Gingrich, Tom Ridge and Colin Powell, as well as Democrats John Kerry, Bill

Clinton and Al Sharpton. In his role as interviewer, Stewart brings to mind the clichéd teen movie character of the highschool underdog who watches the popular rich kid (in this case, the White House and the media) incessantly berate and bully everyone around him. An unlikely hero, this character steps up to the plate as the entire schoolyard rallies behind him, ready to back him up as he lets the bully have what's coming to him. Except when Stewart invites the oppressors on to the show, he evinces patient fortitude as opposed to reactionary spite, engaging in productive dialogue rather than simply giving the bully a taste of his own medicine and punching him in the nose. During his interview with Pennsylvania Senator Rick Santorum, who has consistently and publicly made rampantly homophobic statements, Stewart jokingly prefaces their discussion with an acknowledgement of their disparate sociopolitical views, offering, "I believe sir, ice cream is a delicious treat, but too much will spoil the appetite. Your move." After Senator Santorum agrees with his hypothesis, Stewart triumphantly exalts: "We have bridged the gap! And now we move on." Near the end of the interview, Stewart admits:

You know what's so interesting about this? Ultimately you end up getting to this point . . . this crazy stopping point, where literally we can't get any further. I don't think you're a bad dude, I don't think I'm a bad dude; but I literally can't convince you of the idea that it's doing society a disservice to dismiss the potential of all these people.

Never backing down from an argument, Stewart consistently manages to drill his point home while maintaining respect for his opponent. During his interview, Bernard Goldberg, author of *Bias* (and, some would argue, Eric Alterman's nemesis) praised the host by calling him "one of the nice guys"—(as opposed to one of the ninety-seven moderates and/or liberals and three conservatives he condemns in his latest book *One*

Hundred People Who are Screwing up America). Goldberg did not appear to be acting facetious; however, his flattery, which seemed sincere, may be attributed, at least in part, to his position as the outnumbered underdog sitting facing hundreds of presumably die-hard *Daily Show* fans. Countless other would-be critics tread the same delicate path; boos from the audience the least of their concerns, over-the-top antagonism or outright uncouthness on Stewart's turf could make them the butt of his jokes for months to come. And here is where most guests, fellow comics aside, cannot compete with Stewart's rapid-fire wit. It is also likely that, despite ideology, guests from across the political spectrum cannot help but respect the man.

An operative interviewer and astute listener who, unlike the likes of Oprah Winfrey and Larry King, never self-servingly interrupts or bullies a guest, no matter how long he/she rambles or how disputable his/her views may be, Stewart takes each political interview as an opportunity to uncover some kind of truth. For example, he patiently listened to the contradictory and confused argument laid out by Georgia Senator Zell Miller, adding at the end of the segment: "You're a controversial figure but I like you. We disagree on a lot of things—let me just say this: I think we disagree on everything. But I think your heart is in the right place and you're a good man." Stewart is a genial host, a polite but tenacious interviewer, pressing his guests on issues in the midst of jokes and demanding honesty while maintaining respectful dialogue. During his interview with Republican Harry Bonilla, who could not give a straight answer to a simple question if his life depended on it, Stewart relentlessly probed the Congressman about the groups

used to gauge a Senator's position in the ranks of "most" or "least" liberal. The circular conversation went something like this:

STEWART: When they come out and say he's a liberal . . . he's the number one ranked liberal . . . who does the ranking?

BONILLA: We're all ranked every year; there are conservative groups, business groups, people who track tax bills, trial lawyers, unions, and all of these groups are understood authorities.

STEWART: They say he's the first most liberal senator and Edwards is the fourth. . . how do they compile it?

BONILLA: We have votes and bills that we sponsor . . .

STEWART: I'm not retarded; how do they compile it?

BONILLA: They list it . . .

STEWART: But who's they?

BONILLA: These groups that I told you about.

STEWART: But which one is the one that said they're the first and the fourth?

BONILLA: Well you take the trial lawyers, or the people who follow the union votes, or the small business votes, or corporate votes, and they kind of average them all together.

STEWART: But who?

BONILLA: These groups do. I hope I'm explaining it properly.

STEWART: I don't think so.

BONILLA: These groups . . .

STEWART: Which group says they're the most liberal?

BONILLA: The liberal groups and the conservative groups do.

STEWART: You know how when you go on the shows and you say he's the most liberal—which group does that?

BONILLA: It's not one individual group.

STEWART: I'll tell you who it is. It's the *National Journal*.

BONILLA: Right, they actually compile the stuff.

STEWART: Like you say, you just want people to have an honest discussion, and that's all I want. I'm not democrat or republican, but my head with the spinning and the responses and the things—I'm a sad little man. No more of the rapid response . . . just come out and say it in a way that we can understand.

In the end, Stewart not only had to offer the answer to his own question, but even went so far as to criticize the Republican Party's "Rapid Response Team" that Bonilla worked on during the Democratic National Convention. Rather than pull an "O'Reilly" and tell his guest to "shut up" or demand he leave the soundstage, he simply persevered, refusing to have legitimate questions and concerns strategically ignored.

Other interviews have not been quite as prolific. During the anticipated—and now infamous—August 24th 2004 interview with John Kerry, Stewart was held up to much higher standards (read: scrutiny) by critics who lambasted him for "going easy" on the presidential candidate. In an otherwise favorable interview, John Colapinto of *Rolling Stone* reports that despite his typically challenging string of questions and hard-hitting style:

With Kerry, Stewart seemed to fall prey to precisely what he attacks in the likes of Barbara Walters: soft-soaping a 'get' toward whom he feels sympathetic. The encounter was often excruciating, with Kerry demonstrating all the charm of a cadaver, and Stewart overawed, nervous and eager to please. (Colapinto 64)

Afterwards, Stewart self-deprecatingly joked about how badly he had blown it with Kerry and accepted the blame for not having been "more forthright with him and still done the type of interview that I normally do." Ultimately, he admitted: "I screwed up" (Colapinto

64). Despite Stewart's acknowledgment of this particular foible, Tucker Carlson later scoffed at the interview, particularly his first question to Kerry: "How are you holding up?" Carlson used this example to attempt to frame Stewart as some kind of hypocrite who was just as incapable of conducting a provocative interview as the objects of his derision. What Carlson failed to mention, however, is that Stewart asked the exact same question of Republican White House Communications Director Dan Bartlett—"How are you guys holding up?"—followed by "is [the Republican National Convention] a stressful time?"—just a week later, on September 1. Arguing that what transpired was the only reason Kerry appeared on *The Daily Show* in the first place—completely bypassing such arguably more "newsworthy" stops as *The O'Reilly Factor* and Fox News because the formers' audience is "younger, more left-leaning . . . [and] going to vote for [Kerry] anyway"—Bill O'Reilly insinuates that Stewart is an ally to the Democratic Party, a proponent of a liberal agenda vying for a particular candidate. Sometimes Stewart does seem adamant about getting President Bush out of office, but not because his is a big bad Republican; rather, as Stewart has explained again and again, because Bush drew the nation into war based on false pretenses and outright lies. Despite O'Reilly and many of his colleagues' reluctance to admit it, Stewart often emits balance with his political views: while he does not "care for [the Bush administration's] tactics or their weird arrogance," he is forthcoming in admitting that he has not "seen [positive] results like this ever in [the Middle East] region." Even against his harshest critics, Stewart rarely falters, consistently insisting that the show does not come equipped with an agenda, maintaining his composure, and fighting back with an arsenal of brilliant quips and witticisms.

Alongside his regular position as *Daily Show* front man, Stewart has appeared on just about every talk show from *NOW with Bill Moyers* and *Good Morning America* to *Oprah* and *The O'Reilly Factor*, constantly jumping back and forth between his dependable demographic of educated twenty- and thirty-somethings to middle-class mothers and flag-waving Republicans (even the conventional housewife Marge Simpson gushes about Jon Stewart: “He’s a son, a lover, and a pundit all rolled up into one sexy package . . . rrrrrr”). When people tune into *The Daily Show*, they are, presumably, already Jon Stewart (or Stephen Colbert, or Rob Corddry, etc.) fans. But when Stewart appears on any of the aforementioned forums, not to mention countless others, he exponentially increases the potential to reach a new, untapped audience—and not just to score ratings, but to appeal for a revitalization of democracy, as evidenced on CNN’s “debate show” *Crossfire*. In what has become a legendary appearance on the show in October 2004, Stewart performed as a vehicle delivering other public intellectuals’ theories and concerns to a wide and general audience, specifically channeling the late Pierre Bourdieu. In *On Television*, Bourdieu argues that television poses a threat to democracy (10): On *Crossfire*, Stewart claims that television news and debate shows are “hurting America.” Bourdieu critiques newscasters’ lack of analytical and critical discourse (11): Stewart reveals how these same personalities are “part of [politicians’] strategies . . . partisan hacks.” And what Bourdieu refers to as “a sort of mirror for . . . narcissistic exhibitionism (14),” Stewart refers to as self-serving “theatre.” Bourdieu argues that “fast-thinkers,” who dominate television debate shows, are individuals who think in clichés—in banal, conventional and common ideas that are received generally by a

largely uncritical audience—and who spare journalists the trouble of looking for people who really have something unique to say (Bourdieu 29). Thus, Bourdieu calls televised debates “entirely bogus” due to the initial selection process (who is invited to speak and who isn’t), backstage prepping, and scripting, which leaves little to no room for (honest) improvisation (Bourdieu 30-35). Stewart, however, consciously stood up and called his hosts on this ritualistic covert censorship, later explaining that “the reason everyone on *Crossfire* freaked out is that I didn’t play the role I was supposed to play. I was expected to do some funny jokes, then go have a beer with everyone. By stepping outside of my role, I stunned them” (Winfrey 240).

As the single guest at a live taping—allowing him more airtime and the rare opportunity not to have his arguably inappropriate or unfavorable comments edited out—Stewart defies all televised debate conventions, not only calling his opponent (and host) Tucker Carlson a “dick,” but by outwitting, interrupting, refusing to go to commercial, asking questions when he was expected to answer, completely abandoning the script, challenging Begala and Carlson’s individual journalist ethics as well as their illusion of alleged honest debate, and all on their own turf—CNN—the self-proclaimed “most trusted name in news.” Unlike Bill O’Reilly or Al Franken, whose slanderous comments are characteristically reactionary and meant to offend, if not silence, Stewart’s insults are not of a “two-can-play-at-that-game” mentality; instead, his comments and actions are an act of resistance on a medium that typically defies dissent. Bourdieu critiques scripted televised debate which attempts to pass itself off as free and honest discussion: “There must be conflicts, with good guys and bad guys . . . Yet, at the same time, not all holds

are allowed: the blows have to be clothed by the model of formal, intellectual language” (Bourdieu 35). In an attempt to make his points resonate, however, Stewart delivers some sucker punches, using colloquial and vulgar language, sarcasm, and mockery, so effectively, in fact, that even the *Crossfire* studio audience is on his side, laughing, cheering and egging him on. Stewart compares *Crossfire*’s debate format to a professional wrestling match, which is more of a spectacle—or theatre—than an honest display of athleticism—or intellectual discussion. Despite *Crossfire* host Tucker Carlson’s relentless attempts to reduce him to nothing more than a silly comedian not to be taken seriously, Stewart attempts to establish the kind of coalition between media professionals and the people Bourdieu calls for, situating himself as a concerned citizen speaking on behalf of his fellow Americans: “Come work for us, the people . . . We need your help and right now you’re helping the politicians and the corporations . . .” He continues: “I’m not [here to love you]—I’m here to confront you because we need help from the media and they’re hurting us . . . You have a responsibility to the public discourse and you fail miserably.” Here Stewart explicitly overcomes the paradox John Fiske sets up around the problem of understanding which forms of news can be popular in a late capitalist society: the news is traditionally produced by the power-bloc and popularity is the product of the people. *The Daily Show* overcomes this paradox by separating itself from the forces of domination and aligning itself with the public.

The journalistic responses to Stewart’s appearance, from the *Washington Post* to blogs, almost unanimously boast that Stewart ‘bitchslaps’, ‘punks’, ‘destroys’, ‘torches’, and ‘owns’ CNN’s *Crossfire*, making for, according to MTV.com, the most “refreshing

media moment” of the election season. Stewart appeared on the show on October 15, a Friday evening; by midday Tuesday, the online video hosting site iFilm disclosed that more than 670,000 people had downloaded the 13 minute CNN clip from its site alone, the volume of downloads quickly creeping up on CNN’s ratings numbers for the actual show, which drew in slightly more than 867,000 viewers. Similarly, Blogdex, a research project by the MIT Media Laboratory that tracks blog community activity, ranked the CNN.com transcript as the top online content being pointed to among bloggers on Monday—by Tuesday, the transcript was tied for the top spot on Blogdex’s list (Hines, “Jon Stewart *Crossfire* Feud Ignites Frenzy”). Stewart’s appearance sent the online community into a tailspin, indicating not only that the public was shocked by his frankness, but also that they were ready for such a determined message, the time ripe for such a challenge.

In his *Rules for Radicals*, social activist Saul D. Alinsky argues that revolutionary change must be preceded by reformation; in other words, masses of people must have reached the point of disillusionment with past ways and values, so frustrated with and utterly lost in the prevailing system that they are willing to conceptualize and to begin the process to achieve change (Alinsky xix). Alinsky outlines thirteen ‘power tactics’ for potential revolutionaries, several of which Stewart had pegged on *Crossfire*, including: “making the enemy live up to their own rules” by underscoring the *Crossfire* hosts’ hypocrisy as self-described journalists; “using ridicule to infuriate the opposition,” Carlson’s reactionary petulance working to Stewart’s advantage; “playing to the people”—in this case, the live studio audience—who laughed and cheered their way

through each segment; “keeping the pressure on,” literally by refusing to end their discussion or to change topics by going to a commercial break; and “picking a target, freezing it, personalizing it, and polarizing it,” using Carlson to stand for the ‘dick’ who epitomizes the more abstract opponent—network and cable pundits and their bigwig corporate cohorts (Alinsky 127-130).

In the introduction to his book, Alinsky makes a fundamental, though fleeting statement: *humour is essential to communicating a revolution, particularly for a downtrodden and discouraged generation* (Alinsky xviii). A humorous approach to social criticism and activism is much more readily accepted by a public who may otherwise ignore serious messages that appear dull or didactic. Opting to use humour gives the revolutionary the upper hand: first, likeable and optimistic, he/she wins support from likeminded people; and second, he/she can not be as easily attacked by opponents, always one step ahead, launching jokes as opposed to slanderous attacks, and refusing to become red-faced and frustrated when the debate intensifies. Anyone who comes along preaching about change will seem less like a fearless leader of the people and more like an overzealous demagogue hell-bent on pushing a particular agenda—and, to younger people, he/she will just seem old and tired. There is a fine line between advocacy and self-important ostentation. *The Daily Show* disparages the news media, not in a holier than thou way, but satirically, Jon Stewart simultaneously poking fun at himself. When informed that his show is considered by many young viewers to be an important news source, he jokes: “A lot of them are probably high,” adding, “God help them” (“Young America’s News Source”). *Comedy Central’s* website plays with this irony, categorizing

the show as an unreliable or non-news source, reading: “Keeping up with the world today takes effort. So surrender and get fake news. Ignorance is bliss!” This phrase is intended to undermine neither the show’s significance nor the viewers’ intelligence; instead, it serves as a kind of inside joke between the show and its viewers, the former aligning and identifying itself with its young demographic.

Chapter Three: *The Daily Show*, Youth, Citizenship and Democracy

Many critics perpetuate the exaggerated and misconceived notion that North Americans—particularly young Americans—are generally lazy and apathetic towards politics. Reporting on a study conducted by the *Pew Research Center for the People and the Press*, *The New York Times* ran a front page headline May 13, 1996, noting a drastic decline in the percentage of people under thirty who say they regularly watch television news. Despite the advent of the so-called Information Age, the increased provision of news media, and the rise in college attendance in the U.S., the report confirms, young people are now less interested in news—particularly ‘political’ news—and less well-informed than their counterparts of decades past (Buckingham 1). The percentage of people under thirty who said they had “read a newspaper yesterday,” for example, declined from 67 per cent in 1965 to 29 per cent in 1996; and those who regularly watched network news has declined from 52 per cent in 1965 to 22 per cent in 1996—a drop in news consumption which seems to entail a decline in informed citizenship more generally (Buckingham 1). These statistics, however, have been decontextualized, the connection between waning newspaper readership and a drop in civic responsibility not forming such a straightforward and causal link: the numbers indicating a decline in print and broadcast journalism can be linked to the rise of alternative news sources on television, radio, and the web more than a simple lack of interest in or a lack of engagement with politics. Further, it could be argued that the widespread usage of the

internet across North America has further democratized young people's access to and proliferation of information, and thus their political awareness and agency.

Nevertheless, the popular cry against apathetic youth has become a convenient excuse for lazy politicians, reporters and educators who are not willing to significantly engage with their youngest constituents, viewers and pupils, shifting the blame away from what should be a public responsibility and onto the individual. Youth are thus condemned for being less socially responsible than their parents, the Baby Boomers, many of whom abandoned their healthy skepticism when it collapsed under the weight of capitalism and conformity at the tail end of the '60s. Young people are accused of either being passively inclined to predigested tabloid news, consuming copious amounts of celebrity fare and gossip, or else fall into another stereotypical and unmerited category, such as the drop-out or slacker. Rather than cast blame on an entire generation of seemingly apathetic young Americans, it is crucial to recognize the role the system that *produced* this generation must play—a system that created such easily digestible entertainment as *Extra*, *Cribs*, and *Newlyweds*. Adults criticize their younger counterparts for being politically passive and ignorant. But it is the former generation, from parents and schoolteachers to television producers and network bigwigs, who actively exclude young people from dominant forms of political discourse and from the domain of politics more generally, unwilling to incorporate more inclusive approaches and content into their regular programming. In a *Daily Show* interview CNN's Jeff Greenfield expresses disappointment with those who hypocritically reproach youths' alleged apathy:

When I hear people say this generation has never been faced with anything—it wasn't twenty- and thirty-year-olds who were telling us that politics has nothing to do with your life, withdraw from it, the rest of the world doesn't have to concern you—it's what our politicians were telling us after the fall of the Berlin wall and the serious news media was saying when they closed news bureaus over the world and said people don't want to hear about the news anymore. (*The Daily Show*)

Distancing themselves from the discourse of social change, Henry A. Giroux argues, a number of social critics, including journalists, pundits, and even many intellectuals, appear paralyzed “in exploring the connection between pedagogy and the possibilities of critical social agency” (Giroux, “Where Have all the Public Intellectuals Gone?”).

This type of official disconnect has, evidently, trickled down to the public, largely via television. In the 1960s Marshall McLuhan argued that as a “cool medium” television has “introduced a kind of rigor mortis into the body politic” (McLuhan 269). Russell Jacoby insists that a public that once “snapped up pamphlets by Thomas Paine or stood for hours listening to Abraham Lincoln debate Stephen Douglas” no longer exists, audiences' span of attention shrinking as its fondness for television increases (Jacoby 6). Mass communications scholar Roderick P. Hart confirms these suspicions, connecting the rise of television and the slow demise of print journalism to the decline of civic pride and the growth of cynicism, particularly among the young (Buckingham 4). And *Rolling Stone* writer Jon Katz blames the “monotonously reassuring voice” of mainstream mass journalism, the members of which have not appealed to the more “informal” and “ironic” styles preferred by the young, for abandoning an entire generation (Buckingham 5). While insufficient political training may perpetuate many young people's ignorance about everything from the basic function of a democracy to individual political

candidates, however, thousands more, though compelled to find their information elsewhere, are highly educated and politically astute citizens.

Host of Fox's *The O'Reilly Factor* Bill O'Reilly subscribes to the old-school mentality that today's youth are either lazy or criminals, describing *Daily Show* viewers in particular as "stoned slackers" and "dopey kids" (O'Reilly). O'Reilly is, apparently, unwilling to negotiate young people's multifarious roles as both *consumers* and *critics* of popular culture. O'Reilly's unfounded grumblings, however, have been refuted by the *Annenberg Survey*² which reports that talk show hosts Leno, Letterman and Stewart's viewers not only know more about presidential politics than those who rely primarily on newspapers and network news, but that viewers of *The Daily Show* tested roughly 10% higher than Letterman and Leno viewers on a six-question quiz on the presidential race. *Comedy Central* used its viewers' test scores to strike back at Fox News and Bill O'Reilly, pairing the *Annenberg* results with statistics from *Nielsen Media Research* to show that Stewart's viewers are not only more knowledgeable, but more educated than O'Reilly's: *Daily Show* viewers are 78% more likely than the average adult to have four or more years of college education, while O'Reilly's audience is only 24% more likely to have that much schooling (Long). *Annenberg's* data suggests that some journalists' fears that today's youth rely on late-night comedy for what they argue is "inadequate" political information are largely unsubstantiated. Senior analyst Dannagal Goldthwaite Young argues that young people who watch *The Daily Show* score higher on campaign

² *The National Annenberg Election Survey*, the largest academic election poll, is a project of the Annenberg Public Policy Center. The survey tracks the presidential campaign from October 7 2003 until November 2004. The political quiz was given to 19,013 adults between July 15 and September 19, 2004.

knowledge than young people who do not watch the show, “even when education, following politics, party identification, gender, viewing network news, reading the newspaper, watching cable news and getting campaign information on-line are taken into account” (Long). Further, the *Pew Research Center for the People and the Press* found that 21 per cent of Americans aged 18 to 29 specifically cite *The Daily Show* as the primary source from which they regularly receive their presidential campaign news. Together, these surveys indicate that *Daily Show* viewers are younger, more liberal, more educated, and more interested in the presidential campaign than the average American.

Along the same lines, many sources optimistically assert that young people are increasingly interested and active in politics, particularly as evidenced in their voting patterns. After the 2004 presidential election, for example, MTV’s “Choose or Lose 2004” proudly proclaimed on November 3 that according to final national exit polls, an estimated 20.9 million 18- to 29-year-olds (51.6 per cent) had voted, a sharp increase from the nearly 17 million ballots (42.3 per cent) cast in 2000 (www.civicyouth.org). Originally launched in 1992, “Choose or Lose” is MTV’s contribution to a burgeoning pro-social movement of campaigns, including the celebrity-touted “Rock the Vote,” “Vote or Die,” and “Declare Yourself,” collectively meant to inform young adults about the political process, urge them to voice their most urgent political concerns, compel leading presidential candidates to address those concerns, and mobilize massive numbers of young adults aged 18-30 to register and vote (De La Garza, “Facts About Young Voters”). *Daily Show* correspondent Samantha Bee jokes about the rumored ineffectiveness of these campaigns, pointing out that “Rock the Vote,” which she accuses

of being “all talk and no rock,” actually knows very little about the issues that are meaningful to young voters, much less about how to make said issues appealing to them (*The Daily Show*). Bee explains that “Rock the Vote” began to use “famous musicians” to make voting seem cool to young people in 1990—intentionally listing only the stars who have fallen out of public favour, such as Hootie and the Blowfish and Donnie Osmond—deadpanning, “ever since, the youth voter turnout has plunged.” But of course this is not the case. While the youngest voters did not overwhelmingly flood the polls, swinging the election in the direction of their choosing (i.e. a win for Kerry), the largest number of young people voted since 1992 and hundreds of thousands have displayed a growing interest in politics more generally. Despite Bill O’Reilly’s post-election claim that the youth voters did not turn out in 2004, young citizens voted in a 9.3 per cent increase from 2000, with 54 per cent opting for Kerry compared with only 44 per cent for Bush, many taking the information they receive from *The Daily Show* and other alternative news sources into the voting booths with them.

British columnist Terence Blacker argues that even where there is a discussion of politics on television, namely on the type of hybrid current affairs/satire/sleuth journalism shows such as *The Daily Show* or Britain’s equivalent *The Mark Thomas Project*, it goes further than merely endorsing activism: “They sneer at conventional politics, at a system that, they believe, is cynically and unscrupulously abused by career politicians, businessmen or civil servants” (Blacker, “When Comedians Move into Current Affairs”) In doing so, he continues, they are unwittingly encouraging in their audiences “their own kind of cynicism, a kind of easy, lager activism that allows people to feel scandalized and

entertained at the same time, to be released from any dreary, unamusing obligation to take part in the political process” (Blacker). It might be argued, Cultural Studies professor Tim Walters contributes, that Stewart’s “insufficiently partisan stance” encourages political apathy and works against real social change: Because Stewart’s viewership/ readership consists largely of voters who already think Bush is a perilous oaf, the show’s attacks “may then be seen to function principally as a demographically unnecessary discouragement to vote Republican, and a presumably unwanted discouragement to potential Democratic voters.” Stewart’s immense popularity, he adds, could be considered a real world problematic:

The attractive, Canali-clad Stewart uses his collegiate charm to instill in his viewer/readership the hegemonically useful belief that widespread political change can no longer occur in America through conventional means, and that the appropriate response to the horrorshow of the nightly news is to recoil, to simply sit back and laugh at our world as it becomes increasingly incomprehensible. Stewart’s often admirable gnosis may be pedagogically useful in a culture marked by too little cultural critique in genuinely popular forums, but the ‘Inaction’ he can be seen to counsel corresponds to a continuity and worsening of the institutionalized political stasis he decries, and is a call to no kind of praxis whatsoever (Walters).

The show’s brand of satirical cynicism, however, should not be confused with simple apathy; on the contrary, author of *The Making of Citizens: Young People, News and Politics* David Buckingham elucidates, “it may be a self-conscious way of dealing with powerlessness and even as a precondition for certain kinds of political action” (Buckingham 75). Buckingham distinguishes between cynicism and criticism, the former “a wholesale rejection of the text as a text—‘the news is all propaganda’, ‘everything

they tell you is lies’”—sanctioning a degree of complacent disengagement by dismissing the spectacle of politics as though it were simply another television show with no consequences in real life; and the latter an emotionally-driven commitment to the idea that the truth can and should be told, “entailing a recognition that some form of action might be taken in order to change or intervene in the reality that is shown” (Buckingham 217). The show avoids clichéd readings of the cultural climate, instead reading the world cynically while proposing critical inquiries that will help lead its viewers on the path to discovering some kind of truth. The show’s rise to prominence is due to its willingness to ask difficult questions of those in power—questions that few other voices loud enough to be heard and popular enough to be accessed have been willing to raise in the mainstream media. And just because some critics blur these approaches, instead viewing cynicism/criticism as a burgeoning identity, a twenty-something demographic of yuppies and college grads, does not mean that the viewers are cultural dopes simply purchasing just another consumer image. Rather, many educated young Americans have learned to pair healthy cynicism with a politics of hope—neither an anarchist pessimism nor a naïve youthful idealism—but an often exasperating search for democracy and discovering their role within it.

Henry A. Giroux argues that any pedagogy that promotes a culture of questioning must establish a theoretical discourse of educated hope by generating dissent and providing an activating presence in promoting social transformation (Giroux “Where have all the Public Intellectuals Gone?”). Giroux laments the abandonment of American youth, who occupy a place at the margins of a culture that has come to classify

education—the arena in which young people *should* learn their civic rights and responsibilities—as a private rather than a public good. Reproaching the neoliberal agenda that relegates public education to the dustbin, Giroux holds the privatization of education accountable as the central factor underlying “the rise of a depoliticized citizenry marked by apathy . . .” (Giroux, “Pedagogy of the Depressed”). Giroux goes on to argue that a truly democratic culture can only be reached by treating education as a public good—“as a crucial site where students gain a public voice and come to grips with their own power as individual and social agents” (Giroux, “Neoliberalism and the Vocationalization of Higher Education”). In the meantime, while progressives ponder how to gradually reform the arena of public education, many popular cultural sites (which by no means act as an adequate substitute for a decent education) can at least serve as a crucial political point-of-reference and touchstone for youth. Giroux stresses the importance of media texts on today’s youth: “videos, films, music, television, radio, computers—and the new public spheres they inhabit have far more influence on shaping the memories, language, values, and identities of young people” than in the past (Giroux, “Where Have all the Intellectuals Gone?”). *The Daily Show* is just a small part of the excess of media that appeal primarily to youth; its impact, however, has proved enormous in attracting the interest and attention spans of millions of young citizens.

As opposed to the kind of ‘cynical chic’ attitude gripping many young people convinced that they can neither influence nor be held responsible for what happens in the political arena (and thus opt out of participating), *The Daily Show*, a committed alternative news outlet and political site, takes a critical pedagogical approach to the news

and links it to a language of criticism and hope. On the show the evening before Election Day 2004, for example, Stewart pleaded with his viewers to vote:

Get out there and vote, and not because it's cool—because it's not. I'll tell you what is cool—smoking. Do that while you vote. There will be long lines, so I suggest this: be ready to waste a day for democracy. If the line is long, stay there; if you are hungry, eat someone in line with you. Do not leave until you get your vote counted; and I urge you to do that civic duty tomorrow.

The show acts as one of the few ideological spheres and public spaces—and Stewart one of the few public figures—that encourages young people not only to question and to critique, but to get involved in the political process. *The Daily Show's* influential outspokenness has gained a prominent following amongst North American youth, its scrutiny of current events and political issues reflecting the growing unease many young people have about their government and society. College students on campuses across North America worship Stewart as a type of demigod whose 'gospel' reflects their own progressive politics, collective outrage, and desire for political change.

Unlike Tom Fenton, who condemns mega-corporations and the popular and fast-paced format for taking over the networks and squeezing the life out of foreign news, John Fiske argues that the crucial test of news is not its informational accuracy, but the extent to which it enables readers to perceive its relevance to their everyday lives (Buckingham 26). If anything, Fiske explicates, the news should be *more* entertaining, taking on some of the forms and strategies of other genres typically associated with youth (Buckingham 27). This means privileging the 'micro-politics' of everyday life over the complex 'macro-politics' of social structure and political action, the latter an approach which further distances and alienates the people from the government, resulting in

“popular apathy at the voting booth and an absence of popular interest . . . in the official activities of the power-bloc” (Buckingham 27). The point is not to do away with macro-politics altogether, sweeping the enormity of international affairs under the rug in favour of highly personalized issues, but to find ways to build connections between the two. While many adherents of the ‘decline of hard news’ argument insist that this kind of marriage between solid, objective fact and popular culture is not progressive, instead symptomatic of a cultural decline rather than maturing political debate, it does offer opportunities to involve youth who may otherwise, arguably, remain unresponsive and unconvinced. Critics typically discuss popular news and infotainment more generally as if there is something inherently wrong with it, as if the format only breeds and nurtures ignorance and passivity; however, young Americans who have been raised on high jolts-per-minute television and video games seem to appreciate a format that lives up to their accelerated expectations. Todd Gitlin explains that the culture of speed “rubs up against a culture of slowness and conquers what it can,” the “subsociety of the fast . . . the engine that pulls the whole” (Gitlin 109). Jon Stewart acknowledges that the flamboyant format and vigorous pace of his show is necessary to keep the audience interested and engaged:

I always hear quarterbacks say the difference in the NFL now is the speed of the game. The difference in *The Daily Show* is the speed with which you have to digest material and turn it into a comedy-like pulp. When you look at Johnny Carson’s old shows, you want to smoke a pipe, have a cup of tea, and relax. But our show moves. That’s how TV is now” (Winfrey 189).

The Daily Show has managed to combine the content of official journalism with the delivery of tabloid news, infusing bona fide investigative journalism with popular tones of voice and popular stances toward official knowledge, not to mention the use of

excessive and sensationalist stories and headlines (Fiske 61). For example, in a piece on the Karl Rove CIA leak scandal, lauded by *Newsweek's* Michael Isikoff as “the best explanation [he'd] seen” on television, Stewart offers a brilliant and thorough synopsis of the case without failing to make it hilarious: he even manages to pause briefly to slip in a disconcerting video clip of a monkey washing a cat in a kitchen sink.

Compared to ceaseless screaming matches, this mixture of intense debate and lighthearted banter is attractive to viewers. The producers at *Comedy Central* originally theorized that the station's demographic was too laid-back to care about politics in and of itself, thus offering up *The Daily Show* as an opportunity for viewers to make fun of the news while gaining information as a bonus, almost by accident. But that was when the show was still in its infancy. With Jon Stewart at the helm, politics has become the show's driving force, but not to the point that it interferes or conflicts with his cool demeanor, charm or side-splitting hilarity. For *The Daily Show*, shooting only for *Comedy Central's* coveted 18- to 34-year-old male audience reflects an archaic objective; ever since the show was picked up by CNN International in Europe and CTV in Canada, it has increasingly drawn in a less homogeneous crowd, one that may not typically be drawn to a comedy network. The show appeals to a multitude of diverse groups, crossing lines across profession, age, and political affiliation, from academics to students, activists to writers, and socialists to (even) conservatives, fostering a sense of collective belonging.

The show's disparate demographic is chronicled in the flattering comments made by many of Stewart's interviewees, from political figures to comedians: Martin Short

reminds Stewart that while he complimented him tremendously before the show and would feel sycophantic doing it again on the air, he is a huge fan who watches with his son every night; and Tracey Ullman discloses to Jon that he is her aspiring politician daughter's hero. Politicians Nancy Soderberg and Newt Gingrich playfully allude to past episodes of the show, indicating that they are regular viewers, the former going so far as to recite lines from *America (The Book)* and the latter conceding: "You may produce the next president for the northeast . . . it would be a sign of the growing power of your show." And, after his retirement, Bill Moyers offers to fill in for the departing senior correspondent Stephen Colbert, displaying a copy of the *Friars' Club Encyclopedia of Jokes* as evidence of his sincerity and dedication. Besides these famous fans, of course, *The Daily Show* can be best described as a sort of ideological bomb shelter in which college students gather, crouching and hovering, temporarily protected, in twenty-two minute intervals four nights a week, from the whirlwind of disinformation around them. This group has been dubbed "The Jon Stewart Generation," their gracious host epitomizing, to many, the voice of youth. And Stewart has faith in them: "Spending time at colleges, I never thought this was an apathetic generation and a group of people who would not answer a call to arms . . . I feel extremely hopeful about this group; they're a smart group and there's a lot of them" (*The Daily Show*).

Unlike host Jon Stewart, who oscillates between the roles of callow comedian and the voice of reason, *The Daily Show's* correspondents are not depicted as well-rounded intellectuals; instead, they are one-dimensional jackasses who never fall out of condescending character. Correspondents Ed Helms, Samantha Bee, Stephen Colbert

and Rob Corddry appeal to youth by speaking their language (using slang, profanity, ebonics, surfer jargon); by displaying their boredom with and angst toward figures of authority; and by using everything from bathroom humour to pop cultural puns in their headlines, such as “Popping a Big Tent” and “Abu Cribs.” This strategy—taking popular cultural symbols with which young viewers are familiar and attitudes to which they can relate—makes the news more relevant. The smug Colbert, a crowd favourite, comes off as a completely oblivious misogynist and racist who best epitomizes a hyperbolic version of the pretentious reporter; the balding Corddry reports in his signature antagonistic tough-guy routine, sardonically bullying and mocking his opponents into submission; the bespectacled Helms is a lighthearted and enthusiastic goofball who, at the expense of treating his reports with any (even mock) seriousness, strives to appear hip, fun and likeable; and finally, the show’s only female representative, Bee is always the perfect recipe of overly patronizing combined with just the right mixture of unscrupulousness and disingenuousness. The correspondents align themselves with their younger viewers in a number of their “investigative reports,” lampooning the condescension of authority figures and thus reclaiming some power from these tyrants: in a segment on the Blue Cross insurance plan directed at 19- to 29-year-olds called “Tonik,” Ed Helms cheers like a frat boy, plugging the absurd plan’s packages, including the thrill-seeker plan with a five thousand “off the hook de-duc-ti-on” and the calculated-risk program “for the pussies in the hizzy,” underscoring the absurdity and cluelessness of the plan’s fiftysomething-year-old spokesman. Stewart joins in on the youthful fun, admittedly playing endless hours of video games, addressing anyone from politicians to potheads as

“dude,” and thanking Boston University during the Democratic National Convention for welcoming them to a week-long stay in their dorms, where he met his roommate Sanji—“a computer science major from the Punjab region”—whom he thanks for all the Dungeons and Dragons games and to whom he promises with sorority sister enthusiasm: “we’re totally gonna stay in touch!”

There have recently been a number of attempts on behalf of members of the “official” news media to sex up their formats and informational content in order to draw in younger viewers, to cash in on the ‘MTVization’ of an entire generation who will reach over seventy million by the time the last of them turn eighteen. In 2001, for example, CNN’s *Headline News* was completely revamped to include fast-paced delivery and a multitude of screen graphics and catchy titles. CNN executive Jim Walton points out that CNN has indeed “played around” with its style, but in a good way: “We’re not messing with the CNN brand, but we will continue to broaden the definition of what is news” (“Searching for Youth”). While CNN received a fair amount of criticism from some of its adult viewers, ratings leaped 104 per cent among the 18 to 34 demographic. In recent years, many media organizations have been searching for a way to attract the financially powerful and advertiser-friendly youth market. *Headline News* anchor Robin Meade is confident that during a continuing war on terrorism as well as concerns at home, “many of our viewers—young and old alike—find our solid news coverage interesting and compelling because so much of it has the potential to affect their everyday lives” (“Searching for Youth”). Further, she is convinced that many of them appreciate the fast-paced format as well as the increased information on the screen: “Some folks

have told me they are multitaskers and that, for example, they like to listen to one thing while reading another . . . [it's] never a boring minute" ("Searching for Youth"). She defends the graphics which do not necessarily debase content as long as "they work in support of the information or content presented," helping to illustrate or make a story understandable.

The New York Times recently underwent a similar shift, but one that met with far less popular approval. Author of *Hard News* and former *Newsweek* columnist, Seth Mnookin revealed to Jon Stewart in a *Daily Show* interview that after 9/11, *Times* executive editor Howell Raines turned the paper on its head, a response to pressures in the media world to seize a shrinking audience, the majority of whom were simply no longer interested in 'real' news. Raines, who had taken over the paper less than a week prior to the WTC attack in 2001, waged a campaign to renovate the entire paper, making it more exciting, putting Britney Spears on the front page and, according to Mnookin, even hiring reporters who resorted to "mak[ing] stuff up," namely, the recently ousted Jayson Blair (*The Daily Show*). Part of this phenomenon can be attributed to what many critics have dubbed the 'Fox Effect'—the attempt by big media players, such as MSNBC, CNBC, etc., to "outfox Fox." Jeffrey Immelt, CEO of General Electric affirms this theory: "The standard right now is Fox and I want to be as interesting and edgy as [those] guys are" (*Outfoxed*). Mnookin is certain that the success of Fox has convinced audiences to "demand that their own world views (or, in this case, stereotypical representations of their demographical group) get reinforced instead of asking for the truth," perpetuating a cycle that is drawing us further and further away from a return to

the kind of objective hard news for which so many critics call. The collective agenda of the network and cable news teams seems to have nothing to do with hard-hitting, factual, or insightful news, but only with panache, chutzpah and spectacle.

Recently, *The Nation* featured a piece covering Al Gore's new youth cable channel *Current*, which offers segments on everything from poppy fields in Morocco to hacking into Paris Hilton's cell phone; a bi-hourly news update spotlighting the top ten queries on Google for any given subject; and "a satire of political campaign ads that come across as an amateurish stab at *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*" (Berman 13). The gist of the station is to make current affairs cool—a "MoveOn.org of primetime" or an "interactive grad-school version of MTV"—and most important, according to Gore, to empower a generation of young people by giving them a space to "engage in a dialogue of democracy . . . in the dominant medium of our time" (Berman 13). Offering such a brief window to the world through short-clips and segments, however, the station adds virtually no context to the news, something that most critics complain the genre already sorely lacks. Head of programming David Neuman explains: "This is an audience that has become media grazers, and we decided to create a network that *didn't fight* that but rather *facilitated* that" (Berman 16, italics added). In the midst of this news crisis, then, Neuman admits that he is willing to simply satisfy what he thinks people want or, failing that, at least what they expect or are accustomed to. Contrary to the type of intervention for which John Fiske calls, this strategy does not make news more relevant but further distracts viewers, epitomizing the type of laziness typically associated with the faltering news media.

Alleged youth apathy has far less to do with laziness and immaturity than institutionalized exclusion and disenfranchisement. Many critics, opposed to merging the ‘seriousness’ of politics with the implied flippancy of entertainment, only perpetuate this alienation, often relegating “youth” (who are treated as a monolithic category) to the apolitical margins. Besides Bill O’Reilly’s refusal to acknowledge that *Daily Show* viewers could be anything more than stoned slackers, conservative Michelle Malkin lambastes Colin Powell for agreeing to appear on MTV in a “Global Town Meeting” to discuss world affairs and the nation’s future with young people. She asks: “Couldn’t the State Department have found a ‘unique forum’ that wasn’t so abysmally beneath the dignity of America’s top diplomat?” adding that Powell’s “hook-up” with MTV is an embarrassment to the White House and to all young Americans “interested in a serious forum for discussion of the war on terrorism (Malkin, “Colin Powell ‘Hooks Up’ with MTV”). Malkin implies that the fact that the special was “sandwiched somewhere in between Britney Spears’ videos, Trojan condom ads, booze-drenched Mardi Gras parties, soft-porn soap operas, and reruns of vulgar stunt shows,” is reason enough to assume that it would be an inherently undignified performance. Granted, while revealing whether the next presidential candidate wears boxers or briefs does not have any tangible political relevance, it at least makes politicians seem more human and allows young Americans to connect with them, albeit briefly, in a moment of candidness and lightheartedness, before the former proceed to tackle the more abstract and far-removed issues such as health care, employment, Social Insurance, and military spending. Although Colin Powell was adamant about “speaking one-on-one with young people from across the world in this

unique forum to discuss world affairs,” conservatives Malkin and O’Reilly assert, as if making an accusation, that politicians just want to appeal to young voters by appearing cool. O’Reilly tells Jon Stewart in an *O’Reilly Factor* interview: “I think [John Kerry] wants to be hip. I do. I think going on your show is a cache, and he’s considered the hipper candidate than the square.” The motive behind this type of criticism, however, seems to stem from the fact that those who consider themselves “real” journalists, like Malkin and O’Reilly, do not want competition from anyone—traditional and nontraditional alike—who appeals to such a coveted demographic, offering something with which they are unfamiliar, something with which they cannot compete, no matter how much they superficially retool their own formats. O’Reilly goes so far as to consider Stewart a direct competitor whose show, just like his own, he believes has a specific political agenda:

O’REILLY: Okay, when you get a guy like Kerry on

STEWART: Yes.

O’REILLY: And again, he bypassed me, so I took it personally, he went over to talk to you

STEWART: But you and I are not competitors, let’s be frank about it.

O’REILLY: Well, we’re on our second rerun on *The Factor*—it’s now at 11:00.

STEWART: I don’t mean in terms of—we’re not competitors in terms of content. You’re a news show, and we are a comedy show.

O’REILLY: That’s true. But what do you want the audience to get out of your discussion with Kerry? Just yucks, or anything else?

O'Reilly and Malkin understand that media images and perceptions are the final arbiter of political power, and this terrifies them since how young people view the candidates could, theoretically, swing the next election one way or the other (Taibii 267).

The question remaining is why these approaches do not seem to work where *The Daily Show* is so successful. The main difference lies in the intent: networks and programs trying to market to young people simply want to score ratings whereas *The Daily Show* evolved into its current niche, bypassing an insincere cachet that simply pays lip service to its viewers' presupposed interests. The former come off as contrived, disingenuous and insulting. Jon Stewart, however, is genuinely repulsed by figures of authority who abuse power. He relates to young people through, if nothing else, his persistent desire to be a shit disturber and, at best, his enduring youthful idealism. Many news agencies substitute one at the expense of the other, misplacing the core journalistic values in favour of ratings and, by extension, popularity—and it is obvious. But the solution is not the focus on or substitution of entertainment over information, but striking a fine balance between the two. In an interview with CNN's Jeff Greenfield two weeks after 9/11, Stewart thanks his guest for his guidance, pointing out that there are “a lot of young people who watch the show and right now they're in college and need to know how to act about [9/11].” Here 9/11 is synecdoche for the multifarious problems with which the nation is inundated. The show's mission statement could easily be: “A lot of young people watch the show and they're in college and need to know how to act about the current state of the world and America's place within it.” Guests who typically do not specifically address young people (or at least do not speak to them at a level on which

they are able to relate) are forced to partake in an exchange with Stewart, who stands in as a sort of honorary member of the youth community.

The Daily Show and the Future of Television News

Broadcast news has waned from an industry that once prided itself on prestige to a faltering machine that has the potential to harm the citizens of a democracy more than it may help, some news outlets serving up a hearty supply of inadequate, decontextualized, misleading, and often outright false information. And the news networks assume that American tastes simply cannot be raised; “easy revenue with cheaper outlay and less hard news pays off too easily” (Fenton 223). The news industry has failed to make any substantial changes beyond feeding our need for speed and drama, by advancing the pace of the creeping news strips across the bottom of the screen and relying solely on split-screen debates for “insight” and commentary. The networks remain wedded to the needs of their corporate overlords rather than to the public’s demands—and no amount of *Pew Research Studies* will change their minds. The pressure must come from the public. *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* is TV’s version of Home Depot—“You can do it. We can help”—supplying its viewers with the critical tools with which to determine their demands and showing them how to operate them. The show can be best described as a postmodern text which not only calls into question governmental policies and pervasive sociopolitical ideologies but, more compellingly, draws attention to the notion of truth in popular and journalistic discourse, taking a stand against the mainstream media’s alleged objectivity and the absence of any real civic discussion of domestic and international political and social realities. Like an introductory Cultural Studies class, the writers and correspondents struggle with critical theoretical concepts and ideas—neoliberalism, the

culture industry, commodity fetishism, cultural imperialism—and attempt to make sense of them by applying them to tangible issues and events.

Jon Stewart et al. serve as a utilitarian point-of-reference, not intended to wield direct political clout, but to counterbalance the either-sidedness of the unapologetically partisan pundits who already dominate the media in talk radio, print, and television. The show offers an alternative set of voices—the voices of critics who do not claim to know the truth and oppose those who purport to—who reach America’s youth and show them that politics and their role in it *does* matter. Ultimately, *The Daily Show* is more than ‘just’ a political satire: it is a viable alternative to the mainstream news. The show is certainly not an objective bastion of truth and justice—far from it: the writers have biases and the show makes them clear. Further, the show’s full democratic potential will always be limited by virtue of its medium. Nevertheless, Stewart is one of the few voices on television who relentlessly questions those in power and demands that they be held accountable.

Though we are often tempted to blame the politicians, it’s time, Matt Taibbi insists, to dig deeper: “It is time to blame the press corps that daily brings us this unrelenting symphony of horseshit and never comes within 1000 miles of an apology for any of it” (Taibbi 252). And it is time to blame them, he adds, not only as a class of people, but also as individuals, branding anyone who puts his or her name on credulous campaign coverage an Enemy of the State in hopes of creating a deterrent effect (Taibbi 252). Pierre Bourdieu explains in *The Field of Cultural Production*: “The history of the field arises from the struggle between the established figures and the young challengers”

(60). To initiate a new epoch, he insists, one must win recognition both by asserting one's difference from other producers, "especially the most consecrated of them;" and by "creating a new position, ahead of the positions already occupied, in the vanguard" (Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production* 60). Jon Stewart and his team of fellow Generation X'ers explicitly challenge their predecessors, the Baby Boomers, whose approach to the news they consider offensively archaic. The emergence of a group capable of making an epoch by imposing a new, advanced position, Bourdieu concludes, is accompanied by a displacement of a whole series of earlier members of the field (in this case, the traditional news media) whose modes and methods are gradually rendered obsolete. As criticism becomes more explicit, more humiliating and less ignorable, not only by way of *The Daily Show* but from a number of the progressive sources mentioned earlier, eventually members of the mainstream press (like the CNN executives who cancelled *Crossfire*) will make legitimate efforts to improve the form and content of the news. If a comedian can mobilize generations of people who display an obvious hunger for this type of interesting and funny format, others will undoubtedly catch on.

Despite the praise Jon Stewart receives; despite millions of fans who insist that the show is their primary and, in some case, *only* news source; and despite its roster of guests—who, in just one week from July 11-14th, hosted academics including Law Professor and author Marci Hamilton, alternative columnist Matt Taibbi, conservative journalist Bernard Goldberg, and *Newsweek* investigative correspondent Michael Isikoff—*The Daily Show* is still not considered (even by many of those academics searching desperately for solutions to the current news crisis) a legitimate and serious

alternative news outlet. In the recent onslaught of books and articles focusing on the ineptitude of the mainstream media, any mention of the show is conspicuously absent, overlooked by such astute critics as Danny Goldberg, Robert McChesney, Eric Alterman and Thomas Fenton. As mentioned earlier, Fenton goes so far as to discredit *The Daily Show* as just another blitzkrieg of compressed headlines and pre-digested chuckles. The refusal of anything ‘entertainment’-related and a narrow insistence on seriousness and formality that typically characterizes dominant forms of news production, however, “systematically alienates and excludes substantial sectors of the audience.” Yet, David Buckingham continues, “the answer is not simply to add sugar to the pill” (Buckingham 211). The media should not simply endorse the hyperactive MTV style that has become characteristic of “youth television,” simply perpetuating the stereotype that young people are inherently incapable of processing anything but high-tech and flashy graphics paired with bass-pumping sound bites. Instead, news agencies must pair their content with an approach that takes micro-politics into consideration, making news relevant and avoiding the kind of condescension so often evident in their regular reports.

One explanation for the aforementioned group of authors’ oversight of the show, whether intentional or not, could be that no one wants to invest time studying, academically, something that itself insists is not to be taken seriously. And the writers and producers refuse to budge. At *The Daily Show Secrets Revealed* at the Montreal *Just for Laughs* festival in July 2005, a panel consisting of correspondents Samantha Bee and Stephen Colbert and producers/writers Ben Karlin and David Javerbaum collectively insisted that the prime objective of the show is to be funny—to create jokes about things

they care about—not to carry out any kind of orchestrated agenda. Stewart et al. insist on setting and playing by their own set of rules, refusing their critics' efforts to define and consign them to a strict category (i.e. 'news' or 'comedy'). This is reinforced through the structure and format of the show: for one week in July 2005 the show went on hiatus in order to completely overhaul the look of the studio, scrapping the comfy guest couch and replacing it with a large round table surely inspired by—and likely to further stimulate—debate. Unlike David Letterman or Jay Leno, whose sets reflect a identifiable personality—the former Manhattan chic, revealing an expansive view of the New York City skyline behind the host's desk, and the latter Hollywood hip, with bright lights and couch cushions to match—the new *Daily Show* set creates a detachedly formal ambiance devoid of any kitschy tokens epitomizing its host or the city with which it is affiliated. Just days after the set change, bloggers immediately began to complain that the new look is bleak and uninviting; however, the new set could be indicative of the show's maturation, specifically its attempt to be taken seriously as a dispassionate news source—an evolution from a laid-back late-night talk show to a reputable nightly newscast. Perhaps it is Stewart et al.'s covert way of saying that it is time to take them more seriously as they begin the political journey of the "Indecision" coverage that will lead them into 2008. Or perhaps it is just another way of messing with us, keeping viewers and critics alike on their respective toes, and refusing to be labeled. After the short break, Stewart consecutively interviewed four political guests. Two weeks later, three of the four guests included actors Paul Rudd and Kate Hudson and rapper Andre 3000, making for ineffectual interview segments devoid of much content besides baby talk and behind-

the-set stories from the stars' latest movies. These moments of disjointed babble, however, only make its sparks of brilliance more outstanding.

In the first show back after 9/11, Jon Stewart assumed a paternal role, somberly explaining why he considers his role as late-night talk show host and comedian—and the existence of the show in general—a privilege: “The fact that we can sit in the back of the country and make wisecracks—which is really what we do, we sit in the back and throw spitballs—it is a luxury in this country that allows us to do that. It’s a country that allows for open satire.” Despite the praise Stewart and his late-night counterparts would receive in the following weeks, he went on to commend his fellow citizens:

I want to tell you why I grieve, but why I don’t despair. One of my first memories is of Martin Luther King Jr. being shot . . . that was a tremendous test of this country’s fabric. And this country’s had many tests before and after that. And the reason I don’t despair is because this attack happened. It’s not a dream. But the aftermath of it, the recovery, is a dream realized. And that is Martin Luther King’s dream. . . . Any fool can blow something up and any fool can destroy. But to see these guys, these firefighters and policemen, literally with buckets, rebuilding—that’s extraordinary. And that’s why we’ve already won. It’s democracy. They can’t shut that down.

September 11th changed the way the news is conducted: to some, patriotism still means undivided devotion and admiration for an allegedly infallible nation. And 9/11 altered the way Stewart and the *Daily Show* crew—and many more—regard their own country. It reminded them that what they do everyday—heckle, mock, boo, scorn, and scoff—is an act of patriotism on behalf of citizens who care enough about their country to be honest with and to demand more from it.

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