

## When Fake Is More Real: Of Fools, Parody, and The Daily Show with Jon Stewart

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### Abstract:

The Annenberg Public Policy Center, CNN, and even the controversial, free online encyclopedia, Wikipedia, cite The Daily Show viewers as the most politically well informed among the American electoral public of 2004. [...]Katharine Seelye in her April 16th, 2007, New York Times article, indicated that respondents to a February 2007 Pew survey "seemed to know the most about what's going on - who were able to identify major public figures, for example - were likely to be viewers of fake news programs like Jon Stewart's 'The Daily Show' and 'The Colbert Report' those who knew the least watched network morning news programs, Fox News or local television news." (423) And, indeed, TDS has become somewhat newsworthy. Besides the previously mentioned New York Times article, on April 25th, 2007, ABC's World News aired a clip of Jon Stewart's April 24th, 2007, interview with Senator John McCain, shortly after the senator had formally announced his candidacy for the 2008 presidential race.

### Full text:

"Look at me," shouted the waza Bombur Yambarzal. "This thickheaded, comical, bloodthirsty moron is what you have all decided to become."

-Salman Rushdie, Shalimar the Clown

Ever since winning a Peabody Award for its coverage of "Indecision 2000," viewers have been taking fake news from Comedy Central's The Daily Show with Jon Stewart much more seriously. The Annenberg Public Policy Center, CNN, and even the controversial, free online encyclopedia, Wikipedia, cite The Daily Show viewers as the most politically well informed among the American electoral public of 2004. More recently, Katharine Seelye in her April 16th, 2007, New York Times article, indicated that respondents to a February 2007 Pew survey "seemed to know the most about what's going on - who were able to identify major public figures, for example - were likely to be viewers of fake news programs like Jon Stewart's 'The Daily Show' and 'The Colbert Report' those who knew the least watched network morning news programs, Fox News or local television news." And in a June 4th, 2007, edition of The Washington Post, the appearance of Rep. Ron Paul on The Daily Show was deemed to be "the ultimate test of a 21st-century [presidential] campaign" (A2). Such comments raise the question whether or to what extent a comedy show (The Daily Show, henceforth TDS) is becoming a source of news. The Pew survey shows that while Jon Stewart comes in only eighth out of twenty-two "Most Admired News Figures" - he is actually ranking as a serious news figure.

The change in the status of Jon Stewart as a fake anchor of a news show parody to an actual news figure was already of concern to Aaron McKain in his December 2005 article in the Journal of American Culture. McKain draws on a variety of theories - primarily in media studies, narratology, and parody - in order to conclude, "Optimists may argue that the increased 'newsiness' of TDS will have a positive impact on general news reporting itself. Pessimists may see that TDS will be incorporated into the News medium" (428). Furthermore, McKain goes on to claim that "the News takes its cue from TDS and incorporates more comedy and more entertainment into its broadcasts, even at the expense of its own ethos" (428). So, according to McKain, TDS is turning the serious business of news reporting into entertainment, to the detriment of an increasingly uninformed public. Perhaps what drove McKain to make such an assertion was Stewart's 2004 incursion into official news reporting and commentary. For example, Stewart's appearance on Crossfire has been cited as a major reason for its demise.

While McKain is right on target for the most part, he is wrong - or at least not quite right - regarding his point that

serious news reporting is being turned into entertainment. Anyone who has watched Bill O'Reilly or listened to Rush Limbaugh knows that serious news reporting was entertainment by the time Jon Stewart became so very popular. In his otherwise thorough analysis of how TDS parodies news, McKain has not really grappled with the way TDS parodies how news has become more entertainment than reporting. In *The Assault on Reason*, for example, Al Gore makes the point of how, at least as far back as 1976, television news has turned "into profit-driven entertainment programming" (18).

Nevertheless, McKain does effectively discuss the complexity with which TDS parodies official news by exposing what is presented as real to be fake:

One of TDS's fortes is its laying bare of the Bush administration's prepackaged VNRs [Video News Reports], in which news is delivered to the News with no mediation. By playing clips against each other, TDS shows us what has not been presented to us through this unmediated process (421).... The real fake news, then is the administration's VNRs (e.g. Medicare reform "news" that used actors instead of "authentic" folk), and not TDS. (423)

And, indeed, TDS has become somewhat newsworthy. Besides the previously mentioned New York Times article, on April 25th, 2007, ABC's World News aired a clip of Jon Stewart's April 24th, 2007, interview with Senator John McCain, shortly after the senator had formally announced his candidacy for the 2008 presidential race. This clip showed not the cool, level-headed presidential candidate we might see in official news interviews; rather, the audience was allowed for a moment to see a vexed senator unsuccessfully dodging Stewart's ironic barbs. Of an earlier incident, in which the fake news was shown on official news in order to disclose what official sources could not, McKain affirms that "Stewart's ability to speak is derived from the News's inability" (426). But allowing comedy clips to slip into serious news is not the reason why official news seems more like entertainment.

In order to better understand TDS's complex relation to news-as-entertainment, I wish to start at the point where McKain leaves off. His final attempt to salvage TDS as a critical voice is what could be called the "it's just a joke" defense: "Ironically . . . it is TDS's insistence that it is 'fake news' that may protect it most" (429). This very point is echoed by Andrew Stott, when he looks at comedy's long history of involvement with politics in his 2005 study, *Comedy*:

When laughter is directed aggressively, it can be an extremely powerful tool, victimizing its targets in purely negative terms and reinforcing prejudice. Comedy that seeks to do the same to tyrannical or prejudicial ideologies, however, often has to relinquish a reasonable base for its arguments before it enters the arena. Parody and satire are good for demolishing dogma but not for constructively offering alternatives to it.... Perhaps it is true that comedy has nothing to offer politics when the project requires something more than simple derision. Maybe the limited usefulness of comedy in politics is a function of laughter's association with ridicule. (126)

The "it's just a joke" argument that protects comedians such as Stewart (who has used this defense on numerous occasions) while simultaneously allowing them to voice unofficial criticism needs further investigation, particularly in relation to the mean-spirited use of comedy already deployed by official news people, such as Bill O'Reilly.

Like McKain and Stott, Paul Lewis is interested in the extent to which comedy can effect political change. In his 2006 book, *Cracking Up*, Lewis offers his readership a serious look at American comedy shows of the last thirty years, giving special attention to post-9/11 comedy. He is particularly concerned with the success of rightwing political humorists and points out that comedians, such as Jay Leno, who deliver more impartial (or at least more bipartisan) political jokes have little effect on their voting public. Using Rush Limbaugh as the forefather of how humor is deployed by rightwing commentators, namely Bill O'Reilly, Lewis distinguishes mean spirited humor (killing jokes) from healing laughter, which is an important distinction to make because satire itself knows no restraint. There is a difference between Limbaugh and Stewart that is not based on party affiliation. Lewis

asks: "In not addressing and seeking to alleviate human suffering by holding those responsible up to ridicule, does it serve Freddy-like 1. ends, leaving abuses unmocked, unexposed, and unimpeded?" (158). Therefore, like McKain, Lewis positions TDS as exposing abuse by those with power, rather than protecting those with power and attacking those without. Limbaugh's humor is not only mean-spirited, it is often used to distract from his numerous distortions of facts. Lewis surveys all the research done on how factually incorrect Limbaugh is, and nevertheless remains popular: "It's interesting to note how many of these might actually have been intended as comic exaggeration... 'I was only kidding' is a defense strategy deployed by Limbaugh when his accuracy is challenged" (167). Furthermore, Lewis points out that Limbaugh uses "a veneer of comedy to lower resistance to his arguments and provide cover when they are assailed" (167). Even his constant self-aggrandizing is toned down with the use of humor, so that it seems he is exaggerating. Of course, Stewart uses the same "I'm just a comedian" tactic, when accused of being a bad news anchor. The difference is that his accuracy is not being challenged, just his persona. Rather than use humor to ridicule the less fortunate or draw an audience's attention away from inaccuracies, Stewart and TDS writers focus in on exposing political whitewashing and corruption.

Unlike McKain or Stott, Lewis does not despair when empirical research reveals that humor is unlikely to sway an election (Lewis 168). What he suggests is that the sort of humor that ridicules abusive politics has the effect of creating a space where rational reflection on issues can take place - it provides a more balanced perspective when the official news media cannot. I would say that TDS encourages what Lewis calls a "reflective, rather than reflexive, reception of popular humor" (194). For example, on April 30th, 2007, TDS parodied the recent trend on ABC's World News to have a single sponsor, such as CVS Pharmacies, provide a mostly commercial-free broadcast. Stewart along with such fake "senior experts" as John Oliver and Aasif Mandvi took an in-depth look at the crisis in Darfur, sponsored by a fictitious bubble gum company. In contrast to the dire situation of famine in Darfur, each fake correspondent was gleefully chewing on a mouthful of bubble gum while informing their public of the sad fate of Darfur natives. The "ABC/Darfur" parody thus exposes that which the official news itself is unable to expose: its problematic relation with advertisers and even its own audience, who, Stewart pointed out, are at the age when pharmacies become important (versus his own, younger audience). This exposure allows his audience to reflect not only on the problem of news sponsorship, but also on the unbalanced power relations between first world news reporters and the less fortunate people who provide them with news stories. If the political humor of TDS cannot sway voters, it can open the way for critical reflection. In the spirit of Walter Benjamin who once wrote, "This is the situation of politics which Fascism is rendering aesthetic. Communism responds by politicizing art" (242), I propose that Limbaugh and O'Reilly humorize politics in order to distort, while TDS responds by politicizing humor in order to clarify.

While Lewis uses Freddy Krueger to symbolize rightwing humor, I would like to use Bakhtin's notion of the clown or medieval fool to symbolize Jon Stewart as a fake news anchor. In *Rabelais and His World*, Bakhtin nostalgically celebrates the medieval carnival in order to rescue a notion of a politicized popular laughter in an era traditionally associated with a hegemonic religious-state order. In order to effect this rescue, Bakhtin positions carnival laughter against the seriousness of the church (120-123). He contemplates how such irreverent laughter survives the power of the church it mocks. For example, when laughter parodies a church mass, it does not destroy the concept of the mass; it creates an alternative sort of mass, its "own mass" (88). Bakhtin stresses laughter's "indissoluble and essential relation to freedom. We have seen that this laughter was absolutely unofficial but nevertheless legalized. The rights of the fool's cap were as inviolable as those of the pileus" (89). Like the fool, the clown "was the herald of another nonfeudal, nonofficial truth" (93). A modern-day example in fictional narrative can be found in Salman Rushdie's *Shalimar the Clown*, when the otherwise serious waza Bombur Yambarzal dons a foolish costume to parody and mock a religious extremist who has come to his Kashmiri town of Shirmal. The religious extremist, Bulbul Fakh, had incited some men of the town when Bombur Yambarzal's antics caused the rest of the villagers to laugh the extremist out of town:

When Bulbul Fakh saw that he had lost the day, that his knifelike clarity had been blunted by Yambarzal's obfuscation creation of a comic grotesque, he went without a word into his residential quarters and came out with nothing more than the ragged bundle he had carried on the day of his arrival in Shirmal. (125)

In this episode of the novel, the only weapon against a dangerous extremist was to summon an unofficial truth through the guise of a mocking clown.

By donning the fool's cap, by playing the clown, Stewart as a fake news anchor is able to proclaim nonofficial truths. This is how Stewart is able to defeat such false fears created by official lies in recurring segments, such as Mess-O-Potamia, that mock the official lies that generated mass fears about weapons of mass destruction leading to the invasion of Iraq. Through Bakhtin, we can consider TDS's Mess-O-Potamia as similar to the use of hell in medieval festivals, when a set called "hell" was burned during carnivals: "This grotesque image cannot be understood without appreciating the defeat of fear. The people play with terror and laugh at it; the awesome becomes a 'comic monster'" (91). While many current intellectuals, such as Stott, express reservations about Bakhtin's nostalgic yearnings and heavy reliance on binary oppositions, Bakhtin's study nevertheless invites us to seriously contemplate the use of popular comedy and laughter to unmask political deception. 2.

For Bakhtin, parody was the popular method to unmask official power, and parody is a double-edged sword: "Thus it is that in parody two languages are crossed with each other, as well as two styles, two linguistic points of view, and in the final analysis two speaking subjects" (*The Dialogic Imagination* 76). Bakhtin differentiates "high" from "low": the "high" discourse, etc. is parodied by the "low" - resulting in a double-discourse. Both Linda Hutcheon and Henry Louis Gates pick up the notion of double discourse and develop it within a more modern context. Hutcheon claims that "both the authority and transgression implied by parody's textual opacity must be taken into account. All parody is overtly hybrid and double-voiced" (28). She illustrates this concept with Woody Allen's *Play It Again Sam*, a 1972 parody of the 1942 classic film, *Casablanca*: "What is parodied is Hollywood's aesthetic tradition of allowing only a certain kind of mythologizing in film; what is satirized is our need for such heroicization" (26). TDS, thus parodies the late twentieth century news ideal of news as immediate, transparent (unmediated), and unbiased (neutral), and satirizes our apparent need for "fair and balanced" news, as we saw from what I called the "ABC/Darfur" episode above.

Both Hutcheon and Gates recognize that not all parody lays bare the lies of that which it imitates. Early in her text, Hutcheon points out: "Parody, therefore, is a form of imitation, but imitation characterized by ironic inversion, not always at the expense of the parodied text.... This ironic playing with multiple conventions, this extended repetition with critical difference, is what I mean by modern parody" (6). Similarly, Gates draws on Bakhtin's notion of parody, not so much to topple a hegemonic order, but to create a distinct, Afro-American literary canon within which texts repeat and revise each other: "In this double-voiced relationship, one speech act determines the internal structure of another, the second effecting the voice of the first by absence, by difference" (111). So, then, the use of parody can affirm a community. How does this relate to TDS's use of parody? This double-edged sword can, in segments such as the "ABC/Darfur" parody, both ridicule official sites of power (ABC News) and also create a community of informed viewers, since parody stresses "craft and knowledge of the past" (Hutcheon 4). I would resituate that claim to fit my reading of TDS, which stresses knowledge of current events, or an immediate past. Parody thus displaces the romantic notion of individual authorship and resituates parodied texts into a more public sphere. Hence, the current interest in TDS's audience.

Before going into TDS's viewers and the current crisis of the official news agency that prompted McKain to unwisely speculate how TDS is turning more official news into entertainment, we should briefly review two histories: the long history of official news as entertainment and the much shorter history of fake news, or parodies of television news reporting - a history that undoubtedly informs the current status of TDS.

In the same way Paul Lewis looks back to the nineteenth century marriage of cartoons and politics in the history of political comedy, Robert Love reaches into historical archives to contemplate the confluence of entertainment

with official news in his 2007 article, "Before Jon Stewart: The Truth About Fake News." Love sees this confluence as starting in the late nineteenth century, "when a rush of emerging technologies intersected with newsgathering practices during a boom time for newspapers" (34). The tech involved was the telegraph, transatlantic wire, transcontinental cables, linotype, high-speed electric presses, rise of the telephone, etc. He cites the examples of The Washington Post giving bogus foreign news headlines in 1903, and William Randall Hearst who, along with Teddy Roosevelt and Joseph Pulitzer, "began the first privately funded propaganda push to war in modern media history" (35). The list of news hoaxes is long until about 1937, when Love singles out Marvin Creager's (president of the American Society of Newspaper Editors) announcement that the day of news hoaxes was over (37). This is the point when the American public began to expect serious news reporting. But the days of news hoaxes were not quite over: "Just last year, the Center for Media and Democracy identified sixty-nine news stations that ran clearly marked government- or industry-produced VNRs as unbiased news during a ten-month period." It seems that the Los Angeles Times ran a doctored picture from a war zone in 2003, and Reuters ran another in 2006 (37). Just as technology was involved with the news hoaxes at the turn of the twentieth century, Love claims the new wave of fake official news is due to the latest changes in technology, which "make it easier to deliver the news and also easier to fake it" (37). It is this sort of official hoax that is dangerous, not Jon Stewart's or his predecessors' parody of it.

Fake news made its debut on TV in 1962 when *That Was the Week That Was*, a weekly comedy review that included a fake news segment was anchored by David Frost, who went on to host *The Frost Report* (1966-67), which parodied a current events show. Shortly thereafter, *Rowan & Martin's Laugh-In* (1968-1973) became a hit weekly series that also featured a fake news segment usually anchored by Dick Martin. The fake news was introduced by a song that began: "What's the news across the nation? / We have got the information / In a way we hope will amuse you." As early as the 1960s, news as entertainment had already made its mark. Although *Laugh-In* went off the air in 1973, it took a mere two years for another weekly sketch comedy to hit the screen: *Saturday Night Live* (1975-present). *SNL* featured a slightly lengthier news parody, at first anchored by Chevy Chase, then co-anchored by a deadpan Jane Curtin and Dan Aykroyd. They would not only deliver fake current events, they also went on to parody news commentaries by staging fake debates, often ending with Aykroyd's signature rebuttal: "Jane you ignorant slut." The success of *SNL*'s fake news may have inspired HBO to air an exclusively fake-news series, *Not Necessarily the News* (1983-1990), which was the American version of BBC's *Not the Nine O'Clock News* (1979-1982). Both of these American and British series were devoted primarily to news parodies and directly inform TDS.

However, TDS has attracted considerably more attention than its predecessors from both comedic and media scholars. In *Tuned Out: Why Americans Under 40 Don't Follow the News*, author David Mindich makes a compelling case about the apathy younger Americans feel regarding news, no matter the format, without putting all the blame on them. According to Mindich, the dislike younger Americans feel towards news has two causes: the sort of news being conveyed and the trustworthiness of the news source. And this disillusionment is not unfounded when the likes of ABC News, owned by Disney, cancelled *Nightline* in 2002, in order to try and lure David Letterman into that slot in an attempt to improve ratings (51-52). The chase for ratings, sponsors, and a baby-boom spending public do cut into journalism's credibility. On the other hand, from a purely business point of view, solid journalism is not cheap, so who is to blame? Much to his credit, Mindich does not play a blame game; instead, he looks for possible solutions, among them is encouraging students from elementary through university levels to listen to credible news sources in the same way they are encouraged now to engage in volunteer community work, which bolsters their resumes. Being more informed on local, national, and international affairs makes for a more vigorous democracy.

While Mindich argues that network news and its spin-offs can create a more vigorous democracy, in her essay "News as Performance," Margaret Morse takes a different view. For Morse, the effect of immediacy produced by television news is distorting: "Far from confronting us with social reality, instrumental and impersonal

relations are given their most disguised and utopian expression by simulating the paramount reality of speaking subjects exchanging conversation in a shared space and time" (210). She then goes on to argue that, rather than representing the public, reporters and anchors come to represent the interests of politicians, corporations, etc.: "For the anchor represents not merely the news per se, or a particular network or corporate conglomerate that owns the network, or television as institution, or the public interest; rather he represents the complex nexus of all of them" (213). Morse views network news as a cultural product that is as trustworthy (or not) as soap operas (222). Although she does not mention TDS, it is likely she would consider it to be what she calls "the raw material" of culture; that is, "already full of many voices telling stories which news conventions effectively silence. 'The news' is not a found object, but a cultural product and its reality is the social reality that we perform and call forth together" (222). From this point of view, TDS is a valid news source, one that has the advantage of engaging a broader and younger audience. In fact, the real fake news is not the one claiming to be such (TDS); instead, it is the broadcast news that is a sham, parading as something it is not. Younger people's disillusionment with official news reporting is not entirely unfounded.

Mindich credits TDS in engaging younger viewers because "the show is very, very funny and drips with the kind of irony that many young people tell me they appreciate" (125). I would add that its irony in the form of parody kills two birds with one stone: it informs its viewers of important current events while also criticizing the pathetic state of most mainstream news sources. For example, on his January 24th, 2006, show, Stewart's commentary on the previous day's coverage of a supposedly unscreened audience at Kansas State University began with a clip of Bush declaring he was going to "answer some questions if you have some." After that, and in the trademark TDS montage style, Stewart's audience was treated to clip after clip of shameless adulation instead of hard questions. Stewart then informs us that Bush's audience was indeed screened, thus contextualizing what the previous day's news source had not done. Besides exposing VNRs disguised as press conferences, TDS criticizes the state of mainstream news itself. For example, on October 27th, 2005, TDS analyzed CNN's previous day's reporting of Bush's withdrawal of support for his Supreme Court nominee, Harriet Miers. Again, using its trademark montage, we saw the following clips:

\*

"...a stunning political development..."

\*

"...in a stunning turn of events..."

\*

"Stunning is the term that democrats use..."

\*

"Stunning. I would agree with the word stunning..."

\*

"I'm certainly stunned..."

\*

"Are you stunned?"

By focusing on the overuse of a term designed to enhance audience interest, coupled with Stewart's clownish facial gestures, the TDS montage exposes how a supposedly serious official news source relies on entertaining its audience in order to enhance viewership. TDS goes on to contrast CNN's antics with Fox News's far less enthusiastic coverage of the same event. After showing a clip of syndicated columnist Charles Krauthammer's staid delivery of the Miers news, Stewart adds: "Fox News - They report on what they already know has been decided." While CNN's coverage relies on hype, Fox News's coverage relies on inside information - both sources are exposed as being anything but "fair and balanced."

Whether mainstream news already incorporates entertainment in order to draw in more viewers or is more false than fake news itself, its parody is an event that is to be taken seriously. Rather than influencing official news to

become entertainment, as McKain claims, TDS should be understood as encouraging us to view official news more critically and thus compelling official news to become more credible and engage in what Mindich calls solid journalism. Jon Stewart's role is like that of Bombur Yambarzal, who took on the role of the clown to inform people - not of facts per se - but of how we, as a public, should view them.

#### Notes

1. Freddy Krueger is a recurring character in Wes Craven's horror film, *A Nightmare on Elm Street*, and its sequels. He was a serial child killer who, after being killed by an angry mob of parents, avenges his death by stalking the children of those he deemed responsible as they dream. Because this character is witty with his victims, Lewis uses him as a symbol to describe a mean-spirited type of humor that thinly veils an attack on people unable to defend themselves (166).
2. As a guest on TDS, Al Gore appeared to draw on Bakhtin when he said: "If you want to get through a lot of the nonsense and get to the heart of what the most important news of the day is, this is really one of the places to go to get the straight story. [...] Back in the Middle Ages, the court jester was sometimes the only one allowed to tell the truth without getting his head cut off. And in the current media environment, making jokes about serious stuff is the only way you can get past..." (24 May 2007). Gore was cut off by the positive audience response followed by a cut to commercial.

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