



PROJECT FOR EXCELLENCE IN JOURNALISM

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JOURNALISM, SATIRE OR JUST LAUGHS? **“The Daily Show with Jon Stewart,” Examined**

By the Project for Excellence in Journalism

When Americans last year were asked to name the journalist they most admired, showing up at No. 4 on the list was a comedian. Jon Stewart, host of The Daily Show on Comedy Central and former master of ceremonies at Academy Award shows, tied in the rankings with anchormen Brian Williams, Tom Brokaw, Dan Rather and cable host Anderson Cooper.¹

Are Americans confused? What is Stewart doing on his program, The Daily Show with Jon Stewart, which might cause people to consider him a journalist? How is the show similar to, and different from, what people get from the mainstream press? Beyond that, who—and what—gets skewered by Stewart and company, and who does not?

For answers, the Pew Research Center’s Project for Excellence in Journalism studied the content of The Daily Show for an entire year (2007), compared its news agenda with that of the more traditional news media, examined the lineup of guests and segments and tried to place the program into some kind of media context.²

The results reveal a television program that draws on the news events of the day but picks selectively among them—heavily emphasizing national politics and ignoring other news events entirely. In that regard, The Daily Show closely resembles the news agenda of a number of cable news programs as well as talk radio.

The program also makes heavy use of news footage, often in a documentary way that employs archival video to show contrast and contradiction, even if the purpose is satirical rather than reportorial. At other times, the show also blends facts and fantasy in a way that no news program hopefully ever would. In addition, The Daily Show not only assumes, but even requires, previous and significant knowledge of the news on the part of viewers if they want to get the joke. And, in 2007 at least, the joke was more often on the Bush Administration and its fellow Republicans than on those from the liberal side of the aisle.

¹ Pew Research Center for the People & the Press, “Today’s Journalists Less Prominent,” March 8, 2007. Available at: <http://people-press.org/reports/display.php3?ReportID=309>

² Traditional news media consists of a list of 48 news outlets that are a part of PEJ’s weekly News Coverage Index.

Among the study's findings:

- The program's clearest focus is politics, especially in Washington. U.S. foreign affairs, largely dominated by the Bush Administration's policies in Iraq, Washington politics and government accounted for nearly half (47%) of the time spent on the program. Overall, The Daily Show news agenda is quite close to those of cable news talk shows.
- The press itself is another significant focus on The Daily Show. In all, 8% of the time was made up of segments about the press and news media. That is more than double the amount of coverage of media in the mainstream press overall during the same period.
- A good deal of the news, however, is also absent from The Daily Show. In 2007, for example, major events such as the tragic Minneapolis bridge collapse were never discussed. And the shootings at Virginia Tech, the most covered story within a given week in 2007 by the overall press, received only a cursory mention.
- Republicans in 2007 tended to bear the brunt of ridicule from Stewart and his crew. From July 1 through November 1, Stewart's humor targeted Republicans more than three times as often as Democrats. The Bush Administration alone was the focus of almost a quarter (22%) of the segments in this time period.
- The lineup of on-air guests was more evenly balanced by political party. But our subjective sense from viewing the segments is that Republicans faced harsher criticism during the interviews with Stewart. Whether this is because the show is simply liberal or because the Republicans control the White House is harder to pin down.

Stewart has always insisted that his show isn't journalism and given its comedic core, its blurring of truth and fiction, and its ignoring of many major events, that is true in a traditional sense.

But it's also true that, at times, The Daily Show aims at more than comedy. In its choice of topics, its use of news footage to deconstruct the manipulations by public figures and its tendency toward pointed satire over playing just for laughs, The Daily Show performs a function that is close to journalistic in nature—getting people to think critically about the public square. In that sense, it is a variation of the tradition of Russell Baker, Art Hoppe, Art Buchwald, H.L. Mencken and other satirists who once graced the pages of American newspapers.

How popular is The Daily Show? According to a survey by the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press in April 2007, 16% of Americans said they regularly watched The Daily Show or the Comedy Central spin-off, the Colbert Report. Those numbers are

comparable to some major news programs. For instance, 17% said they regularly watched Fox News' The O'Reilly Factor, and 14% watched PBS' NewsHour with Jim Lehrer regularly.³

The survey also suggests Daily Show viewers are highly informed, an indication that The Daily Show is not their lone source of news. Regular viewers of The Daily Show and the Colbert Report were most likely to score in the highest percentile on knowledge of current affairs.⁴

The Daily Show, which began in 1996, now has an average audience of about 1.8 million.⁵ By comparison, Fox News' primetime show Hannity & Colmes had an average audience of 1.9 million in the first quarter of 2008, and CNN's highest rated show, Election Center captured an average of 1.2 million viewers.⁶ Stewart became host of the Show in 1999 and also serves as a writer and co-executive producer.

Structurally, The Daily Show combines elements of both traditional news shows and late night variety programs. Two commercial segments divide the 30 minute show into three distinct parts. Typically the first segment consists of Stewart's monologue, which often uses video and audio clips. The second segment usually brings in correspondents who do skits, or staged interviews with Stewart. The third, and final, act of the show consists of a guest interview. Guests range from celebrities, to historians and politicians.⁷

What's on—and not on—The Daily Show

Overall, The Daily Show's range of topics is somewhat more limited than the mainstream press generally. Yet in many ways the similarities between the comedy show and the news media are as striking as the differences.

Both The Daily Show and the press generally, for instance, had the same No. 1 topic for the year, U.S. Foreign Affairs, a category dominated by the war in Iraq. It made up 17% of the time on The Daily Show and 19% in the press overall. Politics, particularly the race for president, was the No. 2 topic in both as well, though it garnered an even larger share in The Daily Show (16% vs. 12%).

³ Pew Research Center for the People & the Press, "Public Knowledge of Current Affairs Little Changed by News and Information Revolutions: What Americans Know: 1989-2007." April 15, 2007. Available at: <http://people-press.org/reports/display.php3?ReportID=319>

⁴ "Well-informed audiences come from cable (Daily Show/Colbert Report, O'Reilly Factor), the internet (especially major newspaper websites), broadcast TV (NewsHour with Jim Lehrer) and radio (NPR, Rush Limbaugh's program)."

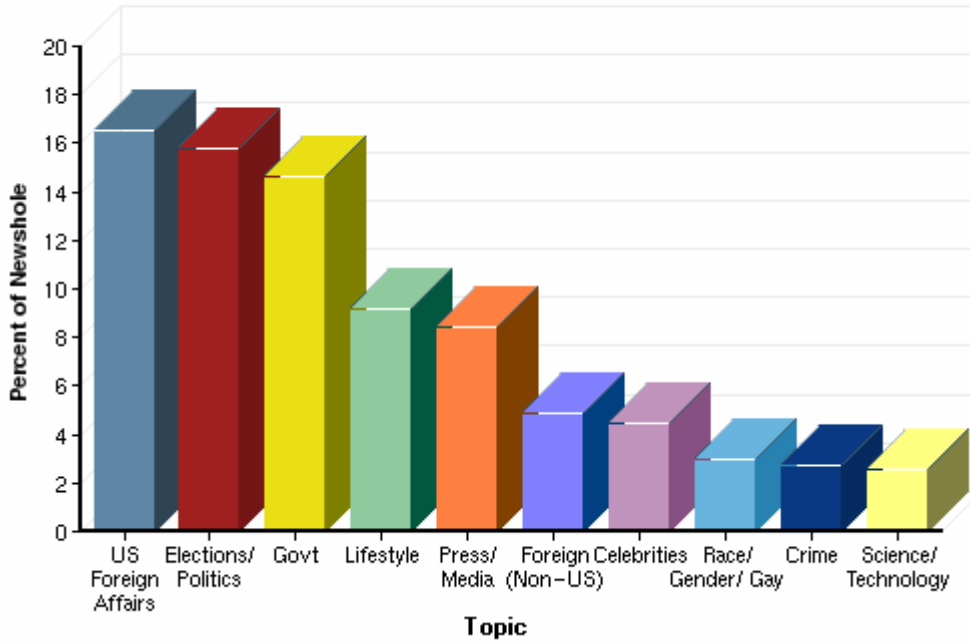
⁵ Average total viewers, 2008 year to date. Viewership data provided by Comedy Central, April 29 2008

⁶ Source: Nielsen Media Research analysis at MediaBistro.com. Available at: [http://www.mediabistro.com/tvnewser/original/1Q'08%20\(LIVESD\)%20FINAL%20P2%20Cable%20News%20Program%20Ranker.pdf](http://www.mediabistro.com/tvnewser/original/1Q'08%20(LIVESD)%20FINAL%20P2%20Cable%20News%20Program%20Ranker.pdf)

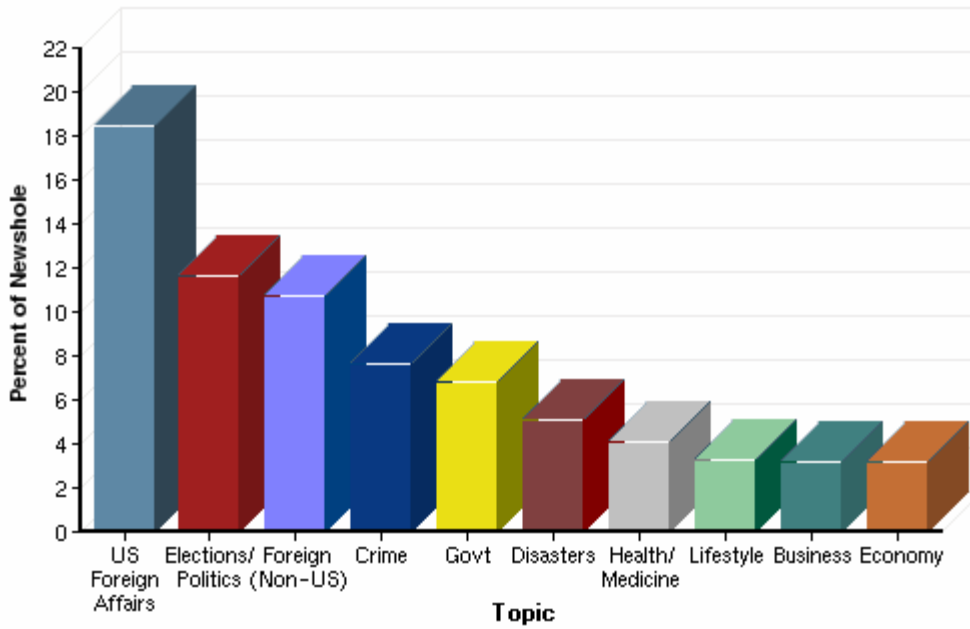
⁷ Once in a while guests appear for two separate segments: the second as well as the third. This is most frequently true for the most prominent figures, such as Presidential front-runners etc. Also, in one instance in 2007, a guest interview (with Ali Allawi on April 18) was aired as third and second to last story. A report on the falling stock market was the last story.

And in both the mainstream press and The Daily Show, the top three topic areas commanded the lion's share of time—47% on The Daily Show and 40% in the press.

Top 10 Topics in the Daily Show



Top 10 Topics in the Mainstream Press



But the news agenda soon begins to diverge. The Daily Show is more focused on political matters and is more Washington oriented than the press overall.

The Daily Show’s No. 3 subject matter was government (15% of time), whereas that topic ranked only 5th in the press overall (at 7% of newshole). The Daily Show was also more interested in lifestyle news, celebrities, and talking about the media itself.

In contrast, the mainstream news media are more focused on such matters as foreign events not associated with the United States, crime, disasters, health, business and the economy.

And in general, it is probably fair to say that the purview of the comedy show is more limited. The top six topics on The Daily Show, for instance, made up 69% of all the time. The top six topics in the media generally filled 60% of its newshole.

One can see this narrow focus comes even more clearly by looking not at the broad topics covered but more specifically on the exact stories. As an example, the presidential campaign and the policy debate about the war in Iraq, together added up to a quarter of the time spent on The Daily Show (26%) for the year.⁸ This was significantly more than in the mainstream press, where the two stories commanded 18% of the newshole studied during the same time period.

Rank	Story	% of newshole
1	2008 Campaign	15%
2	Debate over Iraq Policy	11
3	Events in Iraq	3
4	Fired U.S. Attorneys	3
5	Global Warming	2
6	Immigration	2
7	Domestic Terrorism	2
8	CIA Leak Investigation	1
9	Vice President Cheney Controversies	1
10	Iran	1

To illustrate that more limited range, it is helpful to note the subjects that The Daily Show de-emphasized—or completely ignored—in 2007. As Stewart described it to the host of PBS’ Bill Moyers’ Journal, “we feel no obligation to follow the news cycle...because...we're not journalists.”⁹

Looking at what topics the show does and does not discuss also provides insight into editorial limitations on a program that relies so heavily on satire and comedy. While politicians and celebrities are easy to lampoon, such an approach is often out of bounds when it comes to tragedies and disasters. The August 2 bridge collapse in Minneapolis that killed 13 people accounted for 55% of the mainstream media’s coverage that day. It was not once mentioned on The Daily Show.

And the single largest story for any given week in 2007—the Virginia Tech killings—was all but absent from The Daily Show.

⁸ Even though the stories about the debate over war policy in Iraq took place in Washington D.C., many of those segments were coded as “foreign affairs” because of their broad topic.

⁹ Bill Moyers’ Journal, PBS. April 27, 2007. Transcript available at <http://www.pbs.org/moyers/journal/04272007/transcript1.html>

On April 16, the evening of the shootings, Stewart began his broadcast by stating that the show was not going to focus on the incident because of the desire to keep things light and funny. Stewart began, “Obviously for anybody who has been tuned to the television today, a horrible, horrible day. I have absolutely nothing to add that is insightful or anything. I will just do what I always do when faced with something that is that powerfully damaging to the emotional core: I will begin to repress it, and I will swallow it. And I imagine that thirty years from now someone will spill juice and I will freak the f*** out. So to that end, let’s move on as though the world is ok.”

<http://www.thedailyshow.com/video/index.jhtml?videoId=85393&title=todays-real-news>

In that broadcast Stewart doesn’t once refer to the incident itself by name.

Indeed, on many occasions, the top story in the national news media was quite different from the leading content on The Daily Show. On January 15, for instance, most mainstream news shows led with the story of severe weather and ice storms causing havoc across much of the nation. Stewart began his show by pondering what drink would be best to wash down a Jimmy Dean pancake and sausage on a stick. “On a stick, of course, because anybody eating chocolate chip pancakes and sausage is clearly on the go,” Stewart joked. (He decided on Gatorade A.M.).

<http://www.thedailyshow.com/video/index.jhtml?videoId=80824&title=pantry-of-fame-gatorade-am>

The Object of Sometimes Cutting Satire

Beyond what gets covered, perhaps a more precise sense of the nature of The Daily Show as an information source comes from looking at how subjects are treated. Everyone in the news media covered the fact that the presidential campaign began so early in 2007. But rather than a chance to dash off to the races, for Stewart and company it was a chance to poke fun at a candidate’s dubious choice of campaign slogan rather than speculating on her electoral chances.

A year before the Iowa primary, for example, Hillary Clinton was already touting the slogan ‘Let the Conversation Begin.’ Stewart certainly did. On January 29 he started a conversation about her conversation. “Look, this might not be the most politically correct thing to say, but I don’t think that slogan’s gonna help you with men...I think the typical response will be, ‘Now?’ You might as well get on your campaign bus, the I-Think-We-Really-Need-To-Talk Express to unveil your new Iraq policy, ‘America, let’s pull over and just ask for directions.’”

<http://www.thedailyshow.com/video/index.jhtml?videoId=81462&title=let-the-conversation-begin>

When it came to the debate over Iraq, the show often homed in on party-line bickering or what were perceived to be public gaffes.

A segment on January 22, for example, ridiculed President Bush’s suggestion that in the ongoing war in Iraq, the American public has sacrificed a great deal: namely “peace of mind when they see terrible images of violence on TV every night.”

The Daily Show's Jason Jones: "It's pretty rough. I mean, I can tell you my family has been through a lot in this war. I don't know if you know this. But we were a Gold Star family. That was the brand of TV we had. Seventy-two inches worth of heartache, Jon. I remember it like it was yesterday. It was two days ago. It was 1800 hours...We were slowly making our way towards ESPN when suddenly, two clicks north of Bravo, from out of nowhere...from outta nowhere we see Charlie. Rose. He was talking to some guy about Iraq. And, it seemed like a drag."

An incredulous Stewart: "So? What happened?"

Jones: "We just flipped over and watched University of Wisconsin beat Illinois. That's right. You know, it was a really good game but man! Man, that Iraq story just bummed us out for a couple of seconds there."

<http://www.thedailyshow.com/video/index.jhtml?videoId=81097&title=sacrifice>

Some of the sharper satire suggests a clear point of view. Perhaps the most dominant recurring theme through the year was The Daily Show's criticism of the Bush Administration policy in Iraq. That criticism often came in language too raw for the news media to ever use.

On July 19, Stewart talked about a National Intelligence Estimate report that said Al Qaeda was resurgent and had found a safe haven in Pakistan. He wondered, "How could [the Administration] deny it was the removal of our troops from Afghanistan to go to Iraq that caused the chaos allowing al Qaeda to come back in the first place?" Then viewers see a clip of Frances Townsend, Homeland Security Advisor, responding to a question from Diane Sawyer about whether there are more Al Qaeda in Iraq today than there were before American troops went in. Townsend replies, "It's difficult to say because...I...I...I...there's no baseline by which I can judge the numbers."

"Aha! So that's how they can deny it!" exclaimed Stewart, feigning sudden enlightenment. "They could play retarded. How could we know how much Al Qaeda was in Iraq before the invasion when we didn't know sh** about Iraq when we went in? This wasn't an invasion. It was a fact-finding mission. Hey! Did you know they're Muslim?"

<http://www.thedailyshow.com/video/index.jhtml?videoId=90161&title=return-of-the-jihad>

Questions about the acuity of Administration thinking was a recurring theme. On June 13, Daily Show "correspondent" Aasif Mandvi picked on the Administration's new strategy to arm the Sunnis. As a senior Iraq "correspondent," he witnessed a U.S official handing weapons to a Sunni insurgent. Mandvi reported that he saw the man give his word that he would only use weapons to attack Al Qaeda. "We gave him the guns which he swore he'd use to fight Al Qaeda. I saw him put his hand on the Bible."

"The Bible? The Christian Bible?" asked an incredulous Stewart. It took a while for enlightenment to dawn on Mandvi. "Awh! Son of a b***h!" he exclaimed. "But what're you gonna do?"

<http://www.thedailyshow.com/video/index.jhtml?videoId=87973&title=re-bombing>

Amid the satire, there are elements to The Daily Show that might strike many viewers as journalistic in nature. High among these is the program's use of video—including

sometimes impressive culling of archival footage—to contrast or puncture wavering rhetoric of politicians.

On August 15, the show unearthed a 1994 clip of Vice President Cheney voicing opposition to a U.S. invasion of Iraq.

Viewers saw the clip of Cheney telling a reporter, “Once you got to Iraq and took it over, took down Saddam Hussein’s government, then what’re you going to put in its place?”

Then Stewart responded, “. . . 1994 Cheney makes an interesting point. If you take down Saddam’s regime, what *would* you put in its place? It’s the sort of question you could ponder for, say, nine years and still not come up with an answer.”

<http://www.thedailyshow.com/video/index.jhtml?videoId=91612&title=even-dick-dont-know-dick>

In 2007, the show also sent someone to Iraq, one of its “correspondents,” former Marine Corps reservist Rob Riggle, to Iraq. The purpose was comedic, but the fact that Riggle was actually in Iraq created a sense of something more, a comedy with a sharper edge or a not simply amusing point. In his satellite feeds from Iraq, Riggle’s favorite topic of satire was the way military operations in Iraq were named. In keeping with this joke, Riggle gave over-the-top monikers to his own segment, first calling it “Operation Silent Thunder.” The subtext, more than just a joke, was about the use of political language and military spin.

Making Fun of the Press

Often Stewart and The Daily Show are praised for their criticism of the press itself. “The Daily Show with Jon Stewart offers the best media criticism on television,” wrote Andrew Cline of Missouri State University.¹⁰

How much is the media itself a subject? In 2007, the media was the direct subject in 8% of the content on the program. That is more than twice as much as in the mainstream press (3%). But it may be less than some might have imagined.

Much of the apparent criticism of the press comes in the way The Daily Show talks about the news and in the use of clips, rather than in direct commentary about the media per se. It is, in effect, press criticism by comparison.

Nonetheless, there are times when Stewart and company take the press straight on.

At times, the focus is on individual journalists. On June 6, Stewart aired clips of Wolf Blitzer preparing for one of the Republican debates. Here, Blitzer took his viewers on a trip of “what you can expect.” He tells the audience how the candidates will enter the stage and that there was water available for them. Introducing the clips, Stewart joked, “Here we are almost 18 months before the general election and already CNN has run out of pre-debate filler material.”

¹⁰ Available at: <http://rhetorica.net/archives/002736.html>

<http://www.thedailyshow.com/video/index.jhtml?videoId=88121&title=gop-debates-round-3>

Sometimes, the criticism is downright blunt. During an October 2 guest appearance by MSNBC host Chris Matthews about his book “Life’s a Campaign,” Matthews invited Stewart to Hardball. Stewart responds, “You know what? Can I say this? I don’t troll.”

An outraged Matthews responds, “You are unbelievable! You...This is a book interview from hell. This is the worst interview I’ve had in my life! ...You are the worst!”

At other times, The Daily Show’s humor takes a broader swipe at the media overall. During the intense cable coverage of the death of former model Anna Nicole Smith, Stewart found plenty of fuel.¹¹ “On Thursday,” joked Stewart, “... The media unleashed a full scale coverage orgy with CNN, at one point, going 90 minutes without a commercial making the death of Anna Nicole Smith a more significant news event than a State of the Union address and slightly less than 9/11.”

<http://www.thedailyshow.com/video/index.jhtml?videoId=82077&title=remembering-anna>

Later Stewart added, “There were also a slew of on-site investigative reports from locales as diverse as the front of the strip club where she met her billionaire husband to a picture of her possible Death Fridge...All to find out how a woman who appeared to be in a perpetual downward spiral somehow spiraled downward.”

<http://www.thedailyshow.com/video/index.jhtml?videoId=82068&title=death-of-a-person>

Addressing perhaps the most tragic story of the year—the killings at Virginia Tech—Stewart again focused not on the event but on the press reaction to it. Ten days after the event, Stewart offered a commentary on the coverage. “You know there’s been a lot of debate about how to cover the Virginia Tech killings,” Stewart noted. “Indeed, even over here, we’re torn between addressing it or, my preference, sitting in a corner, and rocking back and forth and weeping. But the rest of the media had so many questions: What went into the mind of this killer? Could this have been prevented and, perhaps most pressing, how did *we* do?” After showing various clips of other television broadcasts which ended when one Fox News reporter commented: “Shepard Smith of Fox, probably, was the most credible when he asked the students, ‘how are you feeling?’ he seemed to really mean it,” Stewart responded, “...Is that the journalistic standard we have in this country? Hey! We almost mean it when we ask how you’re doing. We almost seem human. Which is really ironic because most of us are f***ing sociopaths!”

<http://www.thedailyshow.com/video/index.jhtml?videoId=85992&title=blame-game>

Attacking Politicians: Who Gets Ridiculed?

With so much focus on government and political figures, the next obvious question is which ones? Are some people—or some political parties—considered better targets for ridicule than others?

¹¹ Cable TV news in particular obsessed over the circumstances surrounding her death, devoting nearly a quarter (22%) of cable news airtime to Smith in the 3 weeks following her death.

PEJ examined the question two different ways. First, we identified the main figures being talked about (the lead newsmakers) in the show’s segments (including the monologues, skits and interviews) from July 1¹² through November 1, 2007 (when the writer’s strike began). Second, we looked more specifically at the line-up of on-air guests throughout the year.

The short answer, according to these measurements, is that in 2007 the light shone brighter on Republicans. They were more often the targets of Stewart’s humor. In the mix of on-air guests, Democrats and Republicans appeared in near equal numbers. But a more qualitative impression suggests that those Republican guests are far more likely to be challenged by the host.

Newsmakers in The Daily Show: Subjects of the Humor

First, consider who was placed under the show’s microscope most often. In the time frame examined, members of the Bush Administration were the focus of discussion in 22% of the segments (52 segments in all).

Add in people beyond the Administration, and Republicans dominate even more. Of the top 17 party-aligned newsmakers dealt with in the segments during the year, 12 were Republicans versus just 5 Democrats.¹³

Lead Newsmakers on The Daily Show July 1 – November 1, 2007	
Lead Newsmaker	No. of stories
George Bush (R)	14
Dick Cheney (R)	10
Karl Rove (R)	7
Larry Craig (R)	5
Hillary Clinton (D)	4
David Petraeus (R)	4
Tony Snow (R)	4
Bob Allen (R)	3
Bill Clinton (D)	3
Alberto Gonzales (R)	3
John McCain (R)	3
The Romney Family (R)	3
Michael Vick	3
Mahmoud Ahmadinejad	2
Alistair Campbell	2

More than three times as many segments found humor at the expense of President Bush (14) than the top Democratic newsmaker, Hillary Clinton (4). Even Dick Cheney was the focus of more than twice as many segments as Clinton (10 versus 4) and Karl Rove nearly twice as many (7 stories in all). In fact, the only clearly aligned Democrats in the top fifteen newsmakers were Hillary and Bill Clinton (Next is Wesley Clark at No. 16).

On many occasions, the humor aimed at these officials was quite personal. Throughout 2007, for example, Stewart aired a recurring segment called “You Don’t Know Dick” which focused on Vice President Dick Cheney.

The June 28 episode ended with the following quip from Stewart: “For some reason Cheney actually invented his own fake classification, ‘Treated as Secret/ SCI.’ Because apparently, the government’s own classification, ‘Top Secret’ and ‘Classified’ don’t sound appropriately Blofeldian. The best part is Cheney uses the stamp on things like political

¹² The lead newsmaker variable was introduced into the coding protocol from July 1, 2007 and so only stories from that date were coded for that variable.

¹³ There were a few rare instances where the lead newsmaker of the segments was not the subject of critical humor. In an interview with Lynne Cheney, for example, she and Stewart discussed her book, “Blue Skies, No Fences: A Memoir of Childhood and Family.” In this instance, she was the lead newsmaker but instead of becoming the focus of Stewart’s comedic barbs, she was a partner in the conversation.

talking points for staff members who are going to deal with reporters. In others words, stuff he wants the public to know. Which, I am not sure he understands, is the opposite of secret.” <http://www.thedailyshow.com/video/index.jhtml?videoId=89317&title=you-dont-know-dicklogo>

Fewer segments focused on Democrats, but when their number did come up, the punch could be just as strong.

Take, for example, the new Democratic-led Congress which Stewart ridiculed for its overly ambitious agenda. He joked on January 10, “Last week, after twelve years out of power, House Democrats took over with a full agenda: Raise the minimum wage! Lower Medicare costs! Fund stem-cell research! Resolve the Iraq War! Federal grants for monkeys washing cats! It’s a heady agenda. And last Thursday Nancy Pelosi, in her first speech as House Speaker, upped the ambition ante.”

[Clip of Nancy Pelosi speaking] “This new Congress doesn’t have two years, or two hundred days. Let us join together in the first one hundred hours and make this the Congress the most honest and open Congress in history. One hundred hours.”

“The Democrats are giving themselves only 100 hours to solve American’s problems,” retorted Stewart. “Now, you may say, ‘Wait! Wasn’t that speech given last Thursday, over 140 hours ago? And we still have ****ing problems?’ Touché, my friend: well observed.” <http://www.thedailyshow.com/video/index.jhtml?videoId=80696&title=daily-show-meet-the-clockers>

On-Air Guest Interviews

In the second way of analyzing party-line differences—the guest lineup—the picture was more balanced, at least quantitatively.

In 2007, 136 different guests¹⁴ (some appeared twice in the year) appeared. Of those, 41 were celebrities or guests from the world of pop culture, 33 were politicians and pundits with well known political leanings, and 57 were either journalists, experts, authors, or politicians whose political ideologies were difficult to pin down¹⁵.

Of the guests who have a clear political leaning, 15 had ties to the political right and 18 to the left.

Yet the numbers alone may not capture the full flavor. A close, albeit more subjective, examination of the interviews with those guests suggests the balance may not be quite so even. On a number of occasions, Stewart seems to challenge his conservative guests more harshly than those with liberal viewpoints.

¹⁴ Shows for June 25 and October 18 were not captured or coded; guests for these dates were not part of our sample.

¹⁵ For a guest to be placed in either the conservative or liberal column, she/ he must have demonstrated obvious political leanings. For example, Chuck Schumer, a Democratic Senator, would fall into the liberal group. And press figures such as noted conservative media personality, Bill Kristol, were marked as conservative. A number of politicians, celebrities or press pundits may have political opinions that lean toward one side or the other, but for the purposes of this study, only the most obvious of political activists were classified with an ideology.

Take, for example, Stewart's interview with conservative author Stephen Hayes.

The Daily Show	
Guests With Clear Conservative or Liberal Leanings	
Conservative ¹⁶	Liberal
Andy Card	Al Gore
Bill Kristol	Barack Obama
Brink Lindsey	Bill Bradley
Christopher Horner	Bill Clinton
Jed Babbin	Bill Richardson
John Bolton	Chuck Schumer
John McCain (twice)	Chris Dodd
Lynne Cheney	Jack Goldsmith
Margaret Spellings	Joe Biden (twice)
Michael Barone	John Kerry
Michael Gerson	Josh Rushing
Mike Huckabee	Michael Moore
Scott McClellan	Ralph Nader
Stephen Hayes	Robert Shrum
Tony Snow	Terry McAuliffe
	Valerie Plame
	Wesley Clark
	Zbigniew Brzezinski

Hayes appeared on August 15, soon after the release of his biography on Dick Cheney. This biography was very sympathetic towards the Vice President, painting him as a leader who was always quiet, powerful and dedicated to strengthening the Executive Branch. Hayes' Daily Show interview began amicably enough but then became much more heated as the discussion turned to the Administration's strategy in Iraq. At one point, Hayes stated that Cheney does not like admitting to mistakes, but did admit that the White House underestimated how difficult Iraq would be, and criticized the way post-war Iraq had been handled. Stewart replied strongly, "Then stop making the rest of us feel like idiots when we question their strategy on the war on terror and stop making—and I don't mean you, I mean

them—I think that they've gone, they've seemingly gone out of their way to belittle people and he's actually literally come out and said if you don't elect us, we might get hit again. That to me is—I can't give the portrait you paint of the steadfast leader with the fearmongering, not bright guy that I've seen."

<http://www.thedailyshow.com/video/index.jhtml?videoId=91550&title=stephen-f.-hayes>

Earlier, on March 7, another Republican, former U.N. Ambassador John Bolton came on as a guest on The Daily Show. The interview became heated as it progressed into differing definitions of democratic theory and the power of the executive branch. Bolton argued that threats to democratic theory come from people in government who try to put constraints on what the President can do by having advocates within the government. "But aren't those called checks and balances?" Stewart countered. "Here's what I imagine is a threat to what I would consider is democratic theory," he continued. "The secrecy of what they do and their inability to share. Because...you may be right...but why not then just come out and say that? Why the games? Why, when you go after and you out a C.I.A. agent, why not just and say, 'she was the person who sent Joe Wilson. He was wrong and all I did was tell newspaper reporters that fact.' Why then pretend, 'no, we didn't say that. We had nothing to do with it.'

¹⁶ This does not include comedian Dennis Miller and Republican politician Ron Paul, both of whom could be classified as conservatives in certain circumstances. In this study, Dennis Miller was classified as a celebrity even though he has voiced his conservative political opinions on many outlets, and Ron Paul was placed in the group with politicians whose ideologies were difficult to identify. Paul, an avowed Libertarian and member of the Republican Party, has views that could be considered conservative on some issues and liberal on others (such as the Iraq War).

Man up and come out and say these people have to be sympathetic to the President. Why lie about it?"

<http://www.thedailyshow.com/video/index.jhtml?videoId=84011&title=john-bolton>

When it came to liberal filmmaker Michael Moore, however, Stewart was much more convivial. During Moore's appearance on June 27, they both joked about the comedic nature of Moore's movie, "Sicko," about the U.S. healthcare system. Moore then declared, "Actually, yeah, it's pretty tragic." Stewart encouraged Moore to talk more about the film but never challenged Moore's theories. As Moore turned to his getting bumped off Larry King Live because of news about Paris Hilton, the sense of camaraderie continued. "But then I thought about it and I figured," Moore reasoned sarcastically, "you know...you know, the priorities are in order. Paris Hilton, healthcare for all...you know..." Stewart sympathetically replied, "I think if she's ok, aren't we all ok." Moore agreed, playing on the same joke. "She is our proxy..." Stewart continued, "In many respects, she is the canary in our coal mine."

What explains these differences? Why do Republicans find themselves more a topic of ridicule than Democrats? We cannot answer that definitively here, but can suggest some possibilities.

One explanation is that the show's writers and producers and Stewart himself are simply liberal, and in the course of offering their comedy are also offering their own political views.

Another possibility is that the agenda is fundamentally more anti-establishment than anti-Republican. The party that controls the White House has the preponderance of power, and thus gets the preponderance of the satirical skewer. Past research has suggested that in the mainstream press coverage, the party in control of government tends to be put through greater scrutiny than the minority party.¹⁷ And, comedy, to an even greater degree than traditional news coverage, is often about questioning authority. This is the argument, or the defense, that at least one of the show's executives has offered. As recently as April 30, the show's senior associate producer Adam Chodikoff explained in a Washington Post story, "The show is anti-Establishment. Bush happens to be the president. He's the one in power."¹⁸

To assess whether this second explanation would hold true, it would be interesting to examine how the show differed if a Democrat were to win the Oval Office.

The Daily Show is NOT a News Show

Jon Stewart and the writers of The Daily Show frequently claim that their show is not a news show and should not be considered journalism. In the April interview with Moyers, Stewart denied that his show is made up of reporting and is instead, "a group of people that really feel that they want to write jokes about the absurdity that we see in government and the world and all that, and that's it."

¹⁷ David Niven, "Tilt?: The Search for Media Bias" Praeger Publishers. 2002

¹⁸ Paul Farhi, "It's Funny How Funny Just the Facts can Be," Washington Post, April 30, 2008, C1.

Certainly, the focus here is humor and the content, while related to current events and people, is not meant to be a rendering of the day's events—and in many cases is not a factual account of events at all.

Take, for example, a joke about an appearance before Congress by Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice on January 15. After introducing the segment, the show aired clips of people blasting the Administration and its Iraq Policy. The bulk was clips from actual Democratic senators but also in the mix was a clip from the movie *The Breakfast Club*. It ended with Gene Wilder as the character of Willy Wonka yelling, "You get nothing! You lose! Good day, sir!" Added Stewart, "I don't think I have seen Senator Wonka that mad." <http://www.thedailyshow.com/video/index.jhtml?videoId=80819&title=strangers-with-condoleezza>

Viewers who rely on *The Daily Show* as a source of information must already know enough about the story and the pop culture reference to get the joke.

Another basic way *The Daily Show* differs from traditional news programs is in the production cycle. *The Daily Show* airs four days a week (Monday through Thursday) and is prone to taking weeks off for regular sabbaticals where repeats are aired.

Because of this schedule, *The Daily Show* can find itself off the air when major events occur. For example, one news story that seemed ripe for comic coverage was the arrest of Senator Larry Craig for suspicion of lewd conduct in an airport bathroom. When the story broke on August 27, *The Daily Show* was on sabbatical. Stewart and company had to wait two weeks to comment on the scandal.

And as they often do with their self-reflexive brand of comedy, when they returned to the air, Stewart focused on the fact that his show was unable to attack the story as soon as it happened. "We are back, baby, from a two week break!" Stewart sarcastically announced. "Man! It was such a great break. And thank God that while we were on break we didn't miss any inherently funny scandals...The first day! Senator Craig! He gets busted with the gay sex thing? It was my first day of vacation!"

Stewart then added that he wasn't sad that he didn't have the Larry Craig story to cover in real time, "because, I'll tell you why, [it] didn't feel like a *Daily Show* story to me. [Holds hand to ear as if listening to transmission in ear piece] Wait, I'm sorry, I'm being told it's the only reason this show exists."

<http://www.thedailyshow.com/video/index.jhtml?videoId=102517&title=trapped-in-the-mens-room>

Like A Cable Talk Show

In some ways, the media sectors *The Daily Show* has most in common with are cable and radio talk. They each have a similar emphasis on government and politics: 31% on newshole in *The Daily Show*, 35% in radio talk shows and 30% in cable talk shows versus 18% in news programs overall.

These genres also spend more time than the others on analysis of the work of the press. Eight percent of The Daily Show's coverage was devoted to discussing the press, as was 6% of all cable talk show coverage. In talk radio, this coverage was even higher, at 16%.

Even the way Stewart describes his mission fits somewhat with the mantra of talk programs. In talking with Bill Moyers, Stewart likened his show less to a product of journalism and more to an editorial cartoon that helps people to "digest" the day's events. If it does anything, he said, it helps "provide one little bit of context, that's very specifically focused, and hopefully people can add to their entire puzzle that gives them a larger picture of what it is that they see."

Agenda and model notwithstanding, The Daily Show is clearly impacting American dialogue. The audience numbers are significant, and its hold over a particular audience demographic of young people may magnify that influence even more. The reasons for that hold may vary. It could be that the show's anti-Administration perspective has struck a chord. Perhaps the impact comes in part from the fact that the political right has found an alternative ideological media in talk radio. The Daily Show, in effect, constitutes yet another kind of alternative media—cable comedy. Some of the show's sway as an information source could also come from language, and the sense that it is more candid, and thus somehow closer to one sense of accuracy than the more hidebound traditional media. "My students tell me they read the news for facts, but they watch Jon Stewart for the truth," Professor Steve Lacy of Michigan State University has observed.¹⁹ The Daily Show's sophisticated and often journalistic use of video to puncture the spin of the political may also connect to a deeper function that journalists are expected to serve—speaking truth to power, or at least unveiling deviations from the truth.

Whatever the elements, this brief examination makes at least some conclusions possible. In its subject matter, The Daily Show is indeed journalistic. Its topic agenda is highly focused on the public square, on issues of significance, particularly those focused around Washington. Its agenda is not dissimilar, indeed, from other cable talk shows. The language is even more blunt, and its point often more direct. The Daily Show is no doubt entertainment, but it is entertainment, measurably, with a substantive point. It is, in its own way, another kind of No Spin Zone.

¹⁹ Lacy made the observation in a meeting with PEJ staff in June 2007.

METHODOLOGY

PEJ's study of The Daily Show was conducted over the course of 2007. For this study we recorded every new Daily Show episode that aired during the year (136 in total) and compared the data with that of PEJ's weekly News Coverage Index (NCI).

PEJ's News Coverage Index is a study of the news agenda of 48 different outlets from five sectors of the media. The NCI is designed to provide news consumers, journalists and researchers with hard data about what stories and topics the media are covering, the trajectories of major stories and differences among news platforms.

Data was analyzed by Mahvish Shahid Khan and Paul Hitlin with help from Banu Akdenizli, Dana Page and Nancy Vogt.

Basis of measurement: The Newshole

In this study, as in the Weekly News Index, the basis of measurement is time spent on any story.²⁰ Thus for cable news, such as The Daily Show with Jon Stewart, we refer to the percent of total seconds that a certain story received. In other words, of all the seconds analyzed in cable news this week, ground events in Iraq accounted for xx% (or xx seconds out of a total of xxx). The industry term for this is "newshole"—the space given to news content.

What did we code?

The Daily Show with Jon Stewart airs Monday through Thursday at 11 pm E.S.T. There are no shows on Fridays, Saturdays or Sundays.

During the year, The Daily Show took many sabbatical breaks when reruns were aired. These reruns were not included in the study.

The first show coded was from January 7 since all shows before that date were reruns. The last show captured and coded was from November 1 since the program stopped airing new shows due to the writer's strike.

Shows from June 25, and October 18 could not be captured due to a technical difficulty and were not coded.

In order to make the data comparable, this study uses weekly index data from January 1 through November 1.

The opening statement with which Jon Stewart kicks off the show with highlights of what's coming up, was not coded in this analysis. Similarly, the segment in which Stewart checks in with Stephen Colbert was treated as a preview for the Colbert Report and was not coded.

²⁰ Since the Weekly News Coverage Index consists of both print and broadcast media, the basis of measurement depends on the medium. For broadcast and cable, time is the unit of measurement. For print and online media, the unit of measurement is number of words.

Other segments, such as banter that lasted less than sixty seconds, and the Moment of Zen were not coded. The latter was treated as a story that occurred after the show had ended and was not analyzed as a part of the show.

Method of coding:

In the coding phase of this study, the rules adopted were the same as those for the weekly news index. Each episode was treated in the same way any television broadcast show would be in the NCI.

A coding protocol was designed for this project based on PEJ's previous related studies. Nineteen variables are coded, including coder ID, date coded, story ID number (these three are generated from the coding software automatically), story date, source, broadcast start time, broadcast story start timecode, headline, story word count, placement/prominence, story format, story describer, big story, sub-storyline, geographic focus, broad story topic, lead newsmaker, broadcast story ending timecode, and campaign mention.

The source variable includes all the media outlets we code. The variable for broadcast start time applies to radio and TV broadcast news and gives the starting time of the program in which the story appears. Broadcast story start timecode is the time at which a story begins after the start of the show, while broadcast story ending timecode is the time at which a story ends. The variable for headline identifies whether the story is part of a regular news round-up segment. The variable for story word count designates the word count of each individual print/online news story. The placement/prominence variable designates where stories are located within a publication, on a website, or within a broadcast. The location reflects the prominence given the stories by the journalists creating and editing the content. Story format measures the type and origin of the text-based and broadcast stories, which designates, at a basic level, whether the news story is a product of original reporting, or drawn from another news source. Story describer is a short description of the content of each story. Big stories are particular topics that occurred often in news media during the time period under study. Sub-storyline applies to stories that fit into some of the long-running big stories, reflecting specific aspects, features or narrower elements of some big stories. The variable for geographic focus refers to the geographic area to which the topic is relevant in relation to the location of the news source. The variable for the broad story topic identifies which of the type of broad topic categories is addressed by a story. The variable for lead newsmaker names the person or group who is the central focus of the story. The campaign mention variable identifies whether the story names any mention at all of a U.S. campaign or election.

The lead newsmaker variable was introduced into the coding protocol from July 1, 2007 and so only stories from that date were coded for that variable.

TOPLINE

Broad Story Topic (January 1 – November 1, 2007)

Topic	% of newshole	
	Daily Show	Mainstream Press ²¹
US Foreign Affairs	16.5%	18.5%
Elections/ Politics	15.8	11.6
Government	14.6	6.8
Lifestyle	9.2	3.3
Press/ Media	8.4	2.7
Foreign (non-U.S.)	4.9	10.7
Celebrity/ Entertainment	4.5	2.1
Race/ Gender/ Gay Issues	3.0	1.2
Crime	2.7	7.6
Science/ Technology	2.6	1.2
Additional Domestic Affairs	2.6	2.5
Environment	2.5	1.6
Sports	2.0	1.8
Religion	1.9	0.7
Health/ Medicine	1.7	4.1
Defense/ Military (Domestic)	1.5	2.6
Immigration	1.1	2.8
Domestic Terrorism	0.8	1.9
Economics	0.7	3.2
Education	0.7	1.0
Business	0.6	3.2
Court/ Legal System	0.6	0.4
Catastrophes/ Disasters	0.4	5.1
US Miscellaneous	0.3	2.7
Transportation	0.2	0.7
Development/ Sprawl	0.1	0.2
Total²²	99.9	100.2

Top 10 Stories (January 1 – November 1, 2007)

Rank	Story	% of newshole	
		Daily Show	Mainstream Press
1	2008 Campaign	14.6%	8.8%
2	Debate over Iraq Policy	10.7	8.9
3	Events in Iraq	3.4	6.3
4	Fired U.S. Attorneys	3.3	1.8
5	Global Warming	2.2	1.1
6	Immigration	1.9	3.1
7	Domestic Terrorism	1.6	1.8
8	CIA Leak Investigation	1.5	1.2
9	Vice President Cheney Controversies	1.2	0.1
10	Iran	1.2	2.5

²¹ Mainstream press refers to 48 media outlets. For full list refer to the methodology [LINK](#)

²² Totals may not equal 100% due to rounding

Top Lead Newsmakers (July 1 – November 1, 2007)²³

Rank	Newsmaker	No. of Stories
1	George Bush	14
2	Dick Cheney	10
3	Karl Rove	7
4	Larry Craig	5
5	Hillary Clinton	4
6	David Petraeus	4
7	Tony Snow	4
8	Bob Allen	3
9	Bill Clinton	3
10	Alberto Gonzales	3
11	John McCain	3
12	The Romney Family	3
13	Michael Vick	3
14	Mahmoud Ahmadinejad	2
15	Alistair Campbell	2

²³ In order to be a lead newsmaker, at least 50% of a story had to be about a person

Guests Interviewed

Pols and Pundits (with defined views)		Other	Celebrity/ Pop Culture
Conservative	Liberal		
Andy Card	Al Gore	Alan Brandt	Adam Sandler
Bill Kristol	Barack Obama	Alan Greenspan	Andy Samberg
Brink Lindsey	Bill Bradley	Alan Weissman	Angelina Jolie
Christopher Horner	Bill Clinton	Ali Allawi	Bruce Willis
Jed Babbin	Bill Richardson	Alistair Campbell	Christopher Walken
John Bolton	Chuck Schumer	Bill Gates	Claire Danes
John McCain (twice)	Chris Dodd	Bob Woodruff	David Steinberg
Lynne Cheney	Jack Goldsmith	Brian Williams	David Wright
Margaret Spellings	Joe Biden (twice)	Chris Hansen	Dennis Leary
Michael Barone	John Kerry	Chris Matthews	Dennis Miller*
Michael Gerson	Josh Rushing	Christopher Hitchens	Don Cheadle
Mike Huckabee	Michael Moore	Craig Newmark	Don Rickles
Scott McClellan	Ralph Nader	Douglas Farah	Eddie Izzard
Stephen Hayes	Robert Shrum	Evo Morales	Garry Shandling
Tony Snow	Terry McAuliffe	Fareed Zakaria	Halle Berry
	Valerie Plame	George Tenet	Jake Gyllenhaal (twice)
	Wesley Clark	Greg Bear	Jamie Foxx
	Zbigniew Brzezinski	Harry Frankfurt	Jeff Garlin
		Howard Kurtz	Jerry Rice
		Ishmael Beah	Jerry Seinfeld
		Jack Cafferty	Jodie Foster
		Jeffrey Rosen	John Amaechi
		Jeremy Paxman	John Mellencamp
		Jeremy Scahill	John Waters
		John Bowe	Josh Bernstein
		John Nagl	Louis C.K.
		Ken Burns	Matt Damon
		Kevin Robbins	Matt Groening
		Lee Gutkind	Meryl Streep
		Lewis Gordon Pugh	Mike Rowe
		Matt Cooper	Paul Rudd
		Meredith Vieira	Peter O'Toole
		Michael Beschloss	Richard Gere
		Michael Oren	Robin Wright Penn
		Neil deGrasse Tyson (twice)	Sandra Bullock
		Nikolas Kozloff	Sienna Miller
		Philip Zimbardo	Sig Hansen
		Pierre Rehov	Steve Carrell
		Reza Aslan	Tiki Barber
		Richard Jadick	Tobey Maguire
		Richard Preston	Wynton Marsalis
		Rob Gifford	
		Robert Dallek	
		Robert Draper	
		Robert Pallito	
		Ron Paul*	
		Rupert Smith	
		Sam Sheridan	
		Sharon Moalem	
		Stephen Prothero	
		Tal Ben-Shahar	
		Ted Koppel (twice)	
		Tim Russert	
		Vicente Fox	
		Walter Isaacson	
		Walter Scheib	
		Zaki Chehab	

* Ron Paul and Dennis Miller were not counted as liberal or conservative politicians or pundits. Ron Paul, because his views fall into each side of the political spectrum and Dennis Miller, because he started out as an entertainer, and, politics aside, he often appears on television as a comedian.

