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Entertainment News and Sensationalism

Through the last century, journalism and news media has undergone a number of changes. Originating with Yellow Journalism, sensationalism has become a steady part of traditional news outlets. As a result of this, and the issues that it has created in society, entertainment news has emerged with *Saturday Night Live*, *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*, and *The Colbert Report*. Though many call this outlet “fake” news, in reality these programs encourage participation of youth, provide legitimate news information, and point out hypocrisies in contemporary politics and news and should therefore be considered alternative legitimate news.

Yellow journalism originated with Pulitzer and Hearst in the late 19th century, and is characterized by catchy headlines, flashy imagery, and often inaccurate or exaggerated information. Caught in the heat of intense competition, Pulitzer’s paper, *The New York World*, and Hearst’s *New York Journal*, began over-dramatizing stories and increasing visual imagery to draw more interest. In this original feud lies the origin of modern news media sensationalism.

Pulitzer and Hearst’s battle for readers in the early 20th century has transformed the news industry eternally. “Information has become a commodity” (Amarasingam, 2011). As a result, the media today is not only a tool of democracy and a method of informing the public, but it is also an industry that profits on the sale and distribution of information. The big news corporations such as CNN, Fox

News, and MSNBC entice ratings through partisanship and heavily sensationalized 24-hour programming. Journalist Dannagal Young reflected on his own relationship with contemporary media, saying, “I started to see that my twenty-something cynicism toward media and politics was at least in part driven by institutional problems within the news: media and politics was at least in part driven by institutional problems within the news: Media deregulation of the ‘80s and ‘90s had increased pressure on the news industry to cut costs and maximize profits, thereby reducing investigative reporting and foreign coverage. The resulting pressures had also led to an emphasis on news that was overdramatic, hyper-personalized, fragmented, and supportive of the existing order” (Young, 2013).

Even in today’s climate, however, some claim that news should remain vital to a representative democracy. In sociologist Michael Schudson’s novel, Why Democracies Need an Unlovable Press, he argues several reasons that an impartial and accurate press could further democracy. These points he makes are flawed in reality, however, as a result of the news climate today. For instance, he says that the media informs the public (Schudson, 2008). The issue with this is that the news presented to the American public is “dominated by soft news, popular culture references, and moralistic fights on highly contrived events” (Amarasingam, 2011). The news that citizens receive is often inaccurate and biased in the interests of funding, partisanship, or marketability, and this can lead to corruption and misrepresentation. Researcher David Barker says that hosts of Conservative political talk shows “often engage in what Barker calls ‘propagandist techniques,’

which are intended to vilify the opposition” and resort to repetitive name calling to garner popular support (Baumgartner, 2008).

Another of Schudson’s claims is that the news keeps governments accountable. While this is true in the case of real, investigative journalism and some satirical news, specific ideologies and interests guide many networks and traditional news outlets. There are both left and right-leaning that play into party propaganda of topics rather than drawing necessary focus to corruption within the system.

He also makes the argument that news breaks down major events into something understandable and is critical for collective analysis, as well as “social empathy” (Schudson, 2008). Social empathy is otherwise described as human-interest stories, which are also critical to creating collective beliefs and desires in voters. These conditions are dependent upon a relatable press and communication between the media and the public. This is why Schudson also claims that journalism has a key role as a public forum, and is representative of the people and democracy, though not synonymous with democracy without the right conditions. He believes that through this public interaction, journalists can act as advocates and encourage mobilization (2008). Here, I believe, lies the solution. America is in desperate need for passionate journalists and news outlets, willing to present unpopular opinions and act as advocates for truth.

As a result of the issues presented by current media and the transition of information and political figures into commodities to be purchased by American consumers, a whole new type of communication and media has emerged—a potential solution—in the form of comedy and entertainment news. It began with

Saturday Night Live and “The Weekend Update,” a satirical news segment that drew attention to hypocrisies and humor in politics (Day and Thompson, 2012). Many comedy and entertainment news sources have sprung up since then, including popular television shows, *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*, *The Colbert Report* and more. These are entertainment programs, however they deal with legitimate public interest topics such as politics, environmental concerns, and scientific innovations. These programs are often labeled “fake” news, but should instead be considered *alternative journalism* (Baym, 2005).

In the field of Political Communication, this transition represents an important shift and the emergence of communication subfields beyond the widely recognized three theoretical areas of agenda setting, framing, and priming: Interpersonal communication, persuasion, information technology, media effects, and strategic communication (Holbert & Geidner, 2009). Holbert and Geidner outline these subfields and their relevance in the contemporary political environment.

The interpersonal connection is one that many candidates struggle to establish and maintain with voters, the face-to-face dialogue which is ideal for informed participants. Though the significance of this type of communication appears diminished in the modern technological world, these connections actually become even more important. This leads into the researchers’ second subfield, persuasion. “Connections made to Stewart by audience members also become important variables in the study of potential persuasive effects of *The Daily Show*. These variables would include parasocial relationships formed with Stewart, the

degree to which an audience member feels he/she is like Jon Stewart (i.e., similarity), and the degree to which someone wishes they could be like Jon Stewart” (Holbert & Geidner, 2009). This point will be further analyzed later on, but the interpersonal connection that Stewart establishes with his audience results in his influence over said audience.

Information communication technology refers to the use of technology such as Youtube to spread messages. These channels allow for a massive number and diversity of messages, along with the bonus of incredibly easy and widespread distribution. *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report* have more online viewership than any other late-night show (Young, 2013) and therefore enjoy the benefits of this communication technology. Multimedia also presents new possibilities due to the combination of communication forms (video, text, audio, etc) and the opportunity for interactivity (Holbert & Geidner, 2009). These features of new media have provided entertainment news personalities the ability to garner active participation from audience. Following these changes with technology, there is also the increased significance of “media effects.” *Saturday Night Live* is an example, which will be further discussed later, that shows media impact on popular opinion. *SNL* satirical skits about political figures were widely discussed, both by other entertainment programs and by major traditional news media outlets.

Finally, entertainment programs also employ the use of “strategic communication.” The impact of audience segmentation is incredibly influential in the spread of messages. These programs play a key role in integrating youth and the less politically informed into the public arena of politics and current affairs. Much of

the viewership of these shows is between ages 18 and 25 (Amarasingam 80). The demographics are wider than that, however. "With between 1.9 and 2.5 million viewers each night, plus the largest online viewership of all the late-night shows, Stewart and Colbert have the potential for significant reach and influence" (Young, 2013). More important than the entertainment news program's broad appeal and viewership, however, is how shows choose to use this popularity.

Stewart, Colbert, and the members of SNL's cast are primarily comedians, but Amarasingam also claims that they are, "*rhetorical critics*... who creatively guide audiences toward democratic possibilities" (2011). The humor of their programs is dependent upon irony, parody, and satire, and their content comes from the absurdities that they see in American society.

Saturday Night Live was one of the original sources of entertainment news and political content, dating back to 1975. This content is presented in a unique way, however. "Though *Saturday Night Live*'s "Weekend Update" has become one of the most iconic of fake news programs, it is remarkably unfocused on either satiric critique or parody of particular new conventions. Instead, the segment has been shaped by a series of host who made a name for themselves by developing distinctive comic personalities" (Day and Thompson, 2012). Some of these distinctive characters were less intentional than others. During the 2008 presidential election, an uncanny resemblance was noticed between actress and comedian, Tina Fey, and Vice Presidential candidate, Sarah Palin.

There were a total of six skits aired through the campaign, most of which parodied a speech or interview that Palin had participated in. Interestingly, the

audience for these skits far exceeded the audience for the actual network news programs. “The *SNL* skit was watched by 7.9 million viewers on television and viewed 11.1 million times on Hulu.com and NBC.com” (Flowers and Young, 2010). This skit was also broadly discussed on other entertainment news programs, as well as traditional news outlets. A CNN broadcaster said it was a “devastating impersonation of Sarah Palin” because “...you have Tina Fey literally taking the words out of Palin’s mouth and turning them into comedy” (Flowers and Young, 2010). As is a common theme with traditional media outlets, the humor was directly in the situation or politician and the comedy was simply pointing out these absurdities.

By the next skit, viewership had increased to 69.99 million viewers on ABC, CBS, NBC, Fox, CNN, Fox News, MSNBC, CNBC, BBC America, Telemundo, Telefutera, and PBS (Flowers and Young, 2010). With this third skit, *SNL*’s audience increased by 23% over the previous week. This impersonation critically impacted public opinion. In *The Washington Post* story entitled “Palin Takes on a New Foe: Her Image,” journalist Tom Shales suggested that the vice presidential candidate prepared for her debate by studying Tina Fey’s impression of her (Shales, 2008). Not only did this segment impact Palin’s candidacy, it also resulted in the highest *SNL* ratings in 14 years, simultaneously making and breaking Tina Fey’s and Sarah Palin’s careers. It is suggested by some sources that these skits resulted in McCain and Palin’s loss of the election.

“Using panel data of young adults surveyed in the late stages of the 2008 presidential campaign, we find that those who saw Tina Fey’s impersonation of Sarah Palin on *Saturday Night Live*’s skit of the vice-presidential debate displayed steeper declines in approval for Palin than those who saw debate

coverage through other means. Interestingly, this “Fey Effect” spilled over into vote intention, and was most pronounced among self-identified Republicans.” (Baumgartner, 2012).

This case study shows the significance of entertainment portrayals of politicians and the related impact on public opinion. This show also paved the way for new media comedy shows. “From the start, the show’s blend of political satire, social commentary, and outrageous humor impacted the lives of 30 million viewers per week and changed overall television content” (Reincheld, 2006). The “television content” which emerged as a result of *Saturday Night Live*’s innovations includes satirical news programs, *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report*.

The Daily Show with Jon Stewart and *The Colbert Report* are two of the most popular and potentially influential late-night programs of today. Amarasingam also points out that these sources often contribute more to the “type of deliberative discourse essential to genuine democracy and public policy” than other news outlets (2011). Not only is the information often accurate and informative, but also the programs are increasingly persuasive. Researchers Sternthall and Craig (1973) found that “humorous messages may lead to a reduction in counterargument and increase in persuasion. In addition, they speculated that humor may increase the likeability of the source” (Baumgartner, 2008).

As discussed earlier, the personas of Stewart and Colbert are also key to their authority. On his program, Stewart is the “common-sense observer” that delivers his material as a shocked reaction to the realities of society (Amarasingam, 2011). In Stewart is an every-man with genuine concern for the state of affairs in both United States politics and traditional news outlets. He is often viewed as an “unwilling

protagonist” (Grondin, 2012) in the battle against hypocrisy and corruption in the media and in politics, making him easily relatable to viewers. Colbert, on the other hand, parodies the “new brand of self-indulgent conservative news personalities” (Amarasingam, 2011). Colbert’s persona takes the opposite approach as Stewart’s, using deadpan sarcasm and mockery to critique the modern news personality. Colbert’s character is based on Fox News’ *The O’Reilly Factor* and its host Bill O’Reilly who Colbert jokingly refers to as “Papa Bear” (Baumgartner, 2008). His alter-ego is explained by Baumgartner:

“A central part of Colbert’s character, and thus the show’s comedic appeal, is his explicit rejection of the need for facts in engaging in political debate and assessing political arguments. This approach parodies the hyper-partisan tone of many political talk programs” (2008).

The celebrity of Stewart and Colbert is significant because it impacts the way in which audiences receive information from these sources. “Heuristics allow individuals to form attitudes and opinions without taking the trouble to study all aspects of an issue, such as when one adopts an opinion espoused by a trusted source...” (Amarasingam, 2011). In this case, Stewart and Colbert become this trusted source for viewers.

Stewart, though self-described as a comedian with no intention of being perceived as a legitimate journalist, ranked the fourth most admired journalist in the nation (Amarasingam, 2011). In an interview with Chris Wallace, he commented on this, stating, “The embarrassment is that I am given credibility in this world, because of the disappointment that the public has in what the [mainstream] news media does” (Fox Bias).

The *Daily Show* host made an appearance on the popular Fox political debate show, *Crossfire*, in October of 2004 with a plea for the hosts to “stop hurting America” (Grondin, 2012). During his brief but heated discussion with the show hosts, Stewart made powerful claims about the media impact on the American public. In one of his most sincere interviews, Jon Stewart claimed that Americans need help from their news media, and citizens are being misinformed and tricked instead. He told hosts, “...we need what you do. This is such a great opportunity you have here, to actually get politicians off of their marketing and strategy” (Crossfire). The primary aim of news media should be to inform the public, as honestly and accurately as possible. The second, arguably, should be to invoke action and participation. Stewart called the hosts “partisan hacks” due to a belief that they chose to ask questions that were popular with their respective parties and put on a show rather than forcing politicians to be accountable and therefore creating opportunities for political and societal transformation.

Crossfire featured plenty of contention, but it was primarily theatrical, similar to the spectacle created by professional wrestling. Soon after Stewart’s appearance, *Crossfire* was cancelled, after 23 years on the air. Jonathan Klein, the president of CNN, stated during the announcement, “I agree whole-heartedly with Jon Stewart” (Amarasingam, 2011). Many believed that Stewart’s criticisms were not only appropriate, but also timely and correct. The cancellation of the show illustrates the impact of Stewart’s popularity on public opinion and his ability to call out the traditional news outlets.

Colbert also has significant influence over popular opinion. The term “Colbert Bump” was coined by him to define the boost in popularity that guest achieve by appearing on his show. In 2009, Colbert used this influence to support the Olympic men’s speed-skating team, which was unfunded. His sponsorship drew \$200,000 in donations the first week and he was credited with “saving the Olympics” (Amarasingam, 2011).

Baumgartner also claims that *The Colbert Report* is unique from other entertainment news programs in its satire. Satire is a dual message, both the directly stated or explicit message, and the indirect message which is implied. This underlying message is what the receiver is intended to understand. The interesting feature of *The Colbert Report* is that, although his audience is primarily young liberals, almost all of his “criticisms” are aimed at liberal Democratic leaders and institutions (Baumgartner, 2008). This implies that viewers are getting the joke. The absurdity of Colbert’s hyper-Republican commentary demonstrates a need to occasionally stray from the “strict adherence to the party line.” Adam Sternbergh opens his essay for New York Magazine with, “The former Jon Stewart protégé created an entire comic persona out of right-wing doublespeak, trampling the boundary between parody and politics. Which makes him the perfect spokesman for a political season in which everything is imploding” (Sternbergh, 2006). Throughout the article, Sternbergh alludes that the only true absurdity is in the legitimate news and policy from which Colbert takes his material. After his first year, Colbert said:

“Language has always been important in politics, but language is incredibly important to the present political struggle, because if you can establish an atmosphere in which information doesn’t mean anything, then there is no objective reality. The first show we did, a year ago, was our thesis statement:

What you wish to be true is all that matters, regardless of the facts. Of course, at the time, we thought we were being farcical" (Sternbergh, 2006).

The role of these celebrities and their interaction with society is complex. Stewart was asked during his *Crossfire* interview which candidate in the upcoming presidential election would give him the best material for his show. In response, Stewart stated, "I don't really know, that's kind of not how we look at it. We look at the absurdity of the system, it provides us the best material" (Crossfire). His willingness to openly critique the structure of modern traditional news sources illuminates the meaning behind his satirical, tongue-in-cheek, television program. Both the programs themselves and the personalities that carry them influence public opinion and increase participation in politics. This role also discourages the elitist view of politics.

There are, of course, dissenting arguments as to the usefulness of entertainment news programs. One such argument is that there is inherent danger in emotional politics. First, they can be used to manipulate. This is why smear campaigns and name-calling are effective, as are appeals to emotion and patriotism. These feelings, along with humor, can skew messages. Young points out "On one level, this fear of emotional politics makes sense. History is full of extreme examples of what can go wrong when the masses are politically stirred through emotional appeals. Think Hitler, the KKK, the Salem witch trials" (Young, 2013). However Young also points out that there is incredible potential when individuals get emotional about politics. This is how suffrage, protests, and civil rights have come to pass.

Programs such as *The Daily Show* are also said to increase cynicism about politicians and America's political structure. Though this may be true, first of all, Stewart is also engaging young people in politics in a way they have not been involved before, which is still an improvement over a disinterested population. Second, after analysis of the contemporary news media and political structure, perhaps Americans should be cynical, and this attitude should encourage change.

Though traditional news media since Yellow journalism will always be a competitive and sensationalized industry, entertainment news programs such as *Saturday Night Live*, *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*, and *The Colbert Report* combat this societal norm by drawing attention to absurdities. Infotainment is increasing youth participation in politics and enhancing recognition of national issues.

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