No Laughing Matter: Political Satire and How the News Media Became a Joke

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Abstract

This study of satire that targets the news media is important for a number of reasons. Firstly, the news media and journalists ought to understand why their profession has become a popular target of ridicule. Satire is an expression of frustration. The fact that a growing audience watches and reads news-directed satire is confirmation of the fact that they share the satirists' frustrations with the way the news media cover politics. Volume after volume of media criticism in academic libraries across North America has exposed and dissected the shortcomings of contemporary political reportage and many have suggested ways to reform the profession, often beginning with a re-thinking or outright abandonment of the regime of objectivity. Popular satire has taken many of those criticisms out from academia into the mainstream. The laughter and loyalty of satirical news consumers is proof that reform is needed.

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Introduction

“To a young generation of Americans, Jon Stewart may as well be Walter Cronkite.”(1) *Reuters*’ Andrew Grossman made this bold, yet accurate, observation in a story describing a recent study by the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press. The study indicated that young people are increasingly turning away from traditional news media outlets for their presidential campaign information in favour of satirical sources, such as *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*.(2) It seems an ever-growing proportion of the young adult demographic in America prefers laughing at the conventions of the mainstream news media rather than consuming their journalistic products.

The principal objective of this thesis is to examine the causes and consequences of this growing trend. The prodigious emergence of political satire, which targets the mainstream news media, ought to be quite a troubling phenomenon for the practitioners of “real” journalism, who believe in the integrity and importance of their role in a liberal democratic society. This trend should be equally troubling for their corporate owners who have their eyes rigidly fixed on the bottom line. In this age of media fragmentation, particularly with the abundant possibilities and sources of information available on satellite, cable, and especially the Internet, enormous corporate mainstream news outlets no longer have a monopoly on the attention of the public. There is an abundance of choice available to anyone with access to a computer. This is even truer with regard to the educated young adult demographic, who grew up with the Internet, and are, therefore, more likely to explore its limits. Between satirical television shows and the endless possibilities of the Internet, which has an ever-increasing selection of satirical “news”

outlets, the young adult demographic (“by far the hardest to reach segment of the political news audience” and a favourite target of advertisers) is getting further and further out of the reach of the mainstream news media.(3)

It should be noted that this study is focused primarily on American politics and American political satire. There are several reasons for this decision. While Canada has a long tradition of satirizing politics, particularly on the CBC, with shows such as *This Hour has 22 Minutes*, *The Royal Canadian Air Farce*, *Double Exposure* and now *The Mercer Report*, it is politics and Canadian politicians that have more often been the targets of satirical ridicule, rather than individual journalists and the conventions of the news media. The primary interest of this study is to explore political satire which ridicules the conventions of the news media. In this regard, *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*, based both on its content and popularity, is the gold standard of contemporary political satire and the most prominent source discussed in this work. Another reason for this focus on American politics is the fact that many of the dysfunctional aspects of the press politician/relationship which will be discussed herein, including the dominance and ceaseless repetition of talking points, to name the most serious example, are more pronounced in the U.S. Canadian politicians certainly resort to talking points, but the practice has not become a source of satire.

Finally, American political satire resonates in Canada as well. When *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* was picked up by CTV, Global’s late night comedy host Mike Bullard sank like a stone in the ratings and was quickly cancelled. CTV has since picked up *Daily Show* alumnus Stephen Colbert’s show *The Colbert Report*. American politics

has an impact on this country and a growing number of Canadians are turning to political satire to find out what is happening in the U.S.

This study will also be confined to the time period between the 2000 election campaign that saw Republican George W. Bush face Democrat Al Gore and the 2004 presidential race, and its immediate aftermath, which saw Bush return for a second term in the White House. It was during this time period that political satire, and particularly *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*, became much more than a mere cult pleasure. The show's assault on the political realm, including the mainstream news media, struck a chord both with critics and audiences. This time period saw news-directed political satire rise to prominence and into the mainstream, bringing with it the sober analysis of media scholars.

The chapters will be laid out as follows: Chapter 1 will describe the political climate in the U.S. during the time period being studied. It will examine how a series of trends and conditions, including growing public mistrust of journalists and the news media, shrinking consumption of mainstream news products, and declining voter turnout rates, contributed to a climate that was ripe for a renaissance in political satire, one that targets the news media as well as politicians. It will also draw a clear distinction between late night humourists, such as David Letterman and Jay Leno, who direct most of their political jokes towards the character flaws of politicians, and political satirists, such as Jon Stewart, who direct much of their satirical wrath towards political journalists and their professional practices.

Chapter 2 will provide a short profile of *The Daily Show* and its host Jon Stewart, the most important figure in news-directed political satire. The chapter will examine the

sense of frustration which inspires his brand of media-directed satire, as well as a brief discussion of the format of the show and the tone and targets of its satirical jokes.

Chapter 3 will analyze specific segments from *The Daily Show* and will illustrate how its brand of satire has taken the criticisms of media scholars, particularly those concerning the shortcomings of the regime of objectivity, out of the salon and into the mainstream. The chapter will describe segments from the show which satirize how objective journalists fail to hold official sources accountable for the use of talking points or even outright lies; how political pundits pay no penalty for making absurd predictions or engaging in uncivilized arguments; and how political journalists are complicit in maintaining the illusions constructed by political image makers.

Chapter 4 will explore the potential consequences of news-directed political satire. Some scholars have given satirists considerable credit for transforming societies, institutions, and people that found themselves on the receiving end of their satirical wrath. The purpose of satire, according to Hugh C. Holman, is to use a “critical attitude with humor and wit to the end that human institutions or humanity may be improved.”(4) “The true satirist is conscious of the frailty of institutions of man’s devising and attempts through laughter not so much to tear them down as to inspire a remodeling.”(5) However, another school of academic thought claims the historical influence of satirists is less obvious. Satirists, they argue, are not responsible for transforming societies, because they are simply expressing views and criticisms that have already become widespread. This study will explain why the current renaissance of political satire falls into the latter category. The chapter will also discuss some early indications that the mainstream news

media are more inclined to co-opt political satire for economic gain rather than learn from the earnest criticisms that underlie its humour.

The conclusion will explore what the profession of journalism could learn from news-directed satirists and suggest some very modest proposals for reform. The most important involves a long-overdue rethinking of the regime of objectivity and specifically, how its principles (fairness, neutrality, balance) are applied in practice. The notion of objectivity is certainly a noble one, but politicians and political operatives figured out long ago how to exploit the governing ethic of journalists. News-directed satire provides a clear indication of where this reform should begin and what it should entail.

This study draws upon many of the most important volumes of media criticism from some of the most cited modern media scholars. Their works have exposed the shortcomings of the mainstream news media and of contemporary political reportage and its continued devotion to the regime of objectivity. This work also relies heavily on the statistical studies conducted by organizations such as the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press and the Annenberg Public Policy Center, which have highlighted a number of important trends concerning public attitudes and news consuming habits. Finally, this thesis examines the bounty of news articles, profiles and interviews produced during the time period being studied, which have discussed the impact of comedy on the political realm, its growing popularity, and particularly the popularity of Jon Stewart, who has been designated the leader of the satirical renaissance.

If the popularity of news-directed satire is proof of anything, it is the need for a significant rethinking of the way journalists report on politics. With such an enormous

selection of discursive options, young adults are increasingly passing on the one-side-fits-all offering of the mainstream news media. While certainly not homogenous, mainstream news media outlets are anything but uniquely shaped and coloured planets in a highly diverse solar system. Each “mainstream” outlet, whether print or broadcast, to a considerable extent, gathers its political information in the same manner and from the same “official” sources.(6) These sources often regurgitate the same rehearsed partisan talking points, which the different news media outlets print or broadcast in much the same way by adhering to such professional norms as the sacred tenet of objectivity and its component values. (7)

Political reporting has become a systematized, and as a result, a highly predictable activity. The reporter simply finds the issue or event of the day, which is usually the exact same issue that the rest of his/her colleagues have chosen. The reporter then provides a simple and topical explanation of what is going on, gets a point (Republican), counterpoint (Democratic) perspective, and closes it with a kicker about what is likely to happen next. Those on the extreme right wing of the political spectrum, who continuously bemoan the supposed liberal bias of the media elite, fail to take into account the systematic, almost bureaucratic nature of news reporting today, which is partly a consequence of the evolution of journalistic objectivity. As this study will show, the cause of many of the dysfunctional aspects in the press/politician relationship are rooted in the shortcomings of “objectivity.” Objectivity is the professional ethic that governs the way journalists behave as professionals; the way they gather information; the way they construct their news narratives; the way they present their news products to the public. If the journalistic profession were seriously interested in discovering why it has become

such a deserving and popular target of satirical critique, the sacred tenet of objectivity -- more precisely, how it has come to be defined and put into practice -- is the critical point of departure. In the context of politics, objectivity, with its emphasis on “fairness,” “neutrality” and “balance”, has proven itself to be an inadequate strategy and language for identifying and exposing lies, and discovering and communicating facts at the expense of partisan spin.(8)

The irony is that media scholarship, much of which has been written by journalists, has clearly outlined the deficiencies of the press/politician relationship in America. This literature has identified the systematic blind spots of the regime of objectivity as it is defined, and more importantly, as it is implemented in contemporary political reportage. While no profession or institution is perfect, it is difficult to think of one that is as intensely self-critical as journalism. One need only explore the stacks of books of media criticism that line the shelves of any academic library for proof. But despite this plethora of media criticism, the journalistic profession has done very little to reform or adjust its relationship with the political realm and its actors, or the way it performs its role as the “watchdog” of government. As Timothy Crouse aptly pointed out in his book, *The Boys on the Bus*, “journalism is probably the slowest-moving, most tradition bound profession in America. It refuses to budge until it is shoved into the future by some irresistible force.”(9) Indeed, it could easily be argued that many of the dysfunctional aspects of the press/politician relationship, which this study will describe, have become even more pronounced with the passage of time. Moreover, they have had a profoundly negative impact on the quality of political discourse in America. The press/politician relationship, at least from the perspective of the journalist, is governed by the values that have become

attached to the concept of objectivity. However, as many media scholars have conceded, there is no precise, consensus definition of “objectivity.”(10) Not surprisingly, there is no consensus about how to properly reform or replace “objectivity” as the governing ethic of the profession. Some have tried to reform the concept, such as the public journalism movement, which began in the mid-1990s, but there has certainly been no reform on an institutional level. (11)

Politicians used to bear the brunt of the responsibility for the public’s growing cynicism and apathy with regard to the political process, and, as a result, they have been the traditional targets of America’s political satirists. Watergate and Vietnam seemed to confirm the public’s suspicions that politicians are corrupt self-interested schemers, with little regard for the public interest.(12) Political cynics have long maintained that American politicians are predominantly rich white guys who are largely out of touch with the electorate’s interests and concerns, and who are beholden to the big corporate special interests that finance their astronomically expensive electoral campaigns. In short, the politicians have been easy targets for democratic criticism, as well as the ire of American satirists.

However, as studies confirm the public’s growing mistrust of the mainstream news media’s practitioners and products, and as the popularity of satirical or “fake” news, such as *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* and *The Colbert Report* on television, and *The Onion*, *The Specious Report*, *The Borowitz Report* and *WhiteHouse.org* on the Internet continue to grow, it has become clear that the mainstream news media have been identified as equally responsible for the degradation of political discourse in America. As a result, the journalistic profession has become part of the joke.

Effective satire, while often funny, is always rooted in truth, which is the source of its poignancy. The proliferation of satirical products that target the mainstream news media, as well as the swelling number of consumers of such satirical products, suggests that journalism, as a profession and a democratic institution, is in need of such a remodeling. The loyalty of these “fake” news outlets’ consumers is proof that their critiques of the conventions of contemporary political reporting conform to and confirm the discursive perspective of a growing proportion of the American electorate.(13)

Political satirists have emerged as the watchdogs of the news media, which have of late failed in their role as the watchdogs of government and the public realm. Political satire, which uses humour to target the conventions of the news media and the dysfunctional press/politician relationship in America, is, whether conscious or not, an expression of resistance and a force for accountability and reform. Satirists dismiss this role, claiming they are only in the business of trying to make people laugh, but the fact remains that the news media’s failures supply them with comedic fodder.

Here is one example, chosen among the hundreds which America’s – and Canada’s -- political satirists produce on a daily basis, and the dozens which will be examined herein, which highlights the premise of this study. The day after U.S. weapons inspector David Kay released his report and confirmed that Iraq has no, and likely never had any weapons of mass destruction in the lead up to the U.S.-led war in Iraq, U.S. President George W. Bush held a press conference at the White House with the prime minister of Poland.(14) President Bush was asked whether he was still hopeful that weapons of mass destruction would be found in Iraq. President Bush proceeded to talk at length about how Saddam Hussein was a “gathering threat” and how the world is a better

place without him.(15) He never mentioned weapons of mass destruction, which was the premise of the original question.(16) Neither the journalist who asked the question, nor any of his colleagues, challenged the president's transparent non-response, which was subsequently replayed on many of the evening newscasts, and repeated constantly on the cable news channels, including CNN, Fox New, and MSNBC.

The Daily Show with Jon Stewart provided a different perspective on the press conference and the weapons of mass destruction question in particular. In fact, Jon Stewart brazenly mocked the absurdity of the president's non-response.(17) After each of Bush's verbal detours, Stewart stopped the clip and reminded the president (and the audience) that the question was clearly about weapons of mass destruction. After another evasive sentence, Stewart brought out a diagram depicting weapons of mass destruction. Following Bush's final comments in his long-winded non-response to the original question, Stewart pulled his left hand from above his head, down to his stomach, and said "And scene," thereby emphasizing the fact that the president's response was nothing more than acting, a rehearsed performance.(18) *The Daily Show's* loyal audience laughs because it is utterly and transparently obvious that the president did not answer the question, and the show uses satire to highlight the absurdity of the non-response. Unlike Stewart, however, the journalists participating in the press conference are constrained by the ethic of objectivity, which emphasizes the need to treat issues and sources in a "fair" and "balanced" fashion. Political journalists in America are, or behave as though they are, constantly fearful of being accused of partisan "bias." (19) As a result, in the face of President Bush's non-response, the journalists present simply move onto the next question and rebroadcast Bush's response as the clip of choice on the evening news.

President Bush, the leader of the free world, is let off the hook for not answering a vitally important, simple and straightforward question from the supposed watchdogs of government. The satirist, the “fake” news anchor on the “fake” news broadcast, whose governing ethic requires that he use humour to expose absurdity and hypocrisy, holds both the president and his inquisitors to account for the charade.

Based on these two journalistic efforts, one “objective,” “fair”, and “balanced,” the other satirical, which journalistic product is more trustworthy? For a growing proportion of educated, and media savvy young adults, it is clearly the latter.

Chapter 1: Who is laughing at the news media?

The press/politician relationship, otherwise known as the political communication function, is largely a product of the contemporary definition of objectivity and its application. As a result, this relationship has become dysfunctional in many ways. Given the critical importance of the press/politician relationship in the democratic process, the nature of this dynamic undoubtedly has had consequences on the health of liberal democracy in America. The press/politician relationship is, after all, the defining, yet innately awkward and symbiotic power relationship in liberal democratic society: defining in the sense that it helps determine the relationship between the governors and the governed, and awkward and symbiotic in that each side has both common and opposing interests with the other. Journalists require information from official sources, while those official sources (politicians and political operatives) require, to a certain extent, journalists to communicate their messages. The friction comes from the fact that both sides want to be in control of those messages.

A growing proportion of the citizenry, however, has grown tired of the dynamic between political actors and organizations and the press. (1) The nature of this power relationship has evolved considerably since the 1960s. Theodore White's *The Making of the President 1960*, which gave readers an inside look at the strategies and tactics behind the campaign, is often cited as the inspiration for the kind of strategy-focused media coverage that now dominates modern campaigns, and which several scholars argue serves to alienate the electorate from the political process. (2) As a result, growing numbers consciously decide not to vote, and many increasingly do not bother to read about politics

in the newspaper or tune into the network news. For them, the tug of war between the political class and the press is childish and dysfunctional, and occasionally condescending and patronizing. In fact, an increasing proportion of young people (18-29) in America have come to this conclusion and have begun turning to satire for their political information. (3) According to a recently released study conducted by the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press called “Perceptions of Bias Seen as Growing – Especially by Democrats: Cable and Internet Loom Large in Fragmented Political News Universe,” “young people, in particular are turning away from traditional media sources for information about the (U.S. presidential) campaign”(4) In the 18-29 demographic, consumption of network news for campaign information declined from 39 per cent in 2000 to 23 per cent in 2004, and daily newspaper consumption declined from 32 per cent in 2000 to 23 per cent in 2004.(5) By contrast, consumption of comedy television shows for campaign information, such as *Saturday Night Live* and *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*, rose from 9 per cent in 2000 to 21 per cent in 2004 among the 18-24 year-old demographic.(6)

In short, “comedy programs are increasingly becoming regular sources of news for younger Americans, and are beginning to rival mainstream news outlets within the generation.” (7)

Jon Stewart is indeed the “most trusted name in fake news.” (8)

This trend is occurring during a time when politicians are struggling for ways to compel young people to vote (for them) and the major news outlets are making increasingly futile attempts to get the young adult demographic to consume their news products. A growing number of young adults are not only refusing to watch or read what

the news media is showing them or buy what political organizations are selling them, but instead are laughing at both of them. Their laughter is proof the political communication function is in need of reform.

There are four contemporary trends that this study will explore, which highlight the sad state of political communication, and its consequent effects on the health of liberal democracy in America. They include:

1. The growing public mistrust of the mainstream news media and their workers.
2. The dwindling consumption of mainstream news products, particularly among the young adult demographic.
3. The shrinking voter turnout rates, again among the young adult demographic.
4. The rising popularity of satirical news products, many of which target the mainstream news media's products and professional habits, as well as the overall quality of political discourse in America. It should be noted that this section will draw a clear distinction between late night comedians, such as David Letterman and Jay Leno, and satirical sources, such as *The Daily Show*, which go beyond simply making fun of the personality faults of politicians. Satire in this case, ridicules the conventions of the news media who present those politicians to the public.

Each of these trends is interrelated, but there are also plenty of other factors at work. To suggest that the dysfunctional nature of the political communication function was the only explanation for declining voter turnout rates and shrinking levels of consumption of mainstream news sources is tenuous. There are numerous factors that contribute to these phenomena. In the case of voter turnout rates, the campaign finance structure, which equates political influence with money and makes affluence an essential

prerequisite for running for office, has contributed to the alienation of the average citizen from the political process. (9) Similarly, the proliferation of cable and satellite channels and the resulting fragmentation of the television viewing audience have undoubtedly contributed to the shrinking audience for the evening news on the three major American networks. (10)

While there may be other factors at work, these four trends still feed off each other. It seems quite likely, for example, that political reportage that situates the viewer/reader as a spectator and presents the political realm as a series of childish conflicts would alienate voters and frustrate viewers. Furthermore, if news consumers viewed politics in such an unfavourable light, then certainly those sentiments would also be directed towards the journalists who present, package, and participate in politics. As James Fallows observes in his book, *Breaking the News: How the Media Undermine American Democracy*, journalism which undermines the political process by the manner in which it presents public life, sows the seeds of its own demise. (11)

By choosing to present public life as a contest among scheming political leaders, all of whom the public should view with suspicion, the news media help bring about that very result...The less that Americans care about public life, the less they will be interested in journalism of any form. (12)

Also, the less people consume news and show interest in politics, the less likely they are to participate in the political process and exercise their right to vote. Harvard professor Robert D. Putnam used extensive statistical evidence to prove as much in his book, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*. According to Putnam:

Americans who follow news on television (compared with those who don't) are more knowledgeable about public affairs, vote more regularly, and are generally

more active in community affairs, though they are not quite as distinctively civic as newspaper readers. (13)

Finally, it makes sense, for example, that growing public mistrust and dissatisfaction with the news media's presentation of the political realm would contribute to a climate where political satire, which ridicules much of what the public has deemed unsatisfactory, would become extremely popular. The purpose of satire is to expose absurdity, hypocrisy and folly, wherever it exists. The public's negative opinion of the news media indicates that the current political communication function is rife with all three. The size and loyalty of the satirical news audience is a clear confirmation of this perception about the state of politics in America and the news media's shortcomings in presenting the political realm. In a media universe where people gravitate towards sources of information that confirm their own discursive outlook, a growing constituency of young, educated, media savvy adults are choosing "fake" news. (14)

Kathleen Hall Jamieson and Joseph N. Cappella used compelling scientific survey evidence to prove that the strategy frame of political reportage, which has become the dominant news narrative for political coverage of campaigns and governance, causes public cynicism about the political process and the institutions of democracy. "The effect occurs for broadcast as well as print news, and when the two are combined, the combination is additive." (15) The authors' conclusion was identical to Fallows' earlier observation. They wrote, "...the elevation of public distrust of political institutions and processes may have attached itself to the bearers of information about those institutions – the news media themselves." (16)

E.J. Dionne Jr. echoed this argument in his 1996 book, *They Only Look Dead: Why the Progressives Will Dominate the Next Political Era*. In the book, Dionne Jr.

draws a parallel between our current post-industrial, Information Age and the Progressive Era of the latter half of the 19th century and early 20th century. (17) During that time, the transformations of the Industrial Revolution had taken shape, and journalism was on the verge of its last great revolution, which saw the emergence and institutionalization of the regime of objectivity. (18) Dionne Jr. sees striking similarities between the two eras and predicts a new revolt against the journalistic order.

He wrote,

It is not surprising that public disaffection with politics has evolved into disaffection with the media. When the public's problem is with the content of political debate, it is natural that the main medium through which the debate is carried out should also come under challenge. This happened before. The current structure of the media is the product of the last great overturning of political institutions during the progressive era. We are now in the middle of a new revolt against the journalistic order.(19)

Dionne Jr. suggests the assaults launched by the progressives against the news media during the Progressive Era had a significant impact in revolutionizing it. Based on this description, it is certainly easy to describe today's satirists as the progressives of this current era. Both agree that political discourse has become inadequate. Both hold the news media largely responsible. The work of today's satirists is an expression of resistance and sounds a call, despite the conscious intent of the satirists, for institutional reform. Whether or not the satirists' attacks will provoke a professional revolution similar to the one that helped create the regime of objectivity is uncertain, and is a matter that will be discussed in the final chapter.

The growing public mistrust of the mainstream news media and its workers

Consider public confidence and esteem for the news media, their products, and their professionals. In his book, *The Vanishing Voter: Public Involvement in an Age of*

Uncertainty, Thomas Patterson suggests that the press has squandered its moral authority. The profession of journalism earned considerable prestige and status as “one of the nation’s most trusted institutions” as a result of the exemplary investigative work by journalists during the Watergate period. (20) For a brief moment in the 1970s it seemed as though journalism might live up to its promise as a democratically essential ‘watchdog’ of the public realm. “Two decades later it (the press) was one of the least trusted,” Patterson wrote. (21) He supported his claim with exhaustive polling data, including a 1998 Pew Research Center poll that indicated that 63 per cent of Americans believed that the press “gets in the way of society solving its problems.” (22) Patterson also cites a 1998 Gallup poll which indicated that the public believes journalists were only as trustworthy as the politicians they cover, both of whom were regarded as only slightly more trustworthy than lawyers and building contractors.(23) Finally, Patterson cites a 2000 poll commissioned by National Public Radio (NPR) which claimed that only one in five citizens had “quite a lot” of confidence in the news media. (24) Patterson concluded that “without moral authority the press cannot be an effective watchdog.”(25)

A recent, and very comprehensive study of the news media, painted a very similar picture of the public’s esteem. According to *The State of the News Media 2004: An Annual Report on American Journalism*, produced by the Project for Excellence in Journalism, an institute affiliated with the Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism, “public attitudes about the press have been declining for nearly twenty years.” (26) The study suggests that Americans believe that journalists are “sloppier, less professional, less moral, less caring, more biased, less honest about their mistakes and generally more harmful to democracy than they did in the 1980s.” (27) The report cites a

2002 study conducted by the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, which chronicled the shift in public attitudes about the press from 1985 to 2002. The study showed that the percentage of Americans who think news organizations are “highly professional” declined from 72 per cent in 1985 to 49 per cent in 2002. (28) Indeed, the list of troubling statistics in the study was lengthy. Some of the more disturbing trends included the fact that fewer Americans think news organizations are moral (54 to 39 per cent); fewer Americans believe that news organizations generally “get their facts straight” (55 to 35 per cent); and more Americans are convinced that news organizations are politically biased (45 to 59 per cent). (29)

Most troubling of all, according to the Pew study, was that far fewer Americans had confidence in the “believability” of news organizations. “By August 2002, the percentage of Americans who rated their daily newspaper as highly believable fell from 83 to 65 percent, CBS from 84 to 64 per cent and NBC from 82 to 66 percent.” (30) These public sentiments transcend the different news outlets and all media, the study found. (31)

The surveys and statistics only confirmed what Fallows described roughly eight years earlier. While most, if not all, of America’s institutions have seen a decline in public confidence, “few have lost it as fully as the press,” he wrote. (32) The authors of *The State of the Media 2004* report conclude that the reasons for these dismal levels of public esteem and regard for the media is the result of “a disconnection between the public and the news media over motive.” (33)

Journalists believe they are working in the public interest and are trying to be fair and independent in that cause. This is their sense of professionalism. The public thinks these journalists are either lying or deluding themselves. The public believes that news organizations are operating largely to make money and that

journalists who work for these organizations are primarily motivated by professional ambition and self-interest.(34)

Journalists are supposed to serve the public. Journalism students today learn about the Hutchins Commission and the theory of social responsibility: that freedom of the press comes with responsibilities to the public. They are taught that journalism is more than just a job; it is a public service and an essential ingredient for a healthy democracy. Given that a growing proportion of the public feels that journalists have neglected the public service imperative of their chosen profession in favour of more crass motives, such as economic and career ambitions, it is not surprising that fewer people are choosing to consume mainstream journalistic products. According to Robert A. Hackett and Yuezhi Zhao, this sense of disconnection is even more pronounced among the younger demographics, and explains, at least in part, why they are the least likely group to consume news on a regular basis. “Marketing surveys reveal a growing disconnection between media and their audiences, and younger people in particular are simply shunning the conventional news media en masse.” (35) It is no coincidence that much of the scholarly literature that addresses the contemporary nature of the political communication function discusses how the press/politician relationship situates the public/reader/viewer as spectators in the political process. (36) This literature also outlines how the press fails to explain why participation in the political process is important for individual citizens. Strategy/conflict and horse race coverage does not inform the citizenry about what concrete effects a vote for one candidate as opposed to the other will have on their lives. In short, the press does not show the public what they have riding on the political horse race. (37) The press fails to establish the connection between politics, public policy, and the public itself.

This failure was the main impetus for a group of academics and working journalists to experiment with public or civic journalism beginning in the mid-1990s. The main rationale for this form of journalism was based on the premise that the press/politician relationship had become so self-involved and remote from the needs and concerns of average citizens that the “public” was disappearing. (38) Jay Rosen described the origins, goals, and results of the public journalism movement in his book *What Are Journalists For?* Rosen’s vision of public journalism was a new form of reportage that sought to engage the citizenry in the process of raising, discussing, debating, and hopefully solving its most important collective challenges -- to rebuild the ‘public’ – a participatory collective of democratic citizens. According to the practitioners and promoters of public journalism, the health of democracy, as well as the long-term economic health of the press, depends on the existence of an engaged public. (39)

The lack of connection between the people and the press, and beyond that, with those who govern them, contributes to the declining popularity of the news. If the work of the news media lacks credibility and appears to be motivated by the bottom line as opposed to public service in the eyes of most citizens, then their work becomes less important, and the consumption of it less necessary. Without a significant reversal of approach, this trend will likely only worsen. A recent *Maclean’s* magazine story written by Kirk LaPointe referred to an Ipsos-Reid/Pew Research Center for the People and the Press poll that indicated that only 30 per cent of the public trusts the media, “a figure that is likely to erode further,” the author added. (40) These findings are interesting, because they parallel those in the *American State of the Media 2004* study. Based on these troubling levels of public confidence in the news media, LaPointe concludes that news

outlets are likely to have continuing problems persuading the public to consume their work. "...if trust is as at the heart of loyalty, then journalists face immense challenges in the years ahead to retain, much less develop their audiences." (41) Clearly, public esteem for the news media and the importance of their work is closely linked to their popularity and economic profitability.

**The dwindling consumption of mainstream news products, particularly
among the young adult demographic**

The State of the News Media 2004 outlined the difficulty that journalists and their news outlets are having as they try to retain and expand their audiences. While the study acknowledges that part of the explanation certainly lies in media fragmentation, it is not the whole story.

...while dominant media sectors of the 20th Century – mainstream, general interest newspapers, network television and local television news – still attract the largest number of people, all are losing audience. (42)

Newspaper circulation is in decline, and "as always" young people are the least likely to read newspapers," and fewer young people are picking up the habit later in life compared to generations past, the study found. (43) The authors cite a 2003 study by Scarborough Research, which found that only 40 per cent of people aged 18 to 24 read a paper on weekdays, and less than half on Sundays. (44) Perhaps the most disturbing trend is the number of readers ages 34 to 64 who have stopped reading a newspaper on a regular basis. Not only are newspapers having trouble attracting the next generation of readers, they are losing older readers, the authors wrote. (45)

American network news has also failed to sustain, much less expand its audience, according to *The State of the Media* report. The study points out that the "three nightly

newscasts have seen ratings decline by 34 per cent in the past decade, nearly 44 percent since 1980, and 59 percent since their peak in 1969.” (46) The report also discusses the fact that the audience for the nightly network newscasts is getting older. (47) The median age of the American public is 35, but the average age of the network news audience is approximately 60 years of age, which is not the most attractive demographic for advertisers. (48) The median age for the cable news networks is similarly old, with MSNBC (52.4 years of age) being the youngest. (49) In his book, Fallows could discern who was watching their network news simply by watching the commercials, which included plenty of Geritol, Polident, Mylanta, and Attends ads. (50) The inability of network news broadcasts to attract the younger demographics, particularly the young adult demographic, has harmful financial consequences for the networks and their huge conglomerate owners who are so intensely focused on the bottom line. The young adult demographic is more attractive to prospective advertisers, which means they’re willing to pay more to reach them.

Part of the challenge is the fact that there has always been a generation gap between the youngest and the oldest demographics in terms of their news consumption habits. However, this gap has been growing consistently wider with each generation. A Pew Research Center study released in 2002 indicated “young adults are less interested in the news than were their boomer predecessors at the same age stage, no matter how the news is served.” (51) A significant concern among news media outlets and their managers is that in this age of media fragmentation, the youngest demographics – those who grew up watching entertainment television programming and playing video games – might never develop an appetite for news. This fear is not unfounded. The parents of

these younger groups today were less likely than their parents to make the news an important part of their daily routine. As a result, many news outlets across different media have been developing increasingly desperate strategies to try and attract teenagers and young adults. Many of these efforts can be described fairly as inane: transparent, patronizing and condescending to the very demographic they are attempting to attract. They also fail to establish a genuine connection between the press and their desired public.

In October 2002, for example, a CNN Headline News producer sent out an internal memo to Headline News staff, which was subsequently leaked to the media. (52) The memo encouraged staff to try and infuse their content – the anchors’ words and the text running across in the news ticker – with hip-hop slang words in order to ensure that CNN Headline News is “as cutting-edge as possible with our on-screen persona.” (53) In the very difficult challenge of trying to make 18-35 year-olds interested in the news, the best CNN Headline News could come up with was to substitute “freak” for “sex,” “fly” for “sexually attractive,” “jimmy cap” for “condom,” “flava” for “style,” and “ill” for “to act inappropriately.” (54)

The strategy represents an embarrassing reaction to the legitimate dilemma of a shrinking news audience in an increasingly expansive and fragmented media universe. However, as Karen Lurie explains in an article for *Pop Politics*, none of the popular comedic shows that have had success attracting a relatively young audience, including *The Daily Show*, *The Tonight Show with Jay Leno* and *The Late Show with David Letterman*, for example, intentionally pander to the younger viewers by trying to appear “cutting-edge” by using hip-hop slang. (55) Lurie wonders, “when was the last time you

heard Letterman complain about Saddam being all up in our grill?” (56) In their effort to attract the young adult demographic, simply because they are the most attractive target of advertisers, CNN Headline News’ strategy was forced and clearly unnatural. The media-savvy young adult demographic, which has developed such a hearty appetite for satirical content that exposes and ridicules absurdity and hypocrisy wherever it exists, cannot be so easily fooled. As a result, the disconnection persists, and perhaps even widens. Lurie continued,

And it’s just as cynical to believe that everyone in a certain age group, or any other group, is hip to certain (or any) slang as it is to believe that a target 20-year-old would flip by, see that “jimmy cap” has been shoehorned into CNN’s crawl, not recognize that she’s being pandered to or having her culture exploited, and lock in CNN with “favourite channel” status, staying to herself, “Finally, news that speaks to me.”(57)

Another revealing example of this phenomenon is the youth-oriented tabloid war, which erupted in Chicago in 2002. In an effort to attract the so-called “MTV generation,” so coveted by high-paying advertisers, *The Chicago Tribune* decided to produce a daily tabloid called *RedEye*. The tabloid is geared toward the 18-34 year-old demographic, based on the premise that if this supposedly attention-span-challenged generation were fed a steady diet of light reading, filled with short stories and plenty of insignificant pop culture news, they will eventually mature and one day graduate to become loyal consumers of *The Chicago Tribune*. (58) In an effort to spoil The Tribune’s plans, and to take “its share of the ad revenue,” *The Chicago Sun-Times* decided to launch its own hip young-adult tabloid, called *Red Streak*, filled with similar fluffy and substance-starved content. (59) As Jay Cheshes points out in an article in the *Columbia Journalism Review*, both papers have been torn apart by critics who have called them “condescending” and “amazingly superficial.”(60)

In his article, Cheshes spends a day at *RedEye*. He sits in on an editorial meeting where staff debated the most important news of the day. Well, not the most important news of the day, since it is only the “perceived demographic relevance” that really matters. (61) What matters most, according to *RedEye*’s market research, is very short news stories, which often consist of content imported from wire services, which is then shortened and simplified for easy reading. (62) The day Cheshes spent with the *RedEye* staff in November 2002 – a time when a seemingly imminent war in Iraq was looming – the editorial staff was debating whether the cliffhanger ending of *The Bachelor* (a reality television show), a Breeders’ Cup betting scam, a new STD vaccine, or new statistics outlining the lack of geographic knowledge of young Americans should be the day’s front page story. (63) *RedEye*’s standards were no higher than those of its rival. The debut cover of the free tabloid showed a photograph of Christina Aguilera “modeling her behind in green spray paint.” (64)

It would appear as though the best strategy Chicago’s media elite could devise in order to attract the young adult demographic was to pander to their supposed ignorance and shallowness by offering them the intellectual equivalent of fast-food. According to *Slate*’s Jack Shafer, “At 25 cents a copy, both (*RedEye* and *Red Streak*) are overpriced, slicing the news so thin the servings wouldn’t make a meal for an anorexic.” (65)

Perhaps the clearest indication that *RedEye* and *Red Streak* are indeed condescending, as most media critics suggest, is the fact that shortly after their launch a Chicago-based satirical online newspaper called *Red Face* – later renamed *Chicago Red Face* -- was launched. The publication, which was part satire and mostly parody reminiscent of *The Onion* with its use of wholly fabricated headlines and quotes,

ridiculed all the news media outlets in Chicago, but saved its most potent satirical shots for intelligence-insulting and faux-hip conventions of the two new youth-oriented tabloids. The preview edition of *Red Face* contained a list of the top ten reasons to read the website. Some of the more revealing reasons included number eight, which read, “Lots of sex talk and entertainment reporting...So you KNOW this ain’t like a REAL newspaper.” Number six on the list said, “We just watched 72 hours of *The Real World* [an MTV reality show where a diverse group of horny young adults are forced to live in a house together] so we, like, know where you’re coming from, dude.” Finally, the number three reason to read *Red Face* said, “Lots of cool pictures, pretty colors and a different font type!!!” (66)

A selection of letters to the editor of *Red Face* in response to the website’s question -- “What is on your young, wise, desirable mind? What do you think about newspapers like “Red Face” that are created just for cool people like you?” -- illustrate how the satirical news outlet ridicules the two Chicago papers for underestimating the intellect of their target demographic. (67) Jenny, 26, responded, “I think it’s a good idea because some people have short attention spans and those people – Hey look! A puppy! Isn’t that puppy cute?” (68) Fred, 23, wrote, “It’s about time someone put out a newspaper that speaks to my generation. I used to have the New York Times and Wall Street Journal delivered to my home and, damn if they didn’t have lots of depressing stories.” (69)

A common feature on the website was a section called “Face the Music – Drugs & Raves,” which lampoons the assumption that young adults are profoundly interested in drugs. The section also ridicules the way outlets such as *RedEye* and *Red Streak*, and

apparently CNN Headline News, use slang in an effort to “speak to” their target demographic audience. The Dec. 5, 2002 edition of “Drugs & Raves,” read “Just so y’all remember. We are young and hip and urban. Therefore, we must mention Ecstasy and raves and of course our old friend marijuana. Now we at the *Red Face* don’t condone involvement in any of the above, but yo, isn’t we mad fly for mentioning it.” (70)

Other Chicago news outlets were ridiculed on the site as well. In the March 26, 2004 edition of *Red Face*, there was a side bar, which ridiculed *Fox News Chicago* for many of the same reasons that the two Chicago youth tabloids were satirized. The sidebar, titled “TV Highlights: Fox Chicago” satirized Fox’s preoccupation with entertainment news and fluff. The sidebar provided a breakdown of the Fox newscast, under the slogan, “Fox Chicago: The Only News at Nine.” (71) The breakdown was as follows,

9:00-9:45 Coverage of Chicago native Jennifer Hudson’s progress on American Idol.
9:45-9:50 Discussion of Simon Cowell’s swear finger.
9:50-9:52 Walter’s perspective.
9:52-9:57 Local sports and weather coverage.
9:57-9:59 War, politics and the rest of the world. (72)

While this is certainly an exaggeration, matters of substance and true democratic importance are often drowned out by entertainment-driven “news.” The sidebar’s comedic exaggeration highlights this trend.

Shrinking voter turnout rates

Even when the news is supposed to matter most – during presidential election campaigns – the public is still paying increasingly less attention to public affairs news. “Campaign coverage has never been more plentiful, or so widely ignored,” Patterson

wrote. (73) Some scholars predicted a renaissance in public participation in the democratic process as a result of increased civil rights for previously disenfranchised groups, rising education levels, and the proliferation of mass communication media, which would increase the ability and likelihood for one to become informed. (74) However, as Patterson explained, this renaissance of political engagement never materialized. One of his examples, of many, to illustrate this development is the declining viewership over the years of the presidential debates. (75) The race between Al Gore and George Bush, for example, was expected to be extremely close and it was widely assumed that the three presidential debates would be of critical importance and attract extremely large audiences. “Yet, the audience rating for the three Bush-Gore debates was no higher than for the three Clinton-Dole debates. The third debate in 2000 had a 26 percent rating – the lowest ever,” Patterson wrote. (76)

The number of people paying regular attention to network news coverage of the campaigns has fallen dramatically as well, and the number of people paying sustained attention to election coverage in newspapers has fallen even more precipitously. (77) According to surveys conducted for his book, Patterson and his research team discovered that during the “typical” week, “four times as many respondents said they were paying “just some”, “only a little,” or “no” attention to the campaign as said they were paying a “great deal” or “quite a bit” of attention. (78)

Young adults are also far less inclined to vote. According to the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE) 32.3 per cent of 18 to 24 year-olds voted in the 2000 election – a 16 per cent decline since 1972 – but rebounded to 47 per cent in 2004 for reasons that will be discussed below. (79)

It is conventional wisdom that an informed populace is a key ingredient for a properly functioning democracy. Democracy requires citizens who are capable of making informed choices, or at the very least are motivated enough to make an uninformed choice. But the public's lack of interest in political news is also symptomatic of a larger, more complex and more intertwined problem. "The story of modern political journalism begins near the time that voting rates started to slip." (80) Public esteem for the news media, consumption levels of news, and voter turnout rates have all declined fairly consistently since the early 1970s. The news media's presentation of the political realm does not exist in isolation from the public's perception of it and its will to participate in it. As the public's main window into politics, particularly in the context of a presidential election, the news media are responsible for what the public sees of its political elite. Political coverage that focuses on the "insider baseball" aspects of the political "game" and the horse race dimension of the political "race" offers little information of value to citizens as they attempt to make a decision about how to vote, nor does it encourage them to vote at all. Both story frames, which are the dominant narratives in contemporary political reportage, simply tell those who bother watching, listening, or reading the news which candidate's campaign is most skilled at manipulating them and who is likely to win or lose. (81) And, naturally, if a potential voter is told one campaign or the other is destined to win, what point is there in traveling to the polling station and waiting in line to vote? The election is a forgone conclusion. The political realm, which includes the journalists who report on it, has become a highly professional and insular world that has little to do with democracy. (82) As a result, the notion of "disconnection" between the public and the political realm attaches itself as strongly to journalists as it does to the

politicians they follow. “Candidates, public officials, and journalists operate in a narrow professional world that is largely of their own making and that is remote from the world of the public they serve.” (83) Both are to be viewed with suspicion and neither is serving the public, regardless of the fact that this is their stated goal.

In fact, several media scholars have argued quite convincingly, armed with research data, that instead of inspiring citizens to participate in the democratic process, news coverage of both campaigns and governance, built around the strategy/conflict or horse race story frames actually encourages the opposite. (84) In their book, *Spiral of Cynicism: The press and the public good*, authors Kathleen Hall Jamieson and Joseph N. Cappella argue that “contemporary journalistic culture and a focus on strategy, conflict and motives invite cynicism.” (85) Hall Jamieson and Cappella discovered that the strategy frame is not only the most pervasive narrative, but that it breeds cynicism in the news consumer because it situates them as a spectator in the political process. (86) According to the authors, the strategy/conflict frame has this effect because it implies that “the self-interest of political actors is their primary goal and that the common interest is secondary at best or played out only for its political advantage.” (87) But is it not the much mythologized role of journalists to be the watchdogs of the political realm? Is it not their responsibility to hold politicians to account and to pressure them to operate in the public’s interest? And if journalists fail in this task, are they not simply participants in the cynical charade that politics has become?

Near the end of the book, Hall Jamieson and Cappella present a compelling conclusion, which was supported by the statistics that preceded it. They wrote,

We do know that people do not trust the mainstream media and that those who trust it least are also those most interested in public policy. And we know that

they are seeking alternative formats for news and political discussion and consuming the content voraciously. This public is open to alternatives, even primed to test them. The form of these alternatives is less clear. (88)

Though the alternatives were not obvious when the authors wrote their book back in 1997, one alternative has clearly emerged since the 2000 presidential race: satire.

The anomaly of the 2004 presidential election

It should be noted here, that all these studies were conducted and works written before the conclusion of the 2004 presidential election, which saw voters, including young adults, contribute to the highest voter turnout since 1968. (89) There is certainly a myriad of factors that contributed to this reversal of a trend that had consistently intensified since the 1970s. One contributing factor was the highly divisive, and increasingly disastrous, American-led pre-emptive war against Iraq, and the lingering fear – although denied by both presidential candidates – of a possible draft. (90) Not since Vietnam had the United States been engaged in a foreign conflict where American troops were being killed almost daily, sparking a defiant patriotism on one hand, and a passionate anti-war protest movement on the other.

Other contributing factors to the high voter turnout in 2004 included the continued emergence and growing political power of the religious right in the U.S. The liberal, anti-war left also became far more organized for the 2004 election. Many liberals in America were still bitter over the Supreme Court's decision in 2000, which put a halt to the Florida recount and made George W. Bush president. They were staunchly opposed to the Iraq war and the administration's shifting rationale to justify it. They were also wary of the Bush administration's prosecution of the larger "War on Terror," including its aggressive foreign policy, which had alienated most of the world, including many

traditional allies, as well as the administration's perceived attack on civil liberties at home. It was in this context that numerous well-financed liberal political organizations, including MoveOn.org, dispatched armies of volunteers across the country to get out the vote and foil George W. Bush's attempt to win re-election. The fact is, prior to the November 2004 election, the American electorate was starkly divided. Perhaps the most divisive factor of all was Bush himself. The president inspires the devotion of his supporters and an almost visceral contempt among his detractors.(91)

All these ingredients, and there are surely more, contributed to the high voter turnout. But there seems to be scant evidence that the news media played a key role in inspiring more Americans to go to the polls and exercise their right to vote.

Reviews of the news media's performance during the 2004 campaign were not flattering. The news media failed to strip away the relentless political spin or challenge or expose blatant lies during the 2004 campaign. (92) In fact, there is ample evidence to suggest that the news media failed in their most important role during an election campaign: ensuring that the public is equipped with accurate information in order to make an informed decision when casting a ballot.

A month prior to the election, for example, roughly half of the 18 to 29 year-olds believed that George W. Bush wanted to institute a military draft, despite the fact both he and Democratic candidate John Kerry insisted they had no plans to do so. (93)

Prior to the presidential debates, an Annenberg survey showed that most potential voters knew little about the candidates' policy positions. (94) Most respondents did not know which candidate favoured privatizing social security, or which candidate wanted to eliminate tax breaks for the overseas profits of American companies, or which candidate

wanted to eliminate the Estate Tax. (95) The study concluded that the reason voters were so ill-informed on the issues was because “the candidates have not stressed them and journalists have focused on the horse race. In the absence of good information voters guess, and often guess incorrectly.” (96) The mainstream news media were failing to clarify where the politicians stood on the issues of the day, and therefore, failing to explain how a vote for one candidate or the other would impact on the lives of potential voters.

Even on the most important issue facing the country, the vast majority of Americans were woefully ill-informed. In a study released by the PIPA/Knowledge Networks in April 2004, a majority of Americans (57 per cent) still believed that Iraq was providing substantial support to al-Qaeda, and 20 per cent believed that Iraq was directly involved in the attacks of September 11, 2001. (97) And despite the fact that expert voices and legitimate reports refuted the existence of weapons of mass destruction in Iraq before the war, 60 per cent of Americans were still convinced that Iraq either had weapons of mass destruction before the war or a major program to make them. (98) Even six months later, on the eve of the election, the news media had still failed to clarify these misperceptions. In a media universe filled with loud partisan bluster and the drumbeat of carefully-crafted, yet often misleading talking points, the truth can get drowned out. It is the job of journalists – or ought to be – to turn down the noise and amplify the truth. In 2004, the news media did not succeed in this task.

Despite the widely-publicized conclusions of the Duelfer report, 49% of Americans continue to believe Iraq had actual WMD (27%) or a major WMD program (22%) and 52% believe that Iraq was providing substantial support to al-Qaeda. (99)

Even more surprisingly, even after millions and millions of people from countries around the world flooded their respective streets in the largest coordinated global protest in the history of mankind on Feb. 15, 2003, a near majority of Americans thought most of the rest of the world supported their war in Iraq. (100)

The mainstream news media clearly failed to cut through the loud partisan bluster of the punditocracy – those high profile commentators, including newspaper columnists, academics and current and former political operatives who are paid large sums of money to offer their opinions on TV news talk shows -- or take administration officials to task for their manipulative and often misleading talking points. A record number of Americans may have been inspired to go to the polls on Nov. 2, 2004, but a troubling percentage of them were inadequately informed about the issues of importance and the facts surrounding them. For this, the news media deserve no praise.

The audience for satirical news

Conventional wisdom usually assumes that those who chose not to watch the mainstream network news or to read newspapers are under-educated, lower income earners, or simply lazy citizens who have little interest in the political realm regardless of how it is presented. Hall Jamieson and Cappella's research showed quite the opposite. A large proportion of those who are tuning out of mainstream news outlets, are in fact highly-educated followers of politics who have become dissatisfied with the state of contemporary politics, including the tone and tenor of political discourse and the news media's presentation of the political realm. (101) As a consequence of their dissatisfaction, this particular group is seeking alternatives. And as the next section of this study will show, the young, educated consumer of political satire and Hall Jamieson

and Cappella's media cynics seem strikingly similar to Jon Stewart's target audience.(102) In an interview with *Guardian UK*, Stewart said his show is "neither Democratic nor Republican but simply seeks to represent the "politically disappointed." (103)

This notion of the "politically disappointed" as a concept to describe a growing constituency in American society which chooses not to vote, or even to follow the political process through mainstream channels, has been observed by others as well. In *The Vanishing Voter*, Patterson identified a new subgroup of non-voter in America, which he calls the "Disenchanted." (104) These predominantly educated, voting-aged citizens "have been spawned by the political gamesmanship and negative news that dominated late twentieth-century politics. Many of them express interest in public affairs, talk occasionally about politics, and keep up with the news." (105) The Disenchanted, according to Patterson, are on a percentage level as educated as those who vote, but "where they differ is in their disgust with the way that politics in the United States is conducted, which leads some of them to stay away from the polls on election day." (106) Similar to Hall Jamieson and Cappella's news consumers who are actively searching for alternative sources, the Disenchanted are educated, interested in politics, but profoundly disappointed with what passes for political discourse in the mainstream news media.

Ted Halstead presented a similar description in his August 1999 article for *The Atlantic Monthly* titled "A Politics for Generation X." In the piece, Halstead sought to combine statistics with anecdotal evidence in order to provide an accurate profile of this young-adult generation, born between 1965 and 1979, which has been accused of being irredeemably lazy and politically disengaged. (107) Halstead describes their political

absenteeism as a “perfectly rational” reaction to their perception of the American political system.(108) Central to the “Xers” dissatisfaction with the political system is the partisan squabbling which defines how governance is undertaken in Washington as well as the media’s presentation of the political realm. The political discourse offered by the punditocracy consists largely of screaming matches between rigid ideologues who have never agreed on anything and are the epitome of what this young adult generation rejects. The natural conflict between Democrats and Republicans also defines the objective coverage of political issues, which are usually written in the point (Democrat) counterpoint (Republican) narrative structure. The representatives of each party who are quoted in the story invariably disagree and as a result, the reader is left with a pessimistic feeling that the two parties are unlikely to be able to work together to find the best solution to the issue at hand. The majority of Generation Xers, according to Halstead, address issues in a pragmatic fashion and usually see solutions in the vacant middle ground between the two parties. (109) Halstead quotes a man named Gary Ruskin, the director of the Congressional Accountability Project and a member of Generation X himself. He says, “Republicans and Democrats have become one and the same – they are both corrupt at the core and behave like children who are more interested in fighting with each other than in getting anything accomplished.” (110)

In fact, Halstead points out that 44 per cent of those ages 18 to 29 (in 1999) define themselves as political independents. (111) According to Halstead’s profile, Generation Xers see a slew of critical problems on the horizon, particularly with regard to the economy and the environment, but in their elected leaders they see a bunch of children who are more committed to serve the special interests of the rich who have bought them

rather than address the true challenges that confront society. (112) “So Xers have decided, for now, to tune out. After all, they ask, what’s the point?” (113) *The Vanishing Voter* survey found that respondents 34 years-of-age and younger who believed that “most politicians are liars and crooks” were 17 per cent less likely to vote. (114)

The political leadership is not only to blame for this situation. The news media certainly bear much of the responsibility for the cynical outlook of the Xers. After all, it is the news media that are the principal connections or “windows” for individual citizens to experience the political realm, and politicians inevitably operate in accordance with the conventions of the different media and the news gathering needs and techniques of journalists. The news media are the political forums of contemporary politics. Unfortunately, these political “forums” seem more like ideological battlefields, and this is exactly what turns off the Xers, according to Halstead. (115)

Halstead quotes Neil Howe and William Strauss, who say that this generation feels “America’s greatest need these days is to clear out the underbrush of name calling and ideology so that simple things can work again.” (116) This generation confronts problems and issues from a pragmatic perspective, as opposed to an ideological one, and their main concerns and favoured solutions, which are given negligible expression in the news media, reflect this pragmatism which defies the conservative/liberal distinctions, Halstead wrote. (117) Their vision of the most important need that the American political system faces – “to clear the underbrush of name calling and ideology so that simple things can work again” – is at its most fundamental level, a call for journalistic reform. The news media are certainly not wholly responsible for the unproductive and childish partisanship that dominates contemporary politics in America, but the polarized

construction of news stories, as well as cable news debates that pit Republicans against Democrats in shouting matches, have aggravated the problem considerably. To a large extent, politicians are simply following the conventions of the news media. The news media and the political class are locked in a cooperative/confrontational relationship and each helps define the conventions of the other. The sentiments of Halstead's Gen Xers suggest that both are in need of reform.

Xers may be poorly informed when it comes to public affairs, but they know enough to believe that our political system is badly in need of reform. At a very basic level they recognize that the political system is rigged against their interests. For one thing, Xers continually see a large gap between the issues they care most about and the ones that politicians choose to address. (118)

Based on this profile, Halstead's description of Generation X, while certainly not a homogenous group, nonetheless shares many striking similarities to Patterson's "Disenchanted," and to Hall Jamieson and Cappella's alternative news source seekers, all of whom this study argues constitute Jon Stewart's audience – the "politically disappointed." A significant proportion of young adults do not see their issues of concern addressed, whether that consists of politicians addressing them of their own free will or journalists demanding that they do so. The politics they do see consists of partisan bickering by politicians, political hacks, and pundits, which they deem to be a profoundly ineffective problem-solving strategy. A recent survey by the Annenberg Public Policy Center at the University of Pennsylvania found that while 43 per cent of *Daily Show* viewers consider themselves "liberal," – 38 per cent described themselves as moderate -- a full third of viewers answered "independent" when asked their party affiliation. (119)

The young adult demographic, at least a very significant portion of it, is neither apathetic nor are they intellectually challenged. In fact, a significant proportion are quite media

savvy, perhaps even more so than the news managers who resort to condescending strategies to attract their attention for the purpose of selling them to advertisers.

The news media's strategy for trying to attract this disenchanted and disappointed demographic reflects their ignorance as to the reasons for their willful disconnection. One of the more illustrative recent examples of such flawed attempts was CNN's Rock The Vote town hall, which aired on Nov. 4, 2003 during prime time. The event consisted of a "debate" between the eight candidates running for the Democratic presidential nomination. In addition to fielding questions from the audience, which was composed mostly of young voting-aged adults, each candidate was required to produce a 30-second advertisement that would "appeal to young people and encourage them to vote." (120) The videos that most candidates produced in response to this challenge reflect the degree to which the young adult generation is underestimated. The dominant formula of the 30-second spots consisted of dance/rave/hip-hop music; lightning quick edits reminiscent of the modern music video and a dearth of pertinent information such as credentials or policy positions. Sen. Joseph Lieberman's video, for example, consisted of dance music, no voice over, and only vacuous words in bold letters flashing across the screen such as "IDEAS." The consensus among the candidates, or more appropriately, their communication consultants, was simply that in order to "appeal to" or "speak to" the young adult generation you must speak as though to a child, or not speak at all. Their senses must be dazzled and their intellect unchallenged.

While the presidential candidates, and their political consultants, are certainly guilty of underestimating and failing to address the young adult demographic in an adequate, let alone appropriate manner, CNN and its personnel who worked on the forum

proved to be no more enlightened about the audience. During the forum, Brown University student Alexandra Trustman asked the candidates if they preferred Macs or PCs? The question was intended to be a humorous variation of the boxers or briefs question that was posed to Bill Clinton in 1992. (121) After enduring considerable criticism and ridicule in a Brown University online forum, Trustman was compelled to respond and to describe the circumstances surrounding her choice of question. In a column called “Don’t Shoot the Messenger” published in *The Brown Daily Herald*, Trustman claimed that a CNN producer provided her with the question she was supposed to ask, which was the Macs or PC query. (122) Trustman says she did not see the relevance of this question and asked the producer if she could ask her own technology-related question: How, if elected, would the candidates use technology in their administrations? (123) According to her account, Trustman says the CNN producer,

Took a look at my question and told me I couldn’t ask it because it wasn’t light-hearted enough and they wanted to modulate the event with various types of questions – mine was to be one of the questions on the less serious side. The show’s host wanted the Macs or PCs question asked, not because he was wondering about the candidates’ views of technology, but because he thought it would be a good opportunity for the candidates to relate to a younger audience. (124)

The misperception that the way to relate to the educated young adult demographic is to avoid substance and issues in favour of fluff and a faux-hip presentation is one reason why both politicians and the news media often fail in their attempts to reach the young coveted demographic. They try too hard. Their approach is transparent and condescending. As a result, their efforts, while sound in motivation, appear insincere in their execution. The forum was billed as an opportunity for young people to talk directly to their potential leaders, yet the producers of the show did not trust the young adults themselves to ask the questions they wanted answers to. The producers feared that the

young adults in attendance might bore themselves and their contemporaries watching at home. The CNN producers assumed they knew better how to relate to young adults than other young adults did. They feared the broadcast may be lacking the prerequisite amount of fluff required not to bore the unsophisticated minds of their young MTV generation viewing audience. The CNN producers paid a price for their misjudgment. Trustman's column caused such a stir in the national media that CNN later apologized in an *Associated Press* story for going "too far" in telling Trustman what to ask the candidates. (125)

Rachel Marshall captured the essence of why the news media's efforts do more harm than good in trying to establish a connection with the young adult demographic in her op-ed commentary in *The Brown Daily Herald*, called "Rock My Vote? I don't think so." Marshall described how "substance-less appeals" intensify the cynicism of the young adult generation towards the political process, including the news media and its presentation of that process. (126) Referring to the Macs or PC controversy, Marshall noted, "Rather than seeking to truly engage young voters, politicians and the media instead hype up and simultaneously water down politics in an attempt to sell us a flashy but shallow political package." (127)

Marshall concludes her commentary, which expresses her "disdain for our image as shallow, uninspired voters," by analyzing both the appeal of *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*, as well as the political substance of its content. (128) She cites the popularity of the show as evidence that the young adult generation – *The Daily Show's* largest demographic – is not an intellectually challenged and issue-phobic group. Marshall correctly asserts that although *The Daily Show* is certainly funny, it deals with political

issues of critical importance, including the war in Iraq. The show also skewers the dysfunctional aspects of the press/politician relationship, the dynamics of which have conspired to create a political realm presented by the news media that is excessively superficial. Though the mainstream news media consciously choose to use superficiality to attract the young adult audience, it is this very superficiality which their news show of choice, *The Daily Show*, ridicules with its punchy satire. According to Marshall,

Though he (Stewart) mocks the way President Bush and other political leaders handle our nation, the political nature of the show demonstrates that members of our generation are interested in politics but tired of the political rhetoric and games that occupy our country. The show reflects a deeper yearning for a new take on politics and a desire to cleanse the current political system of its superficiality. (129)

In short, *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* confirms and conforms to the discursive perspective of a growing proportion of young adults in America today who do not want to be talked down to. This is the essence of the show's appeal. Stewart, using satire, respects the intelligence of his audience.

This respectful treatment was evident in *The Daily Show's* coverage of CNN's Rock the Vote broadcast. (130) Stewart showed clips of the different candidates and joked about how they apparently all thought the best way to "speak to" the young generation was to simply dress casual and lose their ties. Similar to Marshall, the portion of the CNN broadcast that Stewart found most absurd, and, therefore, deserving of satirical ridicule, were the candidates' 30-second videos. Stewart found the videos so condescending with their absurd dance music, dizzying edits, and dearth of informational substance, that he simply showed clips from the videos. The videos were so ridiculous that they could generate laughs without Stewart's intervention. A flabbergasted Stewart even made it clear to his audience before he showed the video clips that *The Daily Show*

did not edit them in any way, which only served to highlight how insulting the ads truly were. The crowd howled with laughter at the videos.

The CNN Rock the Vote broadcast and *The Daily Show*'s reaction to it provide a compelling contrast between the mainstream news media and the satirical or "fake" news media which mocks them. It also provides a concise manner for explaining the appeal of satirical outlets such as *The Daily Show* for the young adult demographic. The CNN producers, similar to the news people behind *RedEye* and *Red Streak*, assumed that the best approach to attract the young adult audience was to keep things short and sweet, light and fluffy. After all, young adults have miniscule attention spans and have little interest in issues and matters of true importance. At least, this is the impression of the young adult generation as shown by the news products created specifically to appeal to them.

By contrast, Stewart, who is himself now well beyond the young adult demographic, shares their sense of astonishment at how badly the news media and political leaders underestimate their level of intelligence, media awareness, and political sophistication.

The fact is satirical humour requires a bedrock of knowledge in order to be understood and appreciated. Satire, by nature, usually involves exaggeration. It is the satirist's favourite tool. As several scholars, in particular Leonard Feinberg, have pointed out, there is no consensus definition of satire.⁽¹³¹⁾ The studies of satire, most of which are concerned with satirical literature, suggest different definitions and attribute different motivations to the authors. For the purposes of this study, however, the simplest definition seems to work best. Feinberg wrote, "The technique of the satirist consists of a

playfully critical distortion of the familiar.” (132) The basic ingredients of satire, according to Northrop Frye, are wit and humour and an object of attack. (133) The “familiar” in Feinberg’s definition often represents an “ideal counterpart: a Platonic ideal, or its approximation in reality.” (134) Peter Petro uses the example of a corrupt official, who becomes a target of satire because he does not live up to the ideal of “an incorruptible man whose mission is to serve people wholeheartedly.”(135) In the case of the news media, satire exposes the pretense that journalists exist to serve the public by providing information that the public needs to make informed democratic choices. The satirist who targets the news media highlights, exposes and ridicules those journalists and news outlets that deviate from this norm or ideal. The satirist’s jokes may be funny, but the issues behind them represent an expression of disappointment and disapproval with the values, attitudes and behaviours of the butts of the jokes.(136) “That ridicule may be expressed in amused or in bitter terms, but the essence of satire is revelation of the contrast between reality and pretense.” (137) The pretense of the news media and journalists is that they serve the public interest first, and the business interests of their corporate owners second. The satirist exposes the incongruity between this pretense and what the news media actually offers the public.

A satirical joke is composed of two strands, one plausible (the familiar), the other implausible (the exaggeration, or Feinberg’s “critical distortion”). (138) In the case of the *Red Face* sidebar ridiculing *Fox News Chicago*, the plausible strand involves the conventional wisdom among many disappointed news consumers that insignificant entertainment “news” often trumps political news of true importance. The implausible strand – the exaggerated strand of the satirical joke -- which is slightly more pronounced,

is the source of the joke's humour. It highlights the incongruity (a favourite term of satire scholars) between how journalists ought to – and often claim to (the pretense) -- perform their role (the norm) and the actual manner in which they do so. In this joke, the exaggeration was the suggestion that *American Idol* coverage and commentary would be given 45 minutes of air time on *Fox News Chicago*, but war, politics, and international news would be afforded only two minutes at the very end of the broadcast. Poignant and effective satire is always rooted in the truth. It is the point of departure. As this sidebar demonstrates, *RedEye* and *Red Streak*, for all their condescension and dearth of democratic information are not necessarily that far removed from mainstream news outlets such as *Fox News Chicago*. The *Red Face* satirists, and their readers, would rather ridicule *RedEye*, *Red Streak*, and *Fox News Chicago*, as opposed to read or watch them, and for much the same reasons. Any satire would fail if its audience did not agree that the butt ought to be positioned as a fool and ridiculed for his/her/its shortcomings. (139)

The messages underlying *The Daily Show's* brand of satire are geared towards a media savvy and politically astute audience, as opposed to one that collectively suffers from attention deficit disorder. It is, therefore, not a coincidence that satire, which exposes hypocrisy and folly in the political realm, including the news media's presentation of that realm, would prove so attractive to a growing constituency of young adults. It confirms the discursive perspective of a significant portion of a generation, which, according to Patterson, Hall Jamieson and Cappella, and Halstead, is dissatisfied to the point of paralysis with the quality of political discourse in America. The consumers of *The Daily Show* parallel Halstead's Generation X, who may not be experts on the issues but are sufficiently informed to be able to identify what is dysfunctional about the

manner in which those issues are presented and understand why journalism is a deserving target of satire. In short, they have a strong enough foundation of knowledge and awareness to understand the jokes and to agree with the earnest messages behind them.

In the case of satire that takes aim at the mainstream media, the plausible strand is the identifiable conventions and practices of the press and the behaviour of the press and the political actors that journalists cover. The implausible strand usually consists of the satirist's exaggeration of the plausible. Without the shared knowledge of the plausible strand, the implausible strand – the humorous exaggeration of the conventions and practices of the news media – would fail to be funny. The power and poignancy of satirical humour is that it is rooted in the truth, in the realm of the plausible.

William P. Holden wrote that satire is not necessarily meant to present a picture of “reality” as it is conventionally understood, since it combines conventional wisdom simultaneously with its own exaggeration for comedic effects. (140) However, this does not necessarily mean the messages behind satirical commentary are trivial or insignificant. He suggests satire and its potential impact are quite powerful. “Not the literal accuracy but perverse accuracy is the strength of satire. Satire must distort the truth so that is at once less and more true than reality.” (141)

Post-modern theory may have thrown the notion of the existence of “truth” into question, so it may be more accurate to simply say that satire which ridicules the news media is rooted in a particular worldview. Nonetheless, consumption figures clearly indicate that this form of satirical “reportage” conforms to and affirms the worldview of the media-wise, yet politically disappointed young adult demographic. The young adult

tunes in loyalty and laughs constantly, because he or she agrees with the messages found in the jokes.

The rising popularity of news-directed satire

The influence of comedy in the political realm is not a new phenomenon. However, in this entertainment-driven television age, comedy has become an important source of political information for millions of Americans.

The Center of Media and Public Affairs, a Washington based non-partisan research organization that studies the news and entertainment media, has examined the political influence of late night humour since the late 1980s. In a landmark study published in the *Harvard International Journal of Press/Politics* in 2003, several of the Center's top experts explored the influence of late night comedy as a primary source of political information for a growing proportion of Americans, and scientifically examined the political content of their humour. (142) The study began by asking what *Time*, *Newsweek*, *C-Span*, *The Today Show*, *The NewsHour with Jim Leher*, CNN's *Crossfire*, ABC's *This Week* and NBC's *Meet the Press*, all had in common. Their answer: All were selected by fewer Americans than the category of television comedies (including *The Late Show*, *The Tonight Show*, and *Politically Incorrect*) as a media source from which they had learned something about the presidential candidates of 2000.(143)

The 2000 election produced an "unprecedented" role for late night comedy in presidential politics, as mainstream news sources frequently provided a recap of the late night comedians' jokes directed towards the candidates. (144) The article quoted presidential historian Michael Beschloss, who described the effect of late night comedy

as being similar to “political cartoons of an earlier era multiplied by fifty.” (145) The study also quoted Dan Schnur, director of communications for John McCain’s 2000 presidential campaign, who said the influence of late night comedy on politics

...is incredible and it is growing. During the campaign season, you’re often cowering at 11:30 – what are these guys going to say?...Jay Leno is a lot cheaper than polling. [Late night shows] often reflect what voters feel, and their observations have a tremendous effect on how voters view the candidates, much more so than evening news shows. (146)

The study found that the different late night comedy sources direct their jokes at predominantly the same targets – top members of the executive and presidential candidates – and target both parties relatively evenly. (147) Their jokes also focused almost exclusively on the same personality traits of the candidates. George W. Bush is dumb; and Clinton is a heavy-eating philanderer. Issue-based jokes were rare. (148)

The study’s authors suggested that it is possible that the content of the jokes on late night humour shows offer a window into the thinking of the American people, “or the major weaknesses of presidential aspirants.” (149) “...rather than being idiosyncratic, the major late night shows exhibit quite similar patterns in choice of targets, and the subject matter of their jokes.” (150) However, a more accurate assessment of the role played by late night humourists and their influence on public opinion would be to suggest that they reinforce and solidify the dominant frames presented in the mainstream news media’s political and campaign coverage. In their book, *The Press Effect: Politicians, Journalists, and the Stories that Shape the Political World*, Kathleen Hall Jamieson and Paul Waldman examined the story frames in the 2000 presidential election coverage. They found that the majority of stories were not based around issues, but rather campaign strategy and personality traits of the candidates. More specifically, the major frames were

Gore's supposed wooden public persona and compulsion to lie, and Bush's supposedly inadequate intellect. (151) In short, the mainstream news media created the news frames that would then become the source for the jokes in the late night humourists' monologues. Instead of offering insight into the public's perception of the candidates, late night humour only echoes the dominant – and as Hall Jamieson and Waldman demonstrate – exaggerated story frames of the news media. (152) The late night humourists react to the misguided news media, as opposed to some kind of unspoken public consensus, thus reinforcing and enhancing the errors of the news media. These errors suggest that Gore is a deluded liar who claims to have “invented” the Internet. In fact, Gore asserted, in what could be described as overstatement, that he took the initiative in securing the funding to expand the network. (153) Therefore, there is a clear distinction between late night comedians, such as Jay Leno and David Letterman, and the satirists, such as Jon Stewart. Late night comedians, while certainly popular, and as a result, influential, are part of what ails political discourse in America.

This clear distinction was revealed concretely in the National Annenberg Election Survey released in September 2004. (154) The researchers from the Annenberg Public Policy Center at the University of Pennsylvania conducted a content analysis of the jokes found in the opening monologues of *The Late Show with David Letterman* and *The Tonight Show with Jay Leno*, as well as those found in the “headlines” portion of *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* during a three-month period leading up to the November election. The researchers found that 33% of Stewart's jokes referred to at least one policy issue, compared to 24% of Leno's jokes, and 21% of Letterman's. (155) The content analysis also found that Leno and Letterman directed a far higher percentage of their

jokes at the two presidential candidates using the mainstream news media's dominant news frames. These included George W. Bush's questionable service in the Texas Air National Guard during the Vietnam War, and Kerry's reputation as a 'flip-flopper' when it comes to decision making. (156) "The Daily Show segments are less likely than a Leno or Letterman joke to use a quick punch-line to make fun of a candidate," said Dannagal Goldthwaite Young, the research director of the survey. "Instead, Stewart's lengthier segments employ irony to explore policy issues, news events, and the media's coverage of the events, and the media's coverage of the campaign." (157)

The survey also quantified several other important distinctions between Leno and Letterman and Stewart viewers. The survey asked respondents a series of questions to gauge their knowledge of campaign issues and the candidates' backgrounds. One of the questions asked which candidate favours allowing workers to invest some of their social security contributions in the stock market. Another asked which candidate is a former prosecutor. Not only were *The Daily Show* viewers able to answer more questions correctly than Leno or Letterman viewers, but they even scored better than people who do not watch late night comedy but regularly watch or read the news. (158) *Daily Show* viewers are more interested in the presidential campaign, more educated, younger, and more liberal than the average American or than Leno or Letterman viewers, Young said.

...Daily Show viewers have higher campaign knowledge than national news viewers and newspaper readers – even when education, party identification, following politics, watching cable news, receiving campaign information online, age, gender, are taken into consideration. (159)

The study also seemed to pierce holes in theory, expressed by former *Nightline* host Ted Koppel, that *The Daily Show* audience was not adequately informed about the issues of the day. In fact, as Young points out, and as will be examined in further detail

in the next chapter, *The Daily Show* and its satirical content “assumes a fairly high level of political knowledge on the part of its audience.” (160) If the viewers did not possess this bedrock knowledge then they would not understand the jokes, would derive less enjoyment from the show, and would not loyally tune in every night. They need to understand the plausible strand of the joke in order to appreciate the satirical exaggeration.

Still, while the late night comedians’ jokes may simply reinforce the simplistic, and often erroneous personality-based frames of the news media’s campaign coverage, such shows do offer the candidates a more unfiltered forum to express themselves and communicate with the electorate. The late night circuit, particularly since Bill Clinton’s saxophone performance on the *Arsenio Hall Show* in 1992, has become critically important for candidates on the campaign trail. (161) Such venues provide candidates a platform to show their human side, to show they have a sense of humour. The late night comedy shows allow the candidates to connect with millions of viewers (i.e. voters) in a “more relaxed setting, when they’re more open to liking what you have to present, in this case, the candidate.” (162) Democratic nominee John Kerry, for example, whose handlers were concerned that he was being defined as wooden and boring, similar to Gore, made an entrance onto the *Tonight Show with Jay Leno* riding on a Harley Davidson motorcycle. The segment was a contrived and manufactured photo-op designed to recast Kerry’s image. (163)

There are even distinctions to be made between Jay Leno, David Letterman, and Conan O’Brien. David Letterman, for example, has been called the “Tim Russert of the talk shows.” (164) During a time when sound bites have diminished to seven seconds or

less on average, Letterman's interviews with top politicians are often intentionally humourless, and delve into issues in a more complete manner than even the elite news media, which focus on the horse race, the campaign strategy story lines. The *Boston Globe's* Joanna Weiss described David Letterman's interview with Democratic presidential candidate Gen. Wesley Clark, by saying,

There was no time for banter, or anything vaguely resembling a joke. David Letterman, serious TV interlocutor, got right to business Thursday night...Letterman wanted to know about bullet wounds, the Kosovo campaign, rebuilding Iraq. He resurrected some of Clark's early campaign woes. He barely cracked a smile. (165)

In the same article, Hall Jamieson described Letterman's interview with George W. Bush in 2000, during which Letterman "grilled the candidate on the death penalty and the air quality in Texas," as "deadly" and the equivalent of harsh grilling on a Sunday news show. (166) "It's a very, very effective piece of journalism," she said. (167) Furthermore, when a political figure is interviewed by Letterman, he or she is given more unmediated air-time to communicate themselves and their identity than they are on television newscasts. "When [George W.] Bush appeared on CBS's David Letterman Show on October 19, he received nearly as much air time as he did on the CBS Evening News during the entire general election." (168) On occasion, Leno offers politicians the same sort of unfiltered platform to discuss issues, which are often given short shrift by the news media. *The Associated Press* described an interview between Sen. John Edwards, a candidate for the Democratic presidential nomination, and Jay Leno on *The Tonight Show*. "During the show, he [Edwards] touched on such issues as gay marriage and the loss of U.S. jobs to overseas workers. If elected, Edwards said he would support the right of individual states to decide whether to allow gay marriage." (169)

Nonetheless, there is a clear distinction between late night comedy talk shows such as the *Late Show with David Letterman* and *The Tonight Show with Jay Leno*, and satirical sources, which lampoon the conventions of the news media. Leno and Letterman target, for the most part, politicians and not the news media. As has been shown, late night humour tends to reinforce the dominant news frames, which are often quite flawed. The next chapter will show how satire, or “fake news,” attempts, whether consciously or not, to deconstruct and expose the flawed workings of the news media themselves.

Late night talk shows, such as Leno and Letterman, while still popular sources for campaign information among the young adult generation, have not increased in popularity in this category over the last four years. (170) Late night talks shows are not a part of the satirical renaissance underway in America.

By contrast, *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* has risen considerably in its popularity and influence in the political realm over that same time period. *The Daily Show* gets an average of 4 million viewers per week, “73 per cent of whom belong to the 18-49 demographic with a median age of 33.” (171) “The Daily Show airs at 11 p.m. and is therefore in direct competition with the evening news, and it consistently beats CNN, MSNBC, CNBC, and Fox News among young adults in this time slot.” (172) According to Newsweek, “College kids in particular think Stewart is a God.” (173) During the 2004 Democratic and Republican national conventions *The Daily Show* beat Fox News, MSNBC and CNN in the 11 p.m. time slot six of the eight nights in the 18 to 34 year-old demographic. (174)

The show’s large, loyal, and young audience has attracted the attention of big name advertisers who are desperate to reach the show’s largest demographic. According

to an article in *Advertising Age*, Comedy Central, the show's host station in America, attracted 50 new advertisers in 2004, many of which were brought on board by *The Daily Show*. (175) The article also points out that the show now attracts different kinds of advertisers, including financial service and insurance firms, while continuing to increase its revenues from existing categories of advertisers, including Hollywood studios, beverages, video games and "quick service" restaurants. (176)

An ad in the *Wall Street Journal* in 2002 read, "More 18 to 49-year-olds get their news from *The Daily Show* than any other cable news program." Underneath it read, "Heaven help us." (177) The ad was purchased by the producers of *The Daily Show* in an attempt at humour. However, a closer look at Jon Stewart, as well as the format, content, tone and targets of *The Daily Show's* satire, reveals just how self-deprecating the message truly was.

Chapter 2: Jon Stewart and *The Daily Show*

Jon Stewart, arguably the voice of a politically frustrated generation, was far from an overnight success. Nor is Stewart, 43, even technically a member of the generation that so loyally tunes in four nights a week for his take on the news of the day. Though not a member, he became their unofficial leader and spokesman with his brand of intelligent and honest humour that exposes hypocrisy and dishonesty among political actors and those who cover them.

The intelligence that infuses Stewart's humour is no accident. He has a degree in psychology from the College of William and Mary.⁽¹⁾ However, Stewart used his psychology degree to toil as a bartender in his native New Jersey -- among other jobs -- for a short while before taking a gamble and following his dream of a career in comedy in New York City.⁽²⁾ Stewart honed his craft on the New York open mic circuit where some of the biggest stars in contemporary comedy, including Jerry Seinfeld and Chris Rock, made a name for themselves before achieving enormous success.⁽³⁾ Stewart's path to stardom, however, took a bit longer. The 1990s included numerous false starts, including a couple of short-lived talk shows, several forgettable film roles (*Half Baked*), and being narrowly edged out by Conan O'Brien for the opportunity to replace David Letterman in NBC's 12:30 a.m. timeslot.⁽⁴⁾ By the end of the decade, Stewart was a widely respected comedian, but he had yet to find the proper vehicle to showcase his considerable talent for intelligent, topical comedy.

Stewart's search ended in January 1999 when he was chosen as the new host of *The Daily Show*, a relatively unknown comedy show on basic cable. Stewart replaced

former ESPN personality Craig Kilborn, who left the show to host his own late night talk show at 12:30 a.m. on CBS. (5) Stewart's arrival marked a new beginning for the three-year-old show. Stewart decided to make the show far more topical and political, and the comedy more substantive. In the show's earlier incarnation, the news story segments typically ridiculed ordinary people who said, did, or believed silly things. (6) According to Bruce Fretts of *Entertainment Weekly* a "...typical field segment mocked ordinary Americans who believed in Bigfoot or Alien abductions." (7)

Those same kinds of segments continued once Stewart arrived, but to a lesser extent. The show became more focused on politics, the media, current political issues, and "aiming their comedic ammunition against powerful targets" as opposed to the Bigfoot and alien abduction believers who *Daily Show* correspondent Stephen Colbert described as the "equivalent of baby seals." (8) Some people at the show, according to the *Entertainment Weekly* article, resisted the show's new direction. "I can't say there weren't days of knock-down, dragging'em-out yelling," Stewart told the magazine. (9)

But the changes paid off, and relatively quickly. The show hit its stride and began to earn far greater notoriety – and ratings -- during the 2000 U.S. presidential election campaign and particularly during the debacle that was the Florida recount, which was a prime target for satirical ridicule. (10) *The Daily Show* covered the conventions from its satirical perspective and even enlisted former Republican presidential candidate Bob Dole to provide surprisingly funny commentary on the election. Just 18 months after Stewart took over the helm, the shows ratings increased by 43%. (11) The show's 2000 election coverage, called "Indecision 2000," earned the show a Peabody Award, as well

as an Emmy for comedy writing in 2001. (12) The show, with its new focus on political humour, was a hit with both audiences and critics.

Stewart's ratings have also translated into political influence. When *Newsday* created a list of those who would have the most influence over the coverage of the 2004 presidential campaign, Jon Stewart was first on the list and on the cover of the issue.(13) The list was devised based on interviews with political consultants, journalists and academics. Behind Stewart were such media heavyweights as Tim Russert (#2), Tom Brokaw (#5), Ted Koppel (#16), and Peter Jennings (#16). Other prominent figures in the world of comedy, including Jon Macks (#6), joke writer for *The Tonight Show with Jay Leno*, Michael Schur and Tina Fey (#8), head writers for *Saturday Night Live*, and Jude Brennan (#10), writer for *The Late Show with David Letterman*, all placed ahead of many of the nation's most prominent journalists. (14)

In *Newsweek's* "Who's Next 2004" issue, which listed those who are "destined for greatness in 2004," Stewart was once again on the cover and the subject of the issue's feature story. In the article Marc Peyser wrote,

Not many comedy shows would dare do five minutes on the intricacies of Medicare or a relentlessly cheeky piece on President George W. Bush's Thanksgiving trip to Iraq ("A small group of handpicked journalists accompanied the president on his top-secret mission to tell the entire world about his top-secrecy"). His cut-the-crap humor hits the target so consistently – you've gotta love a show that calls its segments on Iraq "Mess O'Potamia" – he's starting to be taken seriously as a political force. (15)

Political figures hoping to reach the young adult demographic are frequent guests on *The Daily Show*. It has become an essential whistle stop for political leaders, aspirants, and their operatives. (16) Some recent guests include Hillary Rodham Clinton, Richard Clarke, Karen Hughes, Al Gore, Michael Bloomberg, John McCain, Gen. Wesley Clark,

Rudy Giuliani, Sen. John Kerry, and Republican chairman Ed Gillespie, and many others. Sen. John Edwards even announced his candidacy for the Democratic presidential nomination on *The Daily Show*. It was not a joke. (17)

The author of the same *Entertainment Weekly* feature article spent a day at the show when Sen. Hillary Rodham Clinton was to appear to promote her new book. (18) The article quotes the former first lady's press secretary, Philippe Reines, as saying, "When the publisher suggested it, we were struck by the buzz around Jon among both his young audience as well as seasoned political professionals." (19) The article goes on to quote *ABC News* anchor Peter Jennings, who said, "Stewart is an essential character in the national political landscape," and admitted that he was a fan. (20)

Media elites seeking to attract the young adult demographic to their broadcasts and publications are frequent guests on the show as well. The irony, of course, is that both the media and the political elites who appear on the show are trying to promote themselves to an audience who laughs at them four nights a week.

"Steve Kroft, Chris Matthews, George Stephanopoulos and Greta Van Susteren have sat opposite Stewart, sometimes forced to defend their networks' philosophies to surprisingly straight but tough questions." (21)

When Stewart interviews prominent journalists, the discussion has a tendency to become oddly serious, as the producers of "objective," "real" journalism are often forced to atone, explain and justify what they do to a host and an audience who feel they are in many ways degrading political discourse in America. The show's influence is such that wealthy mainstream journalists have come groveling for approval from those who believe they have little credibility.

As he has discussed repeatedly in media interviews during the time period being studied, Stewart's humour comes from his own personal frustrations as an avid news consumer. He and the show's writers craft the show's jokes based on their own "internal barometer" about what is funny and relevant, with little or no consideration about what the audience may want. (22) In that regard, he says the show is a "selfish" pursuit, but one that does not try to pander to any demographic in particular. (23) "Where do the jokes come from? Really, they, they come from a place of pulling your hair out, of seeing things that make you cringe, and wanting to turn that into something that will make you laugh," said Stewart. (24) And what makes him cringe and pull his hair out is often the news media, particularly the 24-hour cable news networks and the manner in which they cover politics, as well as their relentless coverage of such sensationalist stories as the Laci Peterson murder case and the trials of Martha Stewart and Michael Jackson, all of which drown out other stories that are potentially far more significant. "It's almost like having my own bank, because they've so destroyed the fine credibility or the fiber that was the trust between the people and what they're hearing on the air," Stewart said. (25)

In another interview in which Stewart was once again discussing the source of the show's humour, he said the public is "so inundated with mixed messages from the media and from politicians that we're just trying to sort it out for ourselves." (26)

"I think, honestly, we're practicing a new form of desperation," said the comedy/"fake news" anchor when asked if the show represented an old form of comedy or a new form of journalism. (27)

As far as Stewart is concerned, it used to be the news media's role to provide clarity and information, and to "sort things out" for the news consumer, as opposed to

bombarding the overwhelmed viewer with mixed messages. Stewart believes that in the political communication function -- the symbiotic relationship between politicians and political operatives and the press -- it is the political class that has gained the upper hand. They have figured out the conventions of both television news and the journalists who produce it and they are now able to successfully manipulate their colleagues in the fourth estate for their own political advantage. Stewart sees this. It frustrates him. So, naturally, it fuels his brand of media-directed satire. Stewart told PBS's Bill Moyers:

“...they’ve (the news media) forgotten their role. When Nixon went against Kennedy in a debate and they didn’t really know what television was all about and Nixon went on sweaty and Kennedy went on powdered, Kennedy won the debate. Well, now they all know how it works. And they’ve figured out how to get around it. So now the offence has gotten better than the defense. The defense better get together and figure out how to become more effective. And to me, that will engage people as a matter of course.” (28)

While the show’s correspondents play exaggerated versions of real television correspondents, mocking their use of dramatic clichés, serious tone and demeanour and tendency to make themselves the central figure in their reports, Stewart does not imitate the conventions and tendencies of real news anchors. (29) He is not playing a character. He is the straight man, playing off the exaggerated statements and behaviour of his correspondents. In fact, Stewart often challenges them on what they say, much like one would imagine he would while watching the news in his own home, pulling his hair out in front of the television. Unlike real news anchors, Stewart laughs, makes mocking voices and does amateurish imitations of some politicians and journalists.

“Mr. Stewart....doesn’t have a squared-off anchor physique or anchor’s height (he’s 5-foot-7) or a deep anchor voice, but he has fine comic timing (which includes a good repertory of eye rolls and suppressed giggles) and lots of self-deprecating charm. He projects no need to appear unassailable.” (30)

The final third of each episode of *The Daily Show* is an interview. The interview subjects can be Hollywood actors promoting a film, or television stars promoting a new show, but are more often politicians, journalists, media personalities, and authors who have written a new, often polemical, book that is relevant to the current political dialogue.⁽³¹⁾ It is in these segments that Stewart reveals another aspect of his frustration with the current level of political discourse in America – i.e. another source of hair pulling. In fact, it is clear in his own media interviews and when he interviews politicians, media personalities, and authors on *The Daily Show*, that Stewart shares the frustrations of Ted Halstead's Gen Xers when it comes to pointless ideological shouting matches. Stewart explained this frustration to PBS's Bill Moyers as follows:

“The country is, look, the general dialogue is being swayed by the people who are ideologically driven. The five percent on each side that are so ideologically driven that they will dictate the terms of the discussion. The other 90 percent of the country have lawns to mow, and kids to pick up from schools and money to make, and things to do. Their lives are, they have entrusted...we live in a representative democracy. And so we elect representatives to go do our bidding, so that we can get the leaves out of the gutter, and do other things around the house that need to be done. What the representatives have done over 200 years is set up a periphery – I think they call it the Beltway – that is obtuse enough that we can't penetrate it anymore, unless we spend all of our time. This is the way that it's been set up purposefully by both sides...They don't want average people to easily penetrate the workings because then we call them on it.”⁽³²⁾

It is for this reason that, despite his own personal political beliefs, which he rarely hides, Stewart's interview segments bear little resemblance to the ideological battles common on such shows as MSNBC's *Hardball* and CNN's *Crossfire*, which was cancelled in 2005. Stewart is civil, and no matter how ideologically strident his guest may be, he attempts to get him or her to consider an issue from the other side and coax his guest into finding some semblance of common ground.⁽³³⁾ In an interview with Fox News' Bill O'Reilly on Oct. 18, 2005, for example, Stewart asked O'Reilly with an

affable tone, “Why so angry?” (34) Stewart told O’Reilly that he seems to have a very good life. He has a bestselling book, as well as a “hot show,” and yet he still appears to be grumpy.

“There’s a lot of wrongs we have to right in this world. We have to take on a lot of bad people,” responded O’Reilly. (35)

“And when are you going to start doing that?” joked Stewart in response, adding that O’Reilly seems to attack Cindy Sheehan – a mother of an American soldier killed in Iraq who became an anti-war icon – more so than he goes after the neo-conservatives who claimed that Iraq had weapons of mass destruction in the lead up to the war. (36)

Stewart then pointed out that in a *Newsday* article published that day, O’Reilly was talking about retiring from *The O’Reilly Factor* after nine years. Some in the audience began to cheer, but Stewart thought that was impolite. “That’s not right,” he told the audience. (37) O’Reilly then discussed how he has to work up a sense of outrage to do the show every night, “because there’s lots of things wrong.” (38) Stewart then asked if O’Reilly was still boycotting France for its obstruction of the U.S.’s efforts to garner United Nations support for its pre-emptive war in Iraq. O’Reilly said the show is still boycotting France, which he described as an enemy of the U.S.

“The thing is, when was the last time France truly mattered in this?” asked Stewart. “Don’t you think that’s what’s wearing you down? Your outrage must be channeled to...(Stewart pretends to whisper to O’Reilly) I don’t know if you know this, but they never found weapons of mass destruction. Why don’t you go after those guys?” (39)

The exchange between Stewart and the bombastic O'Reilly is a prime example of how Stewart, with his everyman persona, attempts to politely persuade his ideological political guests to realize and acknowledge the inflexibility of their positions in an effort to foster a more constructive dialogue.

However, by the time the 2004 election season rolled around, the success of *The Daily Show* had transformed Stewart into a media celebrity and apparent power player in the American political scene. This new status appeared to create a conflict with Stewart's affable everyman persona and his claims to be nothing more than a powerless comedian. Stewart graced the covers of numerous national magazines, including *Newsweek* and *Rolling Stone*, all touting his influence as an apparent king maker in the 2004 campaign. The same media machine that he ridicules four nights a week had anointed him as the star media personality of the election season. His newfound status was bolstered by the Pew study cited in the introduction, as well as the tendency of different news outlets to follow what their competitors are doing and saying. The media hype seemed to put the satirist in an uncomfortable position. Satirists are not supposed to be media celebrities and power brokers. In Stewart's case, his role had been to mock the mainstream media, now he had been appointed their collective darling. Since the beginning of his tenure at *The Daily Show*, Stewart had repeated constantly that he does not view himself as a social or media critic, and vehemently denied that he had any influence on the political realm. (40) *The Daily Show* "scratches an itch, but makes no dent," Stewart said. (41)

"I think of myself as a comedian who has the pleasure of writing jokes about things that I actually care about. And that's really it. You know, if I really wanted to enact social change...I have great respect for people who are in the front lines and trenches of trying to enact social change. I am far lazier than that. I am a tiny, neurotic man, standing in the back of the room throwing tomatoes at the chalk board. And that's really it." (42)

However, as will be discussed in Chapter 4, which explores the impact of contemporary political satire – has it or will it inspire journalistic reform or will news-directed satire simply be co-opted by the bottom-line driven mainstream news outlets? – Stewart’s claims to be nothing more than a comedian throwing tomatoes from the back of the class seem to betray his actions, which include criticizing and challenging journalists with serious discussions about how they have failed the public in their role as the watchdogs of government.

But before examining the potential impact of political satire on the subjects it ridicules, it is necessary to investigate the comedic ways that contemporary news-directed satire targets the media. The next chapter will examine the serious messages that underlie those jokes, messages that were first expressed in the works of earnest media critics and scholars.

Chapter 3: What is so funny about the news media?

Good question, simple answer. The shortcomings, blind spots and inadequacies of the news media at the dawn of the 21st Century have become obvious to any relatively astute news consumer.

In a fragmented and expanding media universe, people gravitate towards those news sources that confirm their perspective. Right-wingers, for example, are more likely to watch Fox News. Progressives are more likely to read *The Nation* or *Mother Jones* magazines. And those who find the political communication function to be an absurd, even dysfunctional brand of theatre, are more likely to watch *The Daily Show*, or read *The Onion* – sources which portray it as such. (1) Political satire has taken media criticism out of the library and communicated those same arguments to millions of people.

This role as a clarifying force is not a new one for satire, which has a long and important historical tradition. For example, in his book *Anti-Puritan Satire 1572-1642*, William P. Holden argues that by analyzing the satire from the era, the true contours of the religious debate are articulated most clearly.(2) In one sequence, he describes the satirical Puritan pamphlets of Martin Marprelate:

In satiric technique, Martin shows imaginativeness and an ability to comprehend serious issues in comic terms; his opponents here are always his inferiors. Perhaps the greatest single quality of the Marprelate pamphlets is this mixture of the serious and the comic to produce the thoughtful laugh, one of the commonest elements of satire. On the other hand, the pages of the pamphlets are full of boisterous chatter; and Martin sounds frequently like a clown on a stage. But mixed with his talk there are almost always the themes of corruption and error; these charges return again and again until, at the end of the series, the reader has a far clearer picture of the essentials of puritan reform than he can get from the most solemn volumes of logically marshaled arguments. (3)

Similarly, performers, such as Jon Stewart and his team at *The Daily Show*, are able to express the same “logically marshaled arguments” of the contemporary media scholars using the language of satire. Their jokes produce Marprelate’s “thoughtful laugh.” In addition, political satire as a form of political communication has many advantages. Studies have shown that humour is an effective language with which to communicate political messages; that humorous messages are more easily remembered; and that humour can “aid in making a political point not only more forcefully, but concisely.” (4)

Consider the following example. One of the most groundbreaking works of media criticism of the late 20th Century was Neil Postman’s *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business*. Postman’s central argument was that television, by its very nature, is an entertainment medium. As such, the medium turns everything that flashes across its screen into entertainment, including the news. In his most frequently cited example from the book, Postman describes the marathon debates between Abraham Lincoln and Stephen A. Douglas in 1858.(5) The two would debate for hours, providing hour-long responses to a single question, followed by hour-and-a-half rebuttals. (6) Complex issues were discussed with exhaustive detail. The packed audience in attendance was not bored, despite the length of the debate. They offered their full attention and were engaged in the discussion. As citizens in a typographic society, they could follow long, complex arguments, and their attention spans were vastly more patient than those of today’s society. (7)

Postman contrasts the Lincoln/Douglas debates with the modern televised debate in the United States in the Age of Television. Hour-long responses have been reduced to two-minute answers with even shorter rebuttals.(8) Political discourse has deteriorated to

sound bites and platitudes designed to ‘hit the hope button.’ In short, the medium has shrunk and over-simplified the message.

Postman’s argument was presented with humour and striking clarity in a segment on *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* the night after the Democratic presidential candidates participated in a debate moderated by Dan Rather on CBS. (9)

“Two days ago, on Desperation Sunday, the four remaining Democrats sat down for a televised debate on CBS moderated by Dan Rather, who had...no system to ensure equal speaking time,” said Stewart, sitting at his anchor’s desk. “But the Democrats conducted themselves with the decorum and gentility you’d expect,” Stewart added before he was abruptly interrupted by a clip of the candidates bickering and shouting over each other.

The camera then cut back to Stewart, waving a stick, hollering, “I have the speaking stick! I have the speaking stick!” A few moments later, Stewart pointed out that the “real loser of the debate on Sunday, as always, the media, which used its time to grill the candidates over labels that matter only to them.” The shot then cut to *New York Times* reporter Elisabeth Bumiller, who asked the following question to Sen. John Kerry: “Are you a Liberal?”

“Let me first just...” said Kerry before Bumiller quickly interrupted him. “But are you a Liberal?” she insisted.

The shot quickly cut back to Stewart, who, imitating Bumiller said: “Please answer the question, I don’t want to have to think of a better one!” But Bumiller was not finished, following up her ridiculous “Liberal” question with what Stewart described as perhaps the “worst ever heard in this format.”

“Really quick, is God on America’s side?” asked Bumiller in a clip from the debate. The shot then cut back to Stewart who continued his satirical assault of Bumiller by imitating her once again. “Top of your head, why are we here? Wait, out of your ass, meaning of life? Go.”

But Bumiller’s inane questions were not even the silliest part of the televised “debate.” With just a few minutes left in the broadcast, moderator Rather advised the candidates that it was time for a “two-minute drill.” The veteran *CBS News* anchor then asked each of the candidates whether they thought the security perimeter being constructed by the Israeli government to keep out Palestinian suicide bombers was a fence or a wall. A one-word answer from each of the candidates was all the veteran newsman was after.

A game show logo that said “Fence or Wall?” then appeared on a screen beside Stewart’s head. “Oh my God, I love fence or wall, alright, alright,” said Stewart, who was barely able to contain his excitement. “This is such a great game! Sen. Kerry, you go.” The senator called the perimeter a fence. The shot then cut back to Stewart at his anchor’s desk holding up a sign that said ‘Fence.’ Bells started ringing and the studio audience cheered wildly. “I said fence, I said fence!” repeated a triumphant Stewart.

Rev. Al Sharpton disappointed Stewart when he responded “Wall.” When the shot cut back to the anchor he held up a sign that said “Fence.” Instead of bells ringing there was the ‘wahwahwah’ noise known to indicate an incorrect answer on such game shows.

“Come on Johnny Edwards, come through for me buddy,” said Stewart. Edwards did not disappoint and the sound of bells and cheers returned when Stewart slowly raised his sign that said ‘Fence,’ matching Edwards’ answer.

“Alright, Denny K (Congressman Dennis Kucinich), bring it home,” said an excited Stewart. The shot then cut to a clip of Kucinich who did not stick to a one-word answer. “When Israel builds something on its territory, it’s a fence. But when it builds something on the Palestinians’ territory, it’s a wall,” responded Kucinich. The ‘wahwahwah’ sound effect returned as Stewart held up his sign that read, “Either characterization is simplistic and insulting to such a tragic situation.” Stewart shook his head in disgust as the show cut to commercial. The host was not reacting because he got another answer wrong, but in disbelief that a debate supposedly intended to help the public choose the best Democratic candidate to run for president actually ended with a “two-minute drill,” akin to a ‘lightning round’ on a televised quiz show.

It would be difficult to find a clearer example illustrating Postman’s argument. The satirical embellishment adds clarity to the argument – “making it at once less and more true than the reality.” The satirical exaggeration – Stewart turning the debate into a game show – highlights the argument that television has debased political discourse to a form of entertainment of seemingly little significance. And unlike Postman’s book, which was read by many people over the past two decades, Stewart’s segment was viewed by more than a million viewers in North America in one night. (10)

Calling a Lie a Lie

The shortcomings and blind spots of modern objective journalism are the result of the way that the concept of objectivity has evolved over the decades in professional practice. The guiding ethic of the profession is the source of its flaws and, therefore, a bountiful source of satirical material.

Politicians and political operatives believe it to be in their interests to lie, wrote Andre Pratte in his book *Le Syndrome Pinocchio: Essai sur le mensonge en politique*. The book was written in the context of Canadian politics, but its arguments also apply to the modern political communication function south of the border. According to Pratte, the press corps consistently fails to expose or hold public officials accountable for such deceptions, and therefore, politicians see no consequences from indulging in the practice.(11) As a result of the news media's complacency, lying has become second nature for politicians. In fact, lying is now such a part of the language of politics that more often than not it goes completely unnoticed. (12) Lies, Pratte writes, are omissions, partisan exaggerations, embellishments, partial disclosures, and positive spins, and not simply Nixonian deceptions. (13) It is no secret that politicians use such tactics, but rarely are they characterized as lies. They are simply accepted as part of politics – it is part of the game. (14) The acceptance of such practices, however, is the crux of the problem for Pratte. The entire political system from the school board to the federal cabinet or the White House is infected with the syndrome. (15) The fact that the news media – and the public – accept such deceptive tactics so nonchalantly is why the problem is so serious, he argued. (16)

Rarely is a politician challenged on his or her talking points, which frequently include omissions, partisan exaggerations, embellishments, partial disclosures, occasionally Nixonian deceptions, and nearly always positive spin. The journalist, constrained by the imprecisely defined concept of objectivity, often does not feel comfortable questioning the veracity of such statements. Most journalists are ambitious individuals who are concerned with advancing their careers. Most likely cringe at the

thought of being accused or labeled as biased by the growing ranks of the “bias police.”(17) Many are also wary of offending their interview subjects (usually important official sources) who may decline future interview requests if displeased with their treatment. As Tom Fenton explains in his book *Bad News: The Decline of Reporting, the Business of News and the Danger to Us All*, “Bush Administration officials, like those in previous administrations, may freeze out individual reporters whose work has annoyed them.”(18) *The Washington Post*’s Dana Milbank, who is described as “relentlessly” critical of the Bush administration and long-time Washington correspondent Helen Thomas are two of the most well-known casualties of Bush administration vendettas. (19)

Even more fundamental than the fear of losing access is the fact that journalists do not see it as their role to pass judgment on the veracity of statements from officials. That might be construed as evidence of bias and taking such stands would discomfort a journalist’s professional desire to remain “detached.” The “balance” component of objectivity demands that both sides of an issue must get a fair hearing, and then it is up to the news consumer to decide for themselves who is telling the truth and who is making the more sensible arguments. This is not the role of an “objective” journalist. *New York Times* op-ed columnist Paul Krugman provided perhaps the best description of this shortcoming of the regime of objectivity when he wrote,

The next time the (Bush) administration insists that chocolate is vanilla, much of the media -- fearing accusations of liberal bias, trying to create the appearance of "balance" -- won't report the stuff is actually brown; at best they'll report that some Democrats claim that it's brown. (20)

As a result of this practice, the news consumer is left with a point/counterpoint narrative construction. Two “official” sources from opposing sides of the political spectrum are afforded equal space or time to explain how their opponents are full of

nonsense. The journalist is not in a position to identify who is, or is not, telling the truth. The merit of a political argument is based on a political operative or politician's ability to sell an idea, rather than any scientific or even common sense-based evaluation. The point/counterpoint narrative construction fits nicely into the conventions of objectivity as it has evolved into practice. It allows journalists to remain "fair" and "balanced" by giving both sides of the story – although too often there are more than two sides – and allows journalists to remain "detached," since they do not have to uncover the "truth," but simply present two competing versions of it.

In the age of spin, however, "a formula that requires giving equal weight to both sides ends up helping the side that's lying." (21) As Eric Alterman and Michael Tomasky argued in the *American Prospect* magazine, when Bush says, as he often did during the 2004 campaign, "By far, the vast majority of my tax cuts go to those at the bottom end of the spectrum," this "factually checkable lie" was given the same amount of column inches and seconds of coverage as the truth, a practice which "blurred the truth," the authors wrote. (22) Their conclusion, "Truth is sometimes elusive and hard to pin down. It is, however, the point." (23)

Aside from allowing journalists to remain detached and balanced, the point/counterpoint narrative formula also helps journalists produce copy quickly, a critical benefit in the age of the never-ending news cycle. Journalists know who they need to talk to – most often official sources – and all that is really required is for them to quote both sides of an issue and frame their sound bites with an attention grabbing lead, some context, and perhaps a kicker about where the issue is heading next. (24) It is fair, it is balanced, it is efficient, but it is of questionable informational value. "Does the truth

lie between two competing sound bites?” asked David Mindich in his book about objectivity, *Just the Facts: How “objectivity” came to define American journalism*. (25) His question is the answer.

The point/counterpoint narrative construction defers to official sources, who offer competing (self-interested) versions of reality, which the journalist gives equal consideration to, but passes no judgment upon. In this context, objective journalism acts as the institutionalized enabler of political spin. Official sources are sought out to define reality, and, given the desire of journalists to remain “detached” and “fair,” even blatant official lies may go unchallenged. “Objectivity, moreover, is an ideology that in its most pristine form has no clear preference for fact over fiction.” (26) One of the most common consequences of objectivity, particularly in political reporting, is that it often turns journalists into stenographers for the powerful. (27) Objectivity and all that the concept now entails discourages them “from developing the habits and skills of challenging the self-interested view of official sources,” according to Hackett and Zhao. (28) The pair of scholars offered the following example to illustrate their point:

In January 1969, national media gathered on a beach in Santa Barbara to report, matter of factly, President Nixon's claim that the beach had been cleaned up after a huge oil spill. All concerned dutifully ignored the very real oil slick and debris lying just a hundred yards away. (29)

Spin is certainly not harmless. It can have grave consequences for a democratic society. As Fenton correctly asks, “What if, amid the flurry of too-clever debating points, the truth never comes out?” (30) Objective journalism leaves the average news consumer to fend for him or herself and search for facts and the “truth” in a sea of competing sound bites. As a result, many people are gravitating towards partisan news sources that confirm their existing worldview, while others are simply tuning out. (31)

Media satirists, however, are not bound by the constraints of objectivity. A dishonest statement, or one that is an exaggeration or willfully ignorant, or even transparently rehearsed may go unchallenged by most of the mainstream press, but it is far less likely to go unpunished by a true satirist. The astute satirist uses common sense to vet the sincerity and credibility of an argument. Many lies, as defined by Pratte, are not difficult to detect, but exposing them has become a professionally risky proposition for journalists who continue to strive for “objectivity.”

Consider the following example. Vice President Dick Cheney delivered a speech just days after Democratic senator -- and decorated Marine -- John Murtha suggested it was time that the U.S. government plan to withdraw its troops from Iraq as soon as is practical. Cheney's speech took aim at such “criticism,” as well as the suggestions of some U.S. senators -- and a considerable portion of the public -- that President George W. Bush intentionally misled the country into war under false pretences. (32)

In a segment on *The Daily Show*, Stewart showed a clip of Cheney, dressed in a tux, saying the following, "The saddest part is that our people in uniform have been subjected to these cynical and pernicious falsehoods day in and day out." (33)

The shot cut back to Stewart, who, imitating Cheney's voice in a way that resembled Danny Devito's Penguin character in *Batman Returns*, said,

Do you know how hard it is for the troops to hear the president and I criticized. I mean it's one thing for the soldiers to be literally attacked, bombs and bullets, but to see us figuratively attacked with words, well I mean people, there's only so much they can...

One of the favourite rhetorical devices of Bush administration officials when discussing Iraq is to invoke patriotism and the need to support the troops no matter what. Much of the mainstream press, cowed by the post-September 11 patriotic fever that swept

the country in the months, even years, following the attack, felt compelled to follow suit. But this smokescreen, almost four years old by the time Cheney made this particular speech, had become quite worn. Stewart was not about to let the vice president get away with it. The accusation that the administration misled the country into war under false pretences is not the troops' fault, nor is the suggestion an attack upon them. It is an attack against the Bush administration. It was the administration who made the decision to go to war, a decision for which the troops suffer the real consequences. Stewart's joke held the administration accountable by deconstructing Cheney's transparent attempt to use American troops as a rhetorical force-field in order to avoid responsibility for the administration's actions. The studio audience agreed, and laughed heartily.

Cheney, however, was not finished. "Bring it home brother Dick!" Stewart exclaimed. The shot then cut back to Cheney during the same speech. Cheney said, "We're not going to sit by and let them rewrite history. We're going to continue throwing their own words back at them."

Stewart decided that sounded like a good idea, only he opted to throw some of Cheney's own words back at him. Behind Stewart, three large television screens had images of Vegas-style slot machines. "So here we go, let's see who has made some of the most damaging untrue statements about the war," said Stewart, before pulling a giant slot machine lever. The slot machine images on the three screens began spinning.

The first one stopped and a clip of a Cheney interview dated Aug. 22, 2002 appeared. "There is no doubt that Saddam Hussein now has weapons of mass destruction," said Cheney.

Then the next screen stopped and showed a clip of a Cheney television interview dated May 30, 2005. "I think they're in the last throes, if you will, of the insurgency."

Finally, the third screen stopped and showed a clip of Cheney on NBC's *Meet the Press* on March 16, 2003. "My belief is we will, in fact, be greeted as liberators." Across the screen flashed the words "Jacka\$\$!" as cheering sounds and kazoos blared.

All three statements had been thoroughly exposed as lies – according to Pratte's definition -- by the time *The Daily Show* segment aired. The dishonesty of the statements brought into clear question Cheney's credibility in characterizing opponents of the war as dishonest and the validity of the vice president's use of false patriotism to bring his opponents into disrepute. No weapons of mass destruction were found in Iraq, although that was the administration's first and main justification for launching the pre-emptive war. The insurgency was nowhere close to being in its "last throes" in May 2005. The country's top generals told Congress the opposite the same week that Cheney delivered the speech. (34) Not to mention the fact that American casualties in Iraq continued to mount without interruption. Finally, it is difficult to argue that American troops were welcomed as liberators when more than 1,500 of them had been killed in the country when Cheney uttered those words. (35)

According to Andre Pratte's definition, Cheney is a liar. His lies are on tape and have been heard and read by millions. Most mainstream journalists are content to broadcast, quote and repeat them. At best, they will find a Democrat to refute them. The satirist, however, finds humour in exposing such blatant dishonesty. Politicians are trained by their media handlers not to tell the truth, and journalists have grown so accustomed to not receiving it, that many do not even expect it anymore, and even fewer

demand it. In their failure to challenge officials on what are clearly lies, journalists become complicit in the deception. Another possible interpretation would be that if journalists cannot identify a lie when they hear one – but satirists can – then perhaps they are simply incompetent, or maybe they are too entrenched in the culture of lies that permeates official Washington that they have become immune to the sound of a lie. Or, perhaps journalists are simply overly deferential to those in power, or rather intimidated by an administration that controls the press corps and, to use Ken Auletta's description, treats the press corps like an interest group that can be ignored or engaged as the White House sees fit.(36) Whatever the excuse, journalists are not likely to garner the trust of a savvy news consumer. This explains *The Daily Show's* appeal. (37) And, as was illustrated in Chapter One, a lack of trust in the news media has become a significant problem for the entire profession of journalism, including corporate owners.

Can journalists call the vice president a liar?: Libel law in the U.S.

One excuse that seems to ring particularly hollow is the fear of potential legal action. While the speech of satirists is protected and granted significant legal leeway because it is clearly hyperbolic, the mainstream news media too are afforded significant protection against potential libel actions. Supreme Court interventions, beginning particularly with the 1964 libel case *New York Times v. Sullivan*, have made it increasingly difficult for public officials, and even public figures, to successfully sue a news outlet.(38) Public officials and public figures who attempt to sue a news outlet for criticisms concerning their official conduct must prove what is called actual malice – “that is, that the defendant either knew the accusations were false or at least published with ‘reckless disregard of truth or falsity’ – with ‘convincing clarity’.” (39) Later

decisions which attempted to clarify the law often expanded the latitude for the news media. The Supreme Court recognized that, "Journalists must be given enough 'breathing room' to make honest errors...or they will experience the 'chilling effect' of self-censorship." (40) In short, it is very difficult for a politician, political operative, and the like to sue the news media for libel, particularly when the publication at hand dealt with an issue of public importance. Therefore, journalists have no legal reason to be shy about calling the vice president or other public officials liars, particularly if they have done even the bare minimum of journalistic research to back up that conclusion. However, that doesn't necessarily mean journalists will deem it appropriate to use the power entrusted to them by the U.S. Supreme Court.

Lie to me, I need a quote

In fact, journalists often willfully seek out politicians and political operatives who they know will lie to them. Consider, for example, the modern presidential debate. Journalists are less concerned with the substance of the candidates' arguments than they are about the decisive "knockout" blow. Demeanor and the ability to "look presidential" are of far greater importance than any kind of examination of the candidates' positions on important issues, and more importantly, how those issues will impact the average voter.

The debates are covered more like a boxing match. The press and the ideological characters in the punditocracy are preoccupied with determining who "won" the bout, who threw the better punches, and who sustained the fewest, least noticeable bruises. Journalists watch the debates in a separate room, usually a gymnasium or something of that size. As soon as the debate is over, the journalists rush into another room where paid political operatives from both parties, surrounded by hordes of sign carriers, wait for the

coming onslaught of journalists. The reporters, armed with tape recorders and video cameras, come to ask the partisan operatives who they thought won the debate and why. Some people, including Jon Stewart and his *Daily Show* colleagues, question the value for the news-consuming public of having journalists ask Karen Hughes, President Bush's former communications director, for her perspective on the debate. The room where the political operatives gather awaiting the media pack is commonly called "Spin Alley." Journalists go there with the intent purpose of having paid political operatives lie to them, and then repeat those lies to an increasingly bewildered news consuming public.

Daily Show correspondent Ed Helms went to the second presidential debate between President George W. Bush and Democratic Sen. John Kerry. (41) Helms' character was a novice reporter covering his first presidential debate. When the debate ended, there was a long shot of the two candidates meeting on the stage to shake hands. In a voice over, Helms said, "The debate was over, but who had won? Thankfully, there just happened to be a cluster of political professionals on hand who I could count on for reasoned analysis and insight."

Helms entered Spin Alley and was told by Kerry campaign advisor Joe Lockhart that the Democratic candidate clearly won the debate. Helms declared, "You heard it here first ladies and gentlemen, John Kerry won the debate tonight." Helms then went over to Ken Mehlman, Bush's campaign manager, to ask him how he was feeling given that his candidate had just been clobbered. "I think the president dominated the debate," Mehlman told Helms, who now looked very confused. "How could the two candidates have both won the debate?" Helms wondered in his voice-over narration.

Helms went back to Lockhart and accused him of lying. Helms then went from paid spinner to paid spinner and became increasingly distraught and disillusioned. "This wasn't unfiltered analysis," Helms said in his voice-over, before stating the painfully obvious. "It was almost as if everyone I spoke to had an agenda." In another shot, Helms is following after Mehlman and his gang of sign holders screaming, "You lied to me!" "I did not," Mehlman responded, adding, "I'll get you the talking points." This exchange was followed by a series of long shots of Helms, hollering and looking as though he was wandering in a desert, half delusional. In one shot, Jamie Rubin of the Kerry/Edwards campaign tells Helms, "No, de-emphasizing and emphasis are not bullshit" -- although Pratte would certainly disagree. "Nobody is being honest with you!" Helms screamed in the middle of the gym filled with busy journalists. In another shot, Helms wanders on to the set of CNBC's *Hardball with Chris Matthews*. "This is a sham, it's all a fraud," Helms said before almost falling backward onto the desk in front of the show's panelists. The thoroughly distraught Helms finally collapses to the ground in the gymnasium behind a group of reporters who are scrumming a political operative.

The journalistic practice of going to Spin Alley is clearly absurd. It is counter-intuitive to what journalists, truth seekers and reporters of facts, ought to do. Spinmeisters should be avoided and ignored, not indulged. But the journalists covering the debate think nothing of it. It is now simply the way presidential debates are covered. Even if individual journalists know it is silly and unhelpful to ask the campaign manager for President Bush about who he thought won the debate -- the answer will never surprise -- it is not so easy to break from the pack and try something different. It is far less comfortable. The journalist knows what his or her editor or producer is expecting. It is

even more difficult when one considers the fact that the journalists covering the debate are working under an extremely tight deadline. Traveling to Spin Alley is quicker and far easier than other possible approaches. In the case of the cable networks, they need instant analysis; they need people on camera as soon as the debate is over to keep the conversation going. Paid political hacks and ideologically-committed celebrity pundits are only too happy to oblige.

While there may be plenty of logical reasons to explain why journalists head to Spin Alley, which Jon Stewart renamed "Deception Lane," Helms' satirical story exposes the absurdity of the practice. There is little informational value to be gained from paid political hacks who recite talking points, many of which were crafted before the debate even began. Nor is there anything terribly engaging or insightful, since talking points are, by their very nature, highly predictable.

It is interesting that Helms' fictional correspondent was a neophyte covering his first debate. Unlike many of the other journalists in the room, he was not used to the routine and professional norms and conventions that are now a part of covering a political debate. For others, the idea of being lied to by a political operative was so familiar, so normal, that it is not even something they question. To the rookie Helms, a political innocent, the lies and talking points were rude and dishonest, and he took personal offence.

In theory, journalists ought to expect the truth. They ought to demand it, and avoid those who are not prepared to offer it. However, as the piece clearly illustrates, "truth" and "honesty" are simply not part of the political language of either political journalists or their subjects. Objectivity, and the manner in which the concept has

evolved in its practice, is perhaps the primary reason for this unfortunate reality. The debate is a contest and for every contest there must be a winner. But journalists cannot declare a winner. If they did the bias police would scream at the top of their lungs. So, they have to find official sources willing to offer an opinion. But they can't just talk to a source from one party; that would not be balanced. So, they talk to official sources from both the Republican and Democratic sides, who inevitably declare that their candidate won. It is the ever popular point/counterpoint narrative structure. Not only is the news consumer left without a real idea of who actually won the debate -- assuming that is even of great importance -- but the actual content and substance of what the two candidates argued is given short shrift.

When the studio audience laughs at Helms' antics, they do not laugh simply because he was behaving in an erratic and zany fashion while surrounded by earnest professionals. The audience also laughs because the message underlying his jokes -- that the practice of journalists quoting people they know are paid to lie to them -- is unquestionably absurd. Their laughter is an audible sign of approval of the satirist's perspective. It is also a condemnation of an entrenched journalistic convention. With so much written about how contemporary political reportage alienates news consumers by situating them as spectators, satirical coverage clearly represents a form of engagement. The satirist, by embellishing the recognizable conventions of political reportage and exposing them as absurd, depends on the shared understanding and resulting laughter of his audience to be successful. The "thoughtful laugh" of the audience and those viewing at home is a form of participation: they understand the joke and agree with the satirist's perspective.

Debates may be relatively rare events, but the journalistic practice of accepting rehearsed talking points that are often clearly erroneous, or answers that are clearly designed to avoid a direct question, is part of the daily routine of covering politics. (42) Official sources are by far the most popular sources in political news stories, yet they don't speak English. They speak Talking Point. Trained in the art of staying on message, repeating the same short messages over and over, official sources answer the questions they want, and politely side-step those they do not want to, or are not prepared to answer.(43) Unfortunately, journalists often let them get away with it.

One problem, according to Trudy Lieberman of the *Columbia Journalism Review*, is that journalists often ask long-winded, loosely-constructed questions, including double and triple-barreled questions that allow the official source to choose which parts they wish to answer and give them options for how to do so. (44)

Consider this exchange during a rare press conference held by President George W. Bush in April 2004. One journalist asked the following mouthful.

Mr. President, before the war, you and members of your administration made several claims that U.S. troops would be greeted as liberators with sweets and flowers, that Iraqi oil revenue would pay for most of the reconstruction; and that Iraq not only had weapons of mass destruction, but as Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld said, we know where they are. How do you explain to Americans how you got that so wrong? And how do you answer your opponents, who say that you took this nation to war on the basis of what have turned out to be false pretenses? (45)

The question is not only multi-barreled and long-winded, but gives Bush plenty of different options for answering it. Bush was essentially invited to use his trusted talking points, which is exactly what he did. "Well, let me step back and review my thinking prior to going into Iraq," Bush began, before rehashing the same talking points used

before the war, including that the attacks of Sept. 11 mean the U.S. cannot afford not to deal with "gathering" threats; that Saddam Hussein was a threat; that Saddam Hussein had used weapons of mass destruction on his own people; that he "coddled" terrorists; that he was a threat to the region; that he was a threat to the U.S.; and the familiar list continued. (46) None of the journalists that followed sought a better answer to the important, yet poorly worded question.

Transcripts of White House press conferences can be found at www.whitehouse.gov. Satirical transcripts of those same press conferences can be found at www.whitehouse.org, which is a very official-looking site. In its satirical transcript of the April 13 press conference, Bush answered the exact same question this way, "Well, you know, when confronted with a long laundry list of inconvenient facts like that, I like to step back and kind of riff on something big and emotional for a while instead. So here we go." (47)

This shortcoming is exacerbated by the fact that follow-up questions are rare, and even rarer are multiple follow-up questions. Again, the reason for this shortcoming is linked to the concept of objectivity as it is currently understood. Journalists don't want to appear impolite by pressing too hard, because it could be perceived as a sign of bias. Official sources may be wary of a journalist's tough style and avoid future contact, thereby cutting off access. Lieberman quoted Columbia Journalism Professor James Carey who said, "Ask questions too harshly, and you're outside the club. These people are not adversaries who pretend to be friends. They are friends who pretend to be adversaries." (48) Lieberman says no journalist wants to be known as a "bulldog" in the current media climate.

The hot guests, the "big gets" as they are known in the business, will go elsewhere. Few public relations executives want to book someone on a show where the interviewer has a reputation for rough questioning. Most would rather have their clients interviewed by Larry King than by Mike Wallace. (49)

A case in point: when asked about the lack of evidence linking Saddam Hussein to al-Qaeda at the press conference, more specifically, the fact that those claims were thoroughly discredited by the summer of 2003, Bush said only that David Kay, the U.S.'s weapons inspector, was still examining documentation about possible terrorist links. He continued,

And it's just going to take a while, and I'm confident the truth will come out. And there is no doubt in my mind...that Saddam Hussein was a threat to the United States' security, and a threat to peace in the region. And there's no doubt in my mind that a free Iraq is important. It's got strategic consequences for not only achieving peace in the Middle East, but a free Iraq will help change the habits of other nations in the region who will make it -- which will make America much more secure. (50)

The question was whether the president could offer "definitive evidence" that Saddam was working with al-Qaeda terrorists. Bush's answer was long, but could have been reduced to one word: no. Instead he reverted to his Iraq talking points, which were repeated when the following journalist pursued a similar line of questioning with a similar lack of success. Saddam Hussein was a threat; a free Iraq will help foster peace in Middle East; other Middle Eastern nations will follow suit; all of which will make the U.S. safer. One could be excused for forgetting that the original question was about links between Saddam Hussein and al-Qaeda, because Bush did not even utter the name of the terrorist organization.

The result of this journalistic passivity is grave: not only do talking points often go unchallenged, they get amplified and repeated so often that they become accepted

facts, if not conventional wisdom. The main task of journalists is to ask important questions and get answers for the purpose of keeping the public informed. The fact that journalists are prepared to accept blatant non-responses to questions about war and national security is a sign of how badly the political realm is consumed by a culture of lies. Instead of genuine answers to real questions, robotically-trained politicians repeat the same messages over and over until they sink in, albeit with the ever-shrinking news consuming audience. The audience is being spun with public relations -- free political advertising that poses as news.

Talking points are an attempt to brainwash the public. The theory is that if you repeat a statement often enough, even one that is provably false, it will eventually become conventional wisdom and be accepted as the "truth." The Bush administration mentioned Saddam Hussein so often in the context of the attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, that a near majority (48 per cent) of the American people actually came to believe the misperception that the Iraqi dictator had ties to al-Qaeda.(51) The purpose of *The Daily Show* and its brand of satire, however, is as Stewart explained, to stop "that political trend of repeating things again and again until people are forced to believe them." (52)

In her study, Lieberman examined dozens of news transcripts and found sharp questioning rare, with most "journalism" appearing to be "little more than disguised public relations." (53) Lieberman wondered, "Does the audience see through the culture of caution and obfuscation that permeates the news business?" (54)

The growing legions of young, media savvy consumers of political satire certainly do. Talking points, filled as they are with lies and exaggerations, are one of the favourite satirical targets of media satirists. Once again, the standard for what is -- and is not --

absurd in the press/politician relationship is simply common sense. The satirist who ridicules talking points and blatant non-responses can "see through the culture of caution and obfuscation." So too can the consumers of satire who laugh at what objective journalists offer. The audience shares the satirist's bewilderment at the absurdity of the charade. Journalists, bound as they are by their notions of objectivity and professionalism, do not feel empowered to demand more than talking points. Satirists, for whom nothing and nobody are sacred, relish the opportunity. They say what many people, including many if not most journalists, know to be true: the press/politician relationship, or political communication function, has become a charade.

Consider a few examples which illustrate how political satire exposes the absurdity of the modern talking-point riddled political interview.

By February 2004, the failure to find weapons of mass destruction in Iraq had taken a heavy political toll on President George W. Bush, who was gearing up to run for a second term in office. As a result, he decided to sit down with Tim Russert on NBC's *Meet the Press* -- something the president would never agree to do during more popular times. (55) Bush resorted to talking points when asked to explain how his administration was wrong about Iraq having weapons of mass destruction, links to al-Qaeda, or that American soldiers would be welcomed as liberators. "There's going to be ample time for the American people to assess whether or not I made good calls, whether I used good judgment. And I look forward to talking to the American people about why I made the decisions I made." (56)

The shot cut back to Stewart, who pretended to be confused by the president's comments. "Really? Well, since you're giving an hour-long interview on national TV, this

might be a good time to do that,” said Stewart sitting at his anchor’s desk. “Or, or, you could just stick to the talking points.”

Several quick clips of the *Meet The Press* interview followed. They featured Bush using the same fearful language that characterized the administration's post Sept. 11 rhetoric, which was also repeated relentlessly during the administration’s pre-war public relations campaign. The shot then cut back to Stewart, who pulled out a large bottle of what was supposed to be tequila from under his anchor's desk. The audience at home was encouraged to join in, taking a shot of tequila every time Bush said “terror,” “danger,” or “madman,” while referring to Saddam Hussein and Iraq. Quick clips of Bush saying those words flashed on the screen and a bell rang every time he uttered one of the three terms. The bell quickly rang ten times before the shot cut back to Stewart who was chugging tequila straight out of the bottle. He put his arms out in front of him and began chanting like a zombie, "Dangerous madman."

Stewart also took exception to Bush's blatant lies, including one in particular that Russert declined to forcefully challenge. Russert asked whether the administration had miscalculated how American forces would be treated and received in Iraq, given that attacks and casualties had become an almost daily reality for American forces in the country. "I think we are welcomed in Iraq," Bush responded.

"Apparently the rocket-propelled grenade is the Iraqi equivalent of aloha," joked Stewart, for whom such transparent dishonesty and political Orwellian doublespeak is easily convertible into comic currency. Such political nonsense has become permissible because the concept of objectivity does not allow journalists to challenge it. However,

such deceptive language is robbed of its power by the language of satire, which delights in exposing it.

This blind spot in the regime of objectivity also highlights one of the main reasons why young adults who do not trust politicians or the press, are so loyal to *The Daily Show*. In a fundamental sense, satire is more in tune with the romanticized mission of journalism than journalism itself. If objective journalists do not see it as their role to expose dishonesty, but rather to repeat it, then on what grounds do they deserve the public's trust? Political satirists, on the other hand, using the dynamic combination of keen wit and common sense, have made it their mission to expose the political dishonesty that permeates the political realm to an audience that is frustrated by the very same phenomenon. Objective journalists are forced by conventions and professional practices to behave as though they don't see and hear that which has become so obvious to both the satirist and his loyal – and growing -- audience.

The triumph of talking points is also clear evidence that politicians and their operatives have gained the upper hand in the political communication function. As a consequence, the less media savvy news consumer risks accepting some rather astonishing misperceptions.

David Greenberg catalogued some of the most significant lies from President George W. Bush in an article for the *Columbia Journalism Review* called “Calling a Lie a Lie: The dicey dynamics of exposing untruths.” The lies included that Saddam Hussein tried to buy uranium from Africa; that the Bush administration's tax cuts would benefit the middle class even though they are regressive; and that the science is “incomplete” with regard to global warming, despite the fact that “there's an overwhelming consensus

in the scientific community.” (57) Greenberg pointed out that some mainstream liberal commentators, including *New York Times* columnist Paul Krugman discussed and exposed the lies at length, but the notion of Bush the “dissembler” failed to “gain traction in the news pages of mainstream papers, on the wire services, on the nightly network broadcasts, and in other bastions of the purportedly impartial press.” (58)

Greenberg explained that journalists only like certain kinds of lies. Specifically, those “that tend to be the relatively trivial ones, involving personal matters, such as Clinton's deceptions about his sex life,” or Al Gore’s suggestion that he inspired the 1970s film *Love Story*, which, as Greenberg points out, was actually true. (59) “Here, the press can strut its skepticism without positioning itself ideologically,” he explained. (60) In contrast, reporters dislike lies that concern issues of public policy, including, for example, taxes, abortion, the environment or war, because to expose such lies would create the appearance of making a value judgment, of taking an ideological position. “Most of Bush’s lies have fallen in this demilitarized zone,” Greenberg wrote. (61)

The credibility of such false policy pronouncements are further bolstered, Greenberg argues, because fellow party members, partisan columnists and political operatives repeat them so often and with the same exact language that the pronouncements gain the appearance of credibility. “Thus, when a president lies about policy, so does a chorus of members of Congress, columnists, and commentators -- and try calling every Republican or Democrat in Washington a liar.” (62) The truth barely stands a chance in this familiar scenario.

Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice is one of the worst – or rather most skilled -- offenders in modern political history. After former U.S. weapons inspector David Kay

testified before the Senate Armed Services Committee that Iraq had no weapons of mass destruction, she appeared on NBC's *The Today Show* and was interviewed by Matt Lauer, "no doubt intending to toy with (Matt Lauer) like a cat chewing the abdomen off a moth," joked Stewart. (63)

"I wonder if she was given any talking points?" Stewart asked rhetorically, sitting at his anchor's desk. Several quick clips of Rice then appeared on the screen.

"This was a dangerous man in the world's most dangerous region;" "This was a dangerous man he needed to be dealt with;" "Somebody sitting in the world's most dangerous region;" "It was time to take out this dangerous man in the world's most dangerous region."

The shot then cut back to Stewart who said what everyone in the audience and those who watch the show on television were no doubt thinking: "Could you repeat that one more time; I'm not retarded yet."

Talking points are insulting because they are so transparent. They are also insulting because they are clearly an effort to avoid answering a direct question. But a politician's rationale for resorting to talking points is far more obvious than a journalist's reasons for accepting them. Either they do not know politicians are not really answering their questions, in which case they are incompetent, or they have become professionally conditioned to accept talking points, in which case journalists are no more deserving of the public's trust than the politicians they quote.

The Punditocracy: Loud opinions without all those messy facts

If the mission of satire is to expose absurdity wherever it exists, then one of the largest sources in the current news mediascape is undoubtedly the punditocracy.

The term, coined by Eric Alterman, describes the group of elite “celebrity” journalists, former and current political operatives and partisan warriors who engage in ideological arguments (as opposed to reasoned debate) and offer predictions instead of descriptions on cable news networks, in op-ed columns, and on bombastic radio call-in shows every day. (64) Their confrontations arouse the partisan passion of some consumers (as opposed to their intellect), or the disgust of politically disappointed viewers, who do not see the benefits of bickering and have tuned out as a result.

While politicians offer rehearsed talking points and non-responses to direct and important questions, the so-called “experts,” who are paid generous amounts of money to offer their opinions and analysis of the important issues of the day, provide definitive visions of the future without the benefit of telepathic powers, and often scant research.(65) In many cases, loud arguments and bad manners trump well-researched insights, which are not easily expressed in the concise television format, or more likely, run counter to the narrowly defined conventional wisdom that governs any given debate in the punditocracy. (66)

Compromise, consensus, and an effort to find mutual understanding and common solutions to the challenges that confront society are not part of the format of the modern political talkfest. Television talkfests are battlefields, and the participants who face off are ideological warriors.

The pundits featured on cable news talk shows, which consist mostly of political operatives, or partisan columnists, engage in shouting matches, where consensus and compromise would be perceived as signs of weakness. No common solutions to society’s

shared challenges are likely to be devised by two combatants on CNN's *Crossfire*, or MSNBC's *Hardball with Chris Matthews*.

New research by the University of Pennsylvania's Diana Mutz explores the psychological impact of televised political shoutfests on the viewer. Mutz maintains that in everyday life, people tend to be civilized and polite when engaging in political discussions, say around the dinner table, for example. (67) Previous research has shown that when people do disagree and a discussion becomes heated, the natural inclination is for one to want to step back and create some distance, Mutz explained. (68) Perceptions of closeness, she said, have major implications for how people react to each other. (69) In the context of a face-to-face disagreement, if you feel your opponent is too close and invading your personal space then that is likely to heighten the intensity of your negative reaction to them and what they are saying. (70) Mutz wondered whether this same effect occurred when someone is subjected to political disputes on television. On shows such as *Hardball* and *Crossfire*, the more heated the dispute the closer the camera shot. (71) Mutz conducted a series a controlled experiments involving actors and a fictional television talk show script to test her hypothesis.

Mutz's subjects did indeed react the same way to those close-up laden televised political disputes as they do to real life face-to-face political disagreements conducted at close-range. (72) The close-ups on television made viewers react even more negatively to the person with whom they disagreed compared to when the same dialogue was exchanged without the close-ups. (73) Mutz also found that the close-up filled televised sample aroused such a negative reaction in the experiment subjects that they had increased difficulty trying to recall the arguments made by the actor with whom they

disagreed.(74) Mutz also determined that the negative reactions fostered by televised conflicts filmed using close-ups increase political polarization and that viewers attach those heightened negative sentiments to politicians in general.(75) Mutz draws a comparison between the way people feel compelled to slow down and look at a car wreck when they drive past and the way they are sometimes drawn to watch conflict on political talk shows. We may not like what we see but we can't help to look.(76) It is in our evolutionary nature to look. The more striking point, however, is simply that political talk shows are the equivalent of a car wreck.

On the more dignified Sunday morning political talk shows, including NBC's *Meet the Press*, CNN's *Late Edition*, CBS's *Face the Nation*, or ABC's *This Week*, the tone may be more civilized, the manners more refined, but the discussions are far too often focused on the horse race of politics: Who is winning what political battles and what political strategies are they using to win the public's support are frequent topics of "debate."

Far from experts, most pundits more closely resemble unruly and stubborn children who do not know how to maintain a civil conversation or behave in public. But such traits are encouraged on the political talk show format. Fox News, for example, with its loud and intimidating conservative hosts, including Bill O'Reilly and Sean Hannity, use a similar format to the one first employed with great success by right wing talk radio hosts in the United States, most notably Rush Limbaugh. (77) Calm debate is replaced with loud conservative certainty, unabashed patriotism, and the odd outburst with a guest, which is infused with hatred and even hints at the possibility of violence.

Not surprisingly, the punditocracy provides fertile comedic grounds for media

satirists. A recurring segment on *The Daily Show* is called Great Moments in Punditry (as read by children). In the segment, young children are cast to recreate actual exchanges between impolite pundits. Each child reads the lines of one of the participants, which seem even more childish and ridiculous because children are reading them. The immature bickering seems beneath even the young children who read the absurd lines of dialogue.

It is difficult to do justice to the satiric impact of Great Moments in Punditry (as read by children) without being able to actually see the young children reading the lines. But this is a transcript of one edition, which recreated an exchange between CNN *Crossfire* hosts (on the left) James Carville and (on the right) Tucker Carlson during the 2004 election campaign. (78) Two young girls read a transcript of an actual exchange between the two pundits.

Carville: John Kerry is a war hero and you don't like him because he is going to win and he's going to beat (President George W.) Bush and you can't stand John Kerry.

Carlson: That's so dumb I want to laugh in your face.

Carville: You laugh anywhere you want young man, but you don't like gay people.

Carlson: James, James, James. You knock it off before I throw my coffee at you.

Carville: No.

The sight of children reading arguments between the news media's elite opinion makers is an effective commentary on the punditocracy's contribution to political discourse. The audience laughs, in part, at the realization that such ridiculous exchanges are not uncommon on television news. In certain cases, what passes for political discourse has been reduced to a school yard argument of "I know you are but what am I?" The underlying, and scary fact, however, is that these misbehaving children/ overpaid political pundits are bickering about matters of war and peace, life and death. Their discussions help define the boundaries of legitimate public discourse and influence the

decisions of political leaders.(79) Great Moments in Punditry shows such exchanges to be unworthy even of young children.

It is not surprising why many people have become cynical about politics, and frustrated by the coverage of it. Problems and challenges are presented as arguments between opposing sides whose spokespeople make no effort to try and reach consensus or even understand the other side's point of view – not even for the purpose of being able to be able to refute it more effectively. (80) The punditocracy epitomizes what frustrates Halstead's Gen Xers about politics. They don't see how any of the challenges or problems confronting society could ever be solved in such an uncivilized fashion.

On television, intellectual *gravitas* and knowledge are not as important as the ability to overwhelm an ideological opponent with volume and rudeness. None of the most influential pundits are experts on every subject, but none think twice about offering an opinion on any topic, whether they know anything about it or not. (81) They simply have opinions on everything -- from which candidate's campaign needs to shift strategy, to whether global warming is a real threat to mankind or a conspiracy spread by liberal scientists, to how to effectively rid the world of terrorism, to how the people in Iraq (a country most have never visited) will react to an American led war, followed by an occupation.(82)

In his book, *Sound and Fury: The Rise of the Punditocracy*, author, journalist and academic Eric Alterman offered an anecdote that helps illustrate the extent to which the absence of facts or firsthand knowledge will not stop a pundit from offering a definitive opinion on a subject, and thus, help shape the national debate. In the 1980s, when *Washington Post* Moscow correspondent Robert Kaiser returned from assignment to

Washington, he was told by a mutual friend that he should meet with powerful columnist George Will to talk about his experience. (83) The two went out for dinner. Kaiser told Will, a relentless cold warrior in his columns and on television, that he ought to visit the Soviet Union because it is much different than how Will imagines it. Will thought the suggestion ridiculous, according to Alterman's account. "That Kaiser seemed to believe that a pundit's ability to pontificate about a place could in some way benefit from his having observed it firsthand was an indication of just how long he had been away from Washington," wrote Alterman of Will's reaction.(84)

Walter Lippmann, the grandfather of punditry, was convinced that journalism offered an inadequate, "helter skelter" picture of reality, and that the intellectual shortcomings of the average citizen only made matters worse, Alterman wrote. (85) "The net result of imperfect journalism consumed by ignorant people is, in Lippmann's view, the creation of a pseudo-environment "in which a perverse kind of democratic politics takes place." (86) Originally, Lippmann envisioned the creation of intelligence bureaus filled with social scientists who "would model reality like a DNA molecule and explain it to the confused citizenry," but he later abandoned the idea in favour of using his own considerable intellect to properly explain reality, both of the political realm and the world outside America's borders.(87) The original pundit had lofty ambitions and a tall task, which he undertook with an earnest sense of responsibility.

But, as Alterman points out, much has changed in the punditry business since Lippmann was its champion. Most American pundits at the dawn of the 21st century do not make sense of the political realm and its impact on the larger world that surrounds each citizen. They do not undertake their role with the discipline and sense of

responsibility of a scientist. They do not provide clarity, but holler into a partisan echo chamber that creates confusion, contributing to what some scholars have described as the modern media fog.(88) In his book, Alterman compares Walter Lippmann to George Will, who was in the 1980s and remains, perhaps, the most influential pundit in America. While Lippmann had little journalistic experience, Will had none at all. (89) But more importantly, the two pundits viewed their roles quite differently, according to Alterman.

“A former professor and Republican aide, Will saw himself as practicing not a higher form of journalism, but a new kind of political partisanship, one in which the weapons of choice were television stardom, presidential access, and a regular newspaper column, in declining order of significance.”(90)

Some have argued that the media fog – where the truth is increasingly hard to find – explains the current increase in the popularity of partisan news sources across all media (Rush Limbaugh on the radio, Fox News on television, and a variety of left-wing and right-wing news sites on the Internet). (91) If the truth does not exist in an ever-expanding media universe filled with partisan bluster and talking points, then it is certainly no surprise that people would gravitate to those voices that confirm their pre-existing biases and worldview. (92) Just like people can now avoid listening to the radio and wait to hear a song they want by simply filling their iPod with their favourite tunes, people can now choose to ignore their local paper or TV news and simply choose from thousands of Internet sources that appeal to their point of view. They could consciously choose to never read somebody defend gay marriage or suggest President Bush was less than honest. As Alterman points out, perhaps the biggest difference between Lippmann’s era and the media climate by the late 20th century was that Lippmann used to be the leader of a small group. (93) But shortly after his departure, and with the coming of age of television and later cable television and the emergence of the Internet, punditry

became quite the growth industry. Lippmann created a form of journalism that expanded rapidly with technological advances, and its ranks were filled with practitioners who shared neither his intellect, nor even his original purpose, Alterman argues.

Lippmann, however, loftily had envisioned a group of pundits like himself, who would shield the republic from the forces of its emotion and arm it with the means to defend itself intellectually against the Charlatan, the terrorist and the jingo. The punditocracy that he indirectly spawned, however, worked hand in glove with these same forces. For its access to information and social status it attached itself to the very rulers against whom it was supposed to be guarding. And for its income, it relied on a medium dedicated to “poisoning the innocent” and “debasing the public taste.”(94)

One of the favourite activities of pundits, particularly the more civilized journalists – those who are more likely to appear on *Meet the Press* as opposed to *Crossfire* -- is to offer predictions. Having been granted a coveted seat in the punditocracy, where their opinions are constantly sought after by cable news channels that have far too many hours of air time to fill in a day, the pundits have come to believe their own hype. They actually believe that they can see the future. Sadly for the public, a new book by Philip Tetlock called *Expert Judgment: How Good Is It? How Can We Know?*, scientifically measures the utter fallibility and lack of accountability and quality standards of expert political judgments that are spewed into the marketplace of ideas. (95) Tetlock’s research defined one group of political thinkers as “hedgehogs.” This group of experts tend to “know one big thing,” toil devotedly within one tradition, reach for formulaic solutions to ill-defined problems, and just happen to be among the most powerful political commentators in today’s mediascape. (96) Tetlock described another group of experts as foxes. They know “many little things,” draw from many different traditions, and accept ambiguity and contradiction. (97) In short, they are more likely to avoid definitive, inflexible opinions, which are the hallmark of television punditry.

Alterman arrived at the same conclusion more than ten years earlier. He describes how the vast majority of the punditocracy – most of whom were devout cold warriors – continued to fight the rhetorical battle with the communist Soviet Union long after leader Mikhail Gorbachev had begun implementing concrete reforms to appease the U.S. Most academics who study the conflict had concluded that the Cold War was well into its twilight. (98) During the 1988 presidential election, however, the myopic and largely uniform perspective of the members of the punditocracy narrowed the bounds of debate considerably, and to the detriment of the country. By continuing to focus all of their attention and discussion on the Cold War, which they refused to accept was winding down, the pundits pushed other, arguably more pressing issues (health care, education, the environment, the economy) to the periphery of the national debate, wrote Alterman.

“The American purpose as it were, remained resistance of Soviet Communist domination. Candidates who refused to place this at the centre of their political agendas – and who refused, therefore, to subordinate all other national problems to its achievement – were to be dismissed as foolish, naïve, and “McGovernite.” Their funding, and, hence, recognition levels diminished accordingly.”(99)

Fortunately for pundits, there are apparently no consequences for failing to accurately predict the future -- in this case, that Gorbachev’s efforts at reform were sincere and part of a clear effort to de-escalate his country’s longstanding conflict with the U.S. Pundits do not get fired for getting it wrong. Nor do they have their membership privileges to the punditocracy revoked. If they did, the 24/7 cable news networks would have no quasi-celebrity soothsayers to help fill up the countless hours of the never-ending news cycle.

The punditocracy is worse during election campaigns. In the run up to the 2004 Iowa caucuses, Howard Dean was the front-runner to win the Democratic presidential

nomination. But the pundits offered plenty of unconventional predictions in the hours leading up to the vote that not only proved to be a short plane ride away from reality, but downright laughable.

The Daily Show's coverage of the caucuses was, as with most political events, a day late. But with the grace of hindsight, the show lampooned the inaccuracy of the pundit predictions about who would win the first contest in the Democratic nomination process.(100)

“Obviously during primary season it can be very difficult to figure out exactly which candidate to support. Fortunately, the news media was there to help us by asking all the right questions,” Stewart said at the beginning of the segment.

The shot then cut to clips of the election logos of the major news networks, including Fox News’ “You Decide 2004,” CNN’s “America Votes 2004,” and NBC News’ “Decision 2004.” Then several quick clips followed which featured noteworthy pundits and news hosts asking questions that had nothing to do with issues of substance, but everything to do with one of the punditocracy’s most unhelpful obsessions: the horse race of politics. “So, who is at the head of the pack?” asked one anchor, “Is Howard Dean actually slipping?” asked the host of CNN’s *The Capital Gang*, “A four way dead heat, is that right?” asked a stunned Wolf Blitzer on CNN. Finally, CNN’s Anderson Cooper – looking straight into the camera, asked, “What do you see?”

The shot then cut back to Stewart who attempted to explain the pointless questions posed by the trusted men and women of the mainstream news media by saying that pundits pay little attention to tedious policy issues – which could help news

consumers make informed democratic choices – offering instead “a clear presentation of hypothetically what could possibly happen.”

The shot then cut back to a variety of high profile pundits describing numerous possible scenarios about what might happen in Iowa, none of which proved even remotely close to what actually occurred. Some of the predictions even looked past Iowa, projecting what might occur at the following primary in New Hampshire. One talking head on Fox News suggested, “If Kerry were to get ahead of Gephardt say and finish number two, then that would help him in New Hampshire.” (Gephardt was so far out of contention in Iowa that he withdrew from the race immediately after the results came in). William Kristol, editor of *The Weekly Standard*, said on Fox News, “I think Edwards, if he runs fourth in Iowa, he’s finished.” (Edwards came in a strong second to Sen. John Kerry in Iowa).

The erroneous predictions continued, “If Kerry finishes way down in Iowa, then Clark may be the alternative,” said a Fox contributor; “Clark has the potential to catch Dean,” Democratic consultant Mary Ann Marsh said on Fox News; “Clark will beat Dean in New Hampshire and then we’ll really have a race,” said the *Wall Street Journal’s* William Hunt on *The Capital Gang*.

So much for sage analysis. Not only was the news consuming audience left with little information of any democratic value, such as how a vote for each of the different candidates would impact their lives, they would have absolutely no certain idea who was going to win the horse race either. The pundits offer little assistance helping potential voters determine who they ought to vote for, but provide hours of contradictory speculation about who the voters will elect, most of which is often wrong.

“There you have it,” said Stewart. “The experts, the people whose sole source of income is political analysis, predicted that...” (Stewart pretends to be figuring out a math equation on his notes) “This can’t be right, I came up with (failed Democratic presidential candidate in 1988, Michael) Dukakis.”

Instead of helping the average citizen make sense of the complicated world around them, which, from their paycheck to the air they breathe, is influenced by the policies of elected leaders, pundits offer baseless speculation. When they are not speculating on matters of little importance, they provide ideological bluster about important topics, such as foreign affairs, for which few if any could claim to be an “expert.”

Perhaps, most troubling of all is the fact that there appear to be no professional consequences for spreading inaccuracies to millions of news consumers. Nobody got fired for predicting Gephardt would win in Iowa, and no network apologized for airing hours of commentary that proved to be nonsense when the votes were counted only hours later.

The fact that there are no consequences baffled *The Daily Show’s* “senior political analyst analyst” Stephen Colbert. He described the networks’ coverage as if it were a horse race similar to the political campaign. Colbert suggested, with the unflinching certainty of a “real” pundit, that CNN got the most predictions wrong and was, therefore, the “clear loser” and confidently predicted that the network would withdraw from the race and stop covering politics altogether. “From here on, they’re (CNN) 24/7 Kobe (Kobe Bryant), Jacko (Michael Jackson) and car chases,” Colbert told Stewart, who then broke the news to Colbert that CNN would surely continue covering politics.

“I don’t think you’re right,” Colbert responded. “I mean those guys were clearly talking out their asses.”

Stewart then explained to Colbert that speculating on politics with little regard for accuracy is what the punditocracy does.

“Wait, wait, wait. You mean they can say anything they want? They can say that Al Sharpton will carry Wyoming? Or that the ballot boxes will run red with the blood of the goat? That Hispanics are the new soccer moms? And no one questions them on that, there are no repercussions? Nobody gets fired?!”

“No,” said Stewart, to which Colbert responded, “I’ve got to get one of those jobs.”

Nobody may have been fired at the networks, but there were certainly consequences. More than a million people from all over America, some in a small studio in New York City, laughed at the networks’ inane coverage and the embarrassing fortune-telling skills of their esteemed pundits. The average news consumer, as well as the satire enthusiast, are not part of the inside-the-beltway community and do not share its obsession with winners and losers and political strategy. In fact, as many media scholars have pointed out, it is this brand of political reportage that serves to alienate news consumers situating them as spectators of politics as opposed to participants. It does not engage them. It fails to address their interests or concerns as democratic citizens. Satire performs the opposite function. It engages them, demanding their cognitive participation in order to understand the jokes. Understanding the jokes also fosters a sense of belonging, and laughing a cathartic form of participation.

Comedies are, among other things, manifestos in microcosm, ways of seeing the world that depend for their success on wooing and securing like-mindedness in large numbers of people. Laughing together is a surefire short-cut to a feeling of belonging together, and since belonging is an inevitably political

concept saturated with deeply ideological questions (belonging where? to what? for what reasons? with whom? against whom? who decides?), comedy is never innocent of politics. (101)

Not only is it not surprising why so many people would have such low regard for the news media – Stewart and company showed them once again why they should – but it also raises a more important question. Does watching this brand of speculative, horse race coverage make for a more informed populace and a healthier democracy? If the major networks agree that political coverage ought to be filled with baseless and contradictory predictions about who is going to win, as opposed to who should win and what that victory would mean for the public, then what value is there in watching mainstream political news coverage?

But listening to and reading the punditocracy's views can have even more severe consequences, particularly when they collectively "get it wrong," as is often the case. As was previously mentioned, they "got it wrong" in their assessment of the Soviet threat during the mid-1980s. They also quite clearly "got it wrong" during the lead up to the American invasion of Iraq in 2003. In Chapter One, this study discussed three outrageous misperceptions about Iraq and its supposed weapons of mass destruction and ties to al-Qaeda. The troubling findings raise the inevitable question: How did these misperceptions, all of which had long been thoroughly discredited, become so ingrained in the public consciousness? There are two simple reasons. First, that is where the Bush administration wanted them. Officials repeated constantly -- and with certainty -- that Iraq had both weapons of mass destruction, as well as established ties with the terrorist group that flew two planes into the World Trade Center towers in New York on Sept. 11, 2001. "Intelligence gathered by this and other governments *leaves no doubt* that the Iraqi

regime continues to possess and conceal some of the most lethal weapons ever devised,” Bush told the nation in an address March 17, 2003, just days before launching a pre-emptive attack. Officials had been making similar unequivocal declarations for months.(102) As for Saddam Hussein’s links to al-Qaeda, Cheney offered the following, “There’s *overwhelming evidence*...of a connection between al-Qaeda and Iraq.” (103) The administration’s inaccurate pronouncements were amplified, magnified, corroborated and entrenched in the public consciousness by the country’s many chicken hawk pundits.(104)

Why did so many Americans hold those misperceptions? Because their leaders told them, and many of the country’s leading pundits, whose role is supposed to be to offer analysis so the populace can make informed democratic choices, repeated them with similar certainty. Views to the contrary, which questioned those conclusions and attempted to expand the bounds of legitimate debate, were marginalized. They did find expression in satirical outlets on television, including *The Daily Show* and in a vast network of satirical “fake” news sites on the Internet.

Politics and the Theatre of the Absurd

Politics has become a world of pseudo-events filled with pseudo-language (i.e. talking points), all of which results in a pseudo-reality, which has become quite far removed from the millions of people who happen to not live or work inside the Washington beltway. (105) The problem, however, for both the politicians and the journalists who both cover them and conspire with them to create the virtual world of Washington politics is that the very pseudo-nature of the political realm is obvious to many media-savvy news consumers. They know it is all a production; an inadequate

production at that. The trouble is, as far as escapism entertainment goes, there are plenty of more captivating choices in the ever-expanding and fragmented mediascape than politics.

Oct. 17, 2005 was one of the rare occasions when the news media were practically forced to report on the manipulative nature of an all too common pseudo-event.

Support in the U.S. for President Bush's Iraq war was lower than ever, as the country continued to suffer casualties in Iraq. So, President Bush – or rather his political and communications advisors – decided to stage a video conference between the president and a group of soldiers stationed in Iraq. (106) The press conference was billed as an unscripted, give-and-take, between the president and soldiers on the ground. (107) The event did not go according to plan for the White House, because ABC picked up a satellite feed of a Pentagon official rehearsing the soldiers on specific questions that would be asked by the president prior to their “conversation.” Pentagon official Allison Barber asked the same questions President Bush asked just a few minutes later, including how pre-election security operations were going in advance of the upcoming parliamentary elections in Iraq. (108)

Barber even pre-planned a light-hearted anecdote with one of the soldiers who attended a speech the president had delivered four years earlier in New York. The rehearsal produced the following exchange, which, satellite feed or no satellite feed, was clearly unnatural and rehearsed.

Bush: Were you there when I came to New York?

Soldier: Yes I was Mr. President.

Bush: I thought you looked familiar.

Soldier: Well, thank you.

Bush: I probably look familiar to you too.

Solder: Yes you do Mr. President. (109)

In addition, to providing the questions in advance and pre-planning such light-hearted anecdotal exchanges, Barber also prepared the soldiers about how to respond and what to do in the unlikely event that the president asked a question that wasn't planned for in advance.

Barber: Alright, but if he (the president) gives a question that is not something we've scripted, Cpt. Kennedy you're going to have the mic. (110)

This type of blatant political manipulation is almost too ridiculous to satirize. There is precious little that even the most skilled satirist could add to exaggerate it for comedic effect. For the most part, Stewart and *The Daily Show* simply showed clips of the President Bush's actual exchanges with the soldiers, followed by clips of Barber preparing the soldiers for those same exchanges, and then a short joke from Stewart about the manipulative nature of the whole situation. (111)

Stewart also mocked White House press secretary Scott McClellan's disingenuous attempts to explain the deception away. McClellan did so using the administration's well-worn post-Sept. 11 rhetoric, suggesting that the press corps reporters were somehow sully the honour of the soldiers by questioning whether what they were saying was genuine. "Are you suggesting what our troops were saying was not sincere or that what they said was not their own thoughts?" asked a seemingly offended McClellan.

The White House propaganda blunder was covered extensively by the news media. Some reports were more unequivocal than others in suggesting that the event was indeed scripted. Many gave near equal time to the White House's denial and avoided saying conclusively -- factually -- that the event was scripted. (112) Most acknowledged

that the event was heavily stage-managed, which is not uncommon with the Bush administration. “Whenever President Bush has what the White House calls ‘a conversation with citizens,’ presidential aides leave nothing to chance. Whether the subject is Social Security, the economy or the war in Iraq, every effort is made to smooth the presentation,” said National Public Radio’s David Greene in his report. (113) CNN’s Suzanne Malveaux reiterated Greene’s point in her report, but said what “makes today’s so unique is the fact that you, me, our audience, get a rare glimpse to pull back the curtain, if you will, on a rehearsal that took place.” (114)

Brian Williams prefaced NBC’s story by saying, “While we should quickly point out this was hardly the first staged political event we have covered, and we’ve seen a lot of them in the past, today’s encounter was billed as spontaneous. Instead it appeared to follow a script.”(115) Williams was inferring to his audience that the administration often stages phony pseudo-events, which are designed to manipulate them. The news media usually do not critique the motivations and sincerity of such stagecraft. The only difference on this occasion was that officials said the event would be spontaneous. Without that declaration, however, the choreographed teleconference would not have been a story in the eyes of the mainstream news media.

What made the videoconference debacle exceptional was simply the fact that the public got to see the production process. As a result, journalists could not simply ignore the artificiality of the event they were covering. However, absent the ABC feed showing Barber prepping the soldiers, there likely would have been scant discussion in the mainstream news media about the artificiality and dishonest nature of the videoconference. This despite the fact that, as both Greene, Malveaux and other

journalists stated, this certainly was not the first time the White House had scripted a supposedly spontaneous exchange with the president.

The reality, however, which *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* illustrated and which other media observers including *New York Times* op-ed columnist Frank Rich have noted, is that politics – all of it -- has become theatre. (116) It is no different than any other kind of theatre production. It is scripted, set-designed, lit, and acted in order to achieve a desired effect. The videoconference may have attracted the attention of the news media, but, in most cases, the scripted, stage-managed nature of a pseudo-event is not headline material. They are usually covered the way the crafty stage-managers, directors and set designers had planned.

The entire Bush presidency, and to varying degrees, all those going back to Richard Nixon, have been orchestrated for a television audience. During his campaign for re-election in 2004 and during his “conversations on Social Security, President Bush’s campaign managers carefully screened – and prepared -- citizen panelists and escorted out even the most well-behaved political opponents from the audience.”(117) Bush and his handlers used the same tactic when he went around the country holding “town hall meetings” during the 2004 presidential election. It was all a show, designed for TV cameras and with the sole purpose of creating the impression that Bush’s social security plan was popular and catching on across the country. The audience members, who were essentially political performers, asked such insipid questions as, “What can I do to help you?” (118)

But the stage-managed town hall meeting is not even a new phenomenon. It was used to great effect during Richard Nixon’s successful presidential campaign in 1968,

which was chronicled with striking behind-the-scenes intimacy by Joe McGinniss in his book, *The Selling of the President 1968*. (119) The book followed the Nixon campaign, which hired advertising heavyweights from New York's Madison Ave. to rebuild the former vice president's image. Their task was to make Richard Nixon (the man) disappear from public view, and to replace him with an image of Nixon (the president-in-waiting). (120) Nixon's team of image makers used the power of television, advertising, heavily-controlled interview situations, and stage-managed political theatrics, including controlled town hall meetings filled with friendly partisans, in order to achieve their objective. (121)

The idea that politics is artificial is hardly novel. It has been that way for a long time, at least since television came of age. The artificiality of politics, and the news media's complicity in its creation, is a central cause for the growing dissatisfaction with politics and the way the news media cover it, as well as the popularity of satirical, "fake" news sources that express that dissatisfaction and mock such artificiality. This notion was explored in a subsequent segment of the same Oct. 17, 2005 episode of *The Daily Show*. (122) Following their first story about the videoconference, correspondent Rob Corddry joined Stewart at the anchor's desk to offer some "expert" commentary about the debacle.

Stewart: It's obviously not news that many of the administration's media events are scripted and prepared. But, in this instance, were you surprised that the Pentagon allowed soldiers to be used in that manner and then for the rehearsal to be seen by the public?

Corddry: A little bit Jon, but it was a nice gesture to the fans. A little peak at what goes on behind the scenes and a nice bonus for the fifth-season DVD of "The White House."

Corddry went on to discuss the Bush administration's time in the White House as if it were a television drama, no different from *Desperate Housewives*, or Geena Davis'

Commander In Chief. The less than implicit message is that Bush presidency is as heavily-scripted and tightly packaged as any other television show. Corddry then described the main plot points of the past four years of the show, i.e. the Bush presidency. He referred to Season Three when “President George W. Bush, a competitive, born again, ex-alcoholic with a Texas twang and chip on his soldier lands a fighter jet on the deck of an aircraft carrier and yells ‘Mission Accomplished’. I mean that is fucking TV man!” said an enthusiastic Corddry.

The show also had its low points, according to Corddry. He pointed to Season Four’s “Social Security B-story.” “12 town hall episodes in a row? Come on man!” Corddry complained.

The worst part of the town hall episodes was the dialogue, Corddry tells Stewart. The shot then cuts to clips to the president’s town hall meeting in Tampa Bay, Fla, where an old woman says “I’m very happy to have you as a president,” and the aforementioned man asks the president what he can do to help him advance his social security policy. “Okay, okay, we get it. The president has stumbled on a community of androids. Jon, Star Trek, Season two, Episode three, watch it much?” said Corddry.

Corddry also complains about plot lines that were abandoned and never resolved, including that of terrorist leader Osama bin Laden, who attacked the country in Season One and whom the cowboy president from Texas said he wanted “Dead or alive.”

“The guy disappears in Season One and they never wrap up the storyline Jon. That’s just bad writing,” says Corddry.

The exchange between Corddry and Stewart exposes the pervasive artificiality of media-driven politics, and, therefore, the complete lack of novelty of the scripted

videoconference with the soldiers. The videoconference is simply the latest episode, which just happened to include a behind-the-scenes documentary. The show has its own scriptwriters, directors, production designers, and lighting technicians. The news media are the critics. Journalists are less concerned with the fact that it is all a show, designed to manipulate the public's sentiments to support the goals of the political actors, than they are with the quality of the production -- how successfully the politicians and their handlers pulled off the propaganda exercise.

The fact is, in their role as theatre critics, political journalists do not reward improvisation. The news media does not expect, nor encourage or reward honest dialogue on the part of the politicians and political operatives. Straying from the script is not seen as a virtue by the mainstream news media. This is ironic, since one would assume trying to extract honest communication from politicians would be one of the most important goals of a political reporter. It is also ironic, because one would assume that political journalists would be tired and frustrated at only hearing the same safe and carefully-crafted talking points from media-trained politicians. Both these assumptions are incorrect.

A prime example of this occurred during the third night of the Democratic National Convention in Boston in 2004.

Until that point, the convention was unfolding as planned. The defeated Democratic hopefuls took turns at the podium to read speeches as they scrolled past on a teleprompter. The simple goal of each speaker and of the convention as a whole was to rally the delegates on the convention floor and the millions watching on television, and to show that the party was unequivocally united behind its chosen new leader, Sen. John

Kerry. Former presidents, including Bill Clinton and Jimmy Carter, and potential future presidential aspirants, such as Sen. Hillary Rodham Clinton, also delivered speeches. Everything was going according to the choreographed plan.

That was until Rev. Al Sharpton stepped on stage. The reverend ignored the teleprompter and delivered more of a sermon than a speech, which was rife with clever rhetoric, true passion, and a compelling message that sent the delegates into a joyous frenzy.

It also sent the know-it-alls of the punditocracy into a fury, condemning Sharpton for going over his allotted time, deviating from his party-approved speech, and delivering a message that was unabashed in its criticism of the president. The consensus: Sharpton crossed some kind of invisible line drawn by the wise men and women of the punditocracy.

Jon Stewart and his colleagues at *The Daily Show* had a different take on Sharpton's rousing speech. (123) When Stewart introduced Sharpton's speech to his studio audience as "by far the highlight of the evening and perhaps the convention," the audience cheered enthusiastically in agreement, many having clearly watched his speech the night before. Stewart pointed out that Sharpton departed widely from his script and "inserted, let's call them, zingers." The shot then cut to Sharpton delivering his speech as he explained why the majority of blacks vote for the Democrats.

"It's true that Mr. Lincoln signed the emancipation proclamation, after which there was a commitment to give 40 acres and a mule," Sharpton told the audience. "And we never got the 40 acres, and we didn't get the mule, so we decided to ride this donkey as far as it would take us." The delegates cheered wildly.

The shot then cut back to Stewart at his anchor's desk, who pointed out that Sharpton's speech was not simply composed of these rhetorical "zingers," but was filled with substance as well. The shot then cut back to Sharpton's speech, providing the following example:

"...if George Bush had selected the court in (1954), Clarence Thomas would have never made it to law school," said Sharpton, once again rousing the audience into a roar of applause.

Stewart then discussed the reaction of the punditocracy on the convention floor, who expressed varying degrees of astonishment and even, in a few cases, outrage over Sharpton's performance, which went well past his allotted time. "He's a nasty man...They just hope that people who are undecided, that small group, weren't watching that," said right-wing columnist and CNN talking head Robert Novak; "I've got to wonder tonight...if this is doing any good for the Democratic party," said MSNBC's Chris Matthews. "Whose judgment I wonder about here tonight is Kerry and his campaign," said *Newsweek's* Howard Fineman.

The shot then cut back to Stewart who wondered, "What the fuck were you guys watching?" much to his audience's delight. Stewart pretended to be confused, unable to understand why the news media's elite commentators, who had been fed nothing but carefully crafted speeches that offered little excitement and even less insight, were so angry at Al Sharpton, who, according to CNN's Judy Woodruff, "just high-jacked" the convention.

Stewart then showed several clips where the commentators explained their misguided sense of outrage. Fineman offered the following, "And stylistically you don't

scream and shout...He can actually turn off the black vote.” But Fineman wasn’t finished there. “It’s an insult, I think, as an outsider, to African American voters that they’re giving this guy as much time as they are,” he continued. Stewart then shrewdly pointed out that the black delegates in attendance at the convention did not exactly appear upset. The shot then cut to images of black delegates listening to Sharpton’s speech, holding Sharpton signs, standing and cheering as he spoke, engaged as if they were at church listening to a particularly inspiring sermon from a gifted preacher.

“Yeah, they’re real pissed off there Howard,” said Stewart.

But it was not just the pundits who felt the show’s satirical wrath for the unfounded criticisms of Sharpton and their complete neglect of the actual content of his speech.

Following his speech, NBC reporter, and newly-appointed anchor, Brian Williams caught up with Sharpton beside the stage. Stewart introduced Williams to the audience as a different kind of newsman than Matthews and the pundits. He thought if anyone would deal with the content Sharpton’s speech, “...it will be Brian Williams.”

Stewart was thoroughly disappointed. But, as has been shown repeatedly throughout this study, a media satirist’s disappointment with the performance of journalists and the mainstream news media is his or her comedic inspiration. In that regard, Williams certainly didn’t disappoint.

“Rev. Sharpton, from my vantage point here on the podium, I was able to see to look over your shoulder at that teleprompter that just sat there for what seemed like a half hour *while you did a riff on whatever you did a riff on,*” said Williams.

“A riff on whatever you did a riff on?!” exclaimed an incredulous Stewart. “YOU WERE THERE! Yeah, what was Al Sharpton skatin’ about?” asked Stewart. The shot then cut back to Sharpton and his speech for the answer.

“Our votes are soaked in the blood of martyrs...soaked in the blood of four little girls in Birmingham,” said a passionate Sharpton. “This vote is sacred to us.”

The kicker of the whole satirical report of the news media’s deplorable coverage of Sharpton’s important speech, was the fact that, as Stewart points out, *Hardball* host Chris Matthew’s interrupted Sharpton’s speech to criticize it, refused to deal with the content of what he was saying, and when it was over, informed his audience that he would be joined by Steve Buscemi – who’s name he mispronounced – an actor on the HBO series *The Sopranos*.

Journalists have become so accustomed to the rigid, stage-managed nature of the modern political realm that they have not only come to accept it, but it is the rigidity and the discipline of the rhetoric and images that has become the criteria upon which political events (more accurately pseudo-events and pseudo-language) are evaluated. The unscripted politician is a truly endangered species. The mainstream news media skins him alive every time.

But, once again, missing from any consideration in this equation is the media savvy news consumer, for whom the sight of politician speaking off-the-cuff and with sincerity can be a revelation. They don’t understand why the media would punish those politicians who, on rare occasions, have let their guard down to reveal something of their true selves. To them, it is the heavily-scripted and insincere politician and their teams of disingenuous image makers that ought to be the prey of political journalists.

The above examples -- chosen among hundreds of equally effective examples from the show -- which expose the inadequacy of passive objectivity, the silliness of ill-informed declarations of certainty from pundits, and the crass manipulation of media-enabled political theatre, illustrate how political satire uses humour to express the arguments and observations found in sober volumes of media criticism. Folklore scholar Barre Toelken argued that comedy was culture specific and that the “deepest meanings seldom arise automatically from the text but need to be extrapolated from ethnographic evidence.” (124) In other words, the meaning of humour is not found in the item or situation or even the words, but rather in the “feelings people have about the items, situations, and words.” (125) He wrote, “If we were to list the most common jokes told in our culture, I believe we could relate most of them to anxieties, threats, and concerns felt by different groups at different, noticeable periods of time in our history.” (126) The popularity of political satire which targets the news media is a product of the Age of Spin in which it was created. It reflects the anxieties and concerns of a growing number of people, especially young, educated, media-savvy adults who have serious doubts about whether their great democracy is functioning properly and who hold the news media, as well as the political class they cover, largely responsible. Their anxieties are clearly expressed through political satire, which is why they consume it so loyally and in such growing numbers. Their voracious appetite for satire that ridicules the news media is perhaps the most obvious sign that it is now past time for a significant rethinking of the objectives of political reporting and the professional governing ethic required to meet those objectives. The next chapter discusses whether satire is likely to inspire that rethinking.

Chapter 4: What are the consequences of laughing at the news?

There has been considerable debate over the years in academia about the power of satirists and their works to transform the societies that spawned them. One school of thought argues that the aim of satire is to inspire a “remodeling” of the institution (s) it ridicules. If that’s the case, then it is necessary to examine whether that goal, conscious or not, has been achieved to any measurable degree. In the case of the current renaissance of political satire in America, it seems unlikely that satirical ridicule will have any such impact. It certainly has not to date. In fact, many of the shortcomings of the current press/politician relationship have only become more exaggerated.

A more skeptical – and this study would argue, plausible -- school of thought in the study of satire argues that satirists have historically been given credit for having far greater impact than they deserve. (1) Feinberg argued that the main reason people consume satire is simply for pleasure and because it comes with no responsibility to act.(2) He wrote that the idea that satires have altered the societies that spawned them is “probably a delusion.” (3)

One of the reasons why we get more pleasure from satire than from a sermon, even when the satire is making exactly the same point as the sermon, is that we have an uncomfortable feeling that the minister expects us to do something about it. We enjoy the satire because we know that nobody really expects us to do anything about it, and that we have no real intention of ever doing anything about it. (4)

A logical explanation for the historical impact attributed to satire is the fact that the skilled satirist expressed and highlighted critical views that had already become widespread in his society. “When a satirist is in tune with his time and expresses popular dissatisfaction, he may give the impression that he is influencing events. Usually,

however, he is a symptom, not a cause.” (5) Feinberg’s book examined the motivation of satirists and concluded that most have no interest in reforming their targets of ridicule. The main goal of the satirist, according to Feinberg, is to criticize, not to correct. (6) As H.L. Mencken said, “My business is diagnosis, not therapeutics.” (7) Satire, Feinberg wrote, “serves to prod men into an awareness of truth, though rarely to any action on behalf of truth.” (8) Similarly, contemporary political satirists who criticize the conventions, pretense, and products of modern political reportage – views that are clearly widespread in society – offer little in terms of concrete and specific ways to reform that which they disapprove and many of them, including Stewart and Rick Mercer in Canada, tend to downplay their influence as critics, suggesting they are merely comedians looking for laughs. (9) Even if the purpose of satire that mocks the news media is to inspire a remodeling of the institution, you are not likely to hear a satirist admit that this is his or her goal.

Another obstacle for satirically inspired reform is the fact that satire is only persuasive when it is understood. This is problematic because, as Wilson described in his book, which referred to numerous psychological studies, satire (its message and even its intended target) are frequently misunderstood because “it is subtle, ambiguous or threatening.” (10) Wilson’s conclusion, “Owing to the high possibility of misunderstanding, satire is an unreliable mode of persuasion.” (11)

For these, and other reasons that will be discussed herein, there is scant evidence that contemporary political satire that ridicules the news media will result in any kind of significant institutional or professional reform throughout the news media. The satirists themselves have made it clear that this is not their goal. While this brand of political

satire is certainly effective in exposing the shortcomings and blind spots of contemporary political reportage, rarely do satirists – in the context of their satirical work -- offer anything that resemble solutions or recommendations for reform. Jon Stewart has participated in several interviews that caused minor sensations on the Internet as he took journalists to task for their shortcomings and offered solutions of his own, but these heated exchanges had nothing to do with satire and Stewart continued to shield himself from responsibility by claiming to be merely a comedian who did not deserve to be taken seriously.

Another obstacle to satire-inspired reform that will be discussed is the fact that several powerful news media executives have shown themselves to be more interested in co-opting the format and popularity of satire, rather than internalizing their sage critiques and reforming the profession of journalism. The news is, above all else, a business, and similar to any other business, its executives are concerned about the bottom line above all else.

The ascendancy of the regime of objectivity in the latter half of the 19th century was more the result of a shift in the economic imperatives of the news business, than the persistent chorus of rational media critiques. (12) In this context, the regime of objectivity gradually emerged because large metropolitan newspapers wanted to gain as large a circulation as possible in order to increase their advertising revenues. (13) The amount of advertising newspapers were able to attract, and the price at which they were able to sell that advertising, was tied to the size of their circulation.(14) Newspaper barons were now in the business of selling readers to advertisers, as many journalism historians have described it. (15) Therefore, it no longer made financial sense to merely

appeal to the supporters of a particular political party, who represented only a fraction of the total potential circulation. Objectivity as a governing ethic for journalists made as much financial sense for the owners, as it did professional sense for the journalists.

Today, in an era of media fragmentation, concentration and convergence of ownership, and declining consumption of mainstream news sources among the young adult demographic, business imperatives may also cause another transformation in the journalistic order. The young adult demographic is one of the favourite targets of advertisers. The news media, similar to any other business, are interested in what sells. What is selling among the young adult demographic is satire and irreverence. (16)

Nonetheless, it is highly unlikely that the practitioners of “real” journalism who work for mainstream news outlets could be unaware of the reasons why their profession has become such an enormous target for satire. Many have graduated from journalism school and have read their share of works that expose the shortcomings of the media, some have even written their own. They know the pressures they are under, the deadlines they cannot miss, the formulas they follow, and they watch and read the results. But even if they were not sufficiently convinced that their products were less than adequate, the work of today’s political satirists makes it abundantly clear. This is the role of effective satire.

Ridicule is disparaging and dismissive. Its butt receives personal criticism in public. If the rest of the audience laugh at him (or in this case as institution), the butt will feel isolated; for the group derive pleasure from the source of his discomfort. The audience’s amusement may seem to the butt to constitute tacit approval of the abuse and may bolster the feelings of being isolated. (17)

Nobody enjoys being laughed at, especially not politicians or journalists, both of whom tend to have lofty and self-important views of themselves and the value of their

role in democratic society. It is often said that the most important asset of both journalists and politicians is their credibility.(18) Their success depends on the trust of the public. For both politicians and journalists, credibility is an even more important currency than currency itself. However, by exposing the absurdities found in the contemporary press/politician power relationship in America to a growing and loyal audience who see things in much the same way, *The Daily Show*, as well as a number of other increasingly popular “fake” news sources, are constantly robbing the news media of its treasured credibility. The irony is that “real” journalists are well aware of the reasons why their presentations of the political realm are so easily held up to ridicule. Journalists are among the biggest fans of *The Daily Show*. In fact, it is “real” journalists and their “mainstream” news outlets that have fueled the hype surrounding Jon Stewart and elevated him to the status of “in demand” media pundit. In an interview with Jon Stewart, PBS’s Bill Moyers asked the satirist, “What do you see that we don’t see?”(19)

I think we (at *The Daily Show*) see exactly what you see. And...but for some reason, don’t analyze it in that manner or put it on the air in that manner. I can’t tell you how many times we’ll run into a journalist who will say, “Boy, that’s...I wish we could be saying that. That’s exactly the way we see it, and that’s exactly the way we’d like to be saying that’. And I (Stewart) always think, “Well, why don’t you?”(20)

Stewart also discussed this notion of journalists being conscious of the absurd elements of modern journalism in a *60 Minutes* interview with Steve Kroft. Discussing *The Daily Show*’s experience at the 2000 Republican convention, Stewart said,

Stewart: We’re a fake news organization covering a fake news event. Did you go to the conventions?

Kroft: No.

Stewart: Rightfully so. Because it’s their promotional ad for the party. We – we, as a fake news organization, should have been the only ones there, but there were, like, 15,000 of you guys just walking around. “Oh, do you believe these

guys? It's a whole big song and dance." Well, then leave! We think it's goofy! We're staying!"(21)

Kroft, and hopefully most of the other "real" journalists who cover political conventions, are conscious of the fact that they are indeed heavily-staged, carefully scripted, pseudo-events. In fact, the national conventions are the quintessential example of a pseudo-event as described by Daniel J. Boorstin in his groundbreaking work, *The Image: A Guide to Pseudo-Events in America*. (22) The satirist knows this, which is why he ridicules the proceedings. His audience knows this, which is why they tune in, grasp the satirical jokes, and laugh because it rings true. The journalists know this, but there are hundreds of them on the convention floor, all conditioned to follow certain professional practices. They're all seeking interviews with the same official sources, who are armed with the same talking points and motivated by the same desire to spin those who ask them for their thoughts.

In a piece on *ABC News* profiling Jon Stewart and his work on *The Daily Show*, Peter Jennings openly admitted that Stewart often says on air what ABC News journalists say in the newsroom, but not on camera. "This Jon Stewart of Comedy Central's *The Daily Show*, the man who often says in public what the rest of us tend to say only in the newsroom," Jennings said in a voice-over at the beginning of his "Person of the Week" profile. (23)

A few seconds later, Stewart repeated the same point he has made to other prominent journalists who seem jealous of his freedom to say what he really thinks; to express what his own common sense tells him.

I can't tell you how many times we'll run into government officials or people in the press who say, "yeah, you tell it like it is. I'd love to be able to say that."

Jeez, you know, maybe you should, seeing as you have a 24-hour network. Maybe you should say it all of the time. (24)

Jennings' statement, while innocent enough on the surface, is actually an admission of dishonesty to his audience. He and his colleagues, bound by the conventions of their profession and the current incarnation of the concept of objectivity, are forced to hold back. They do not feel empowered to share the whole story.

The central theme underlying the satirical content of *The Daily Show* is that "objectivity," as it is currently defined and practiced by the mainstream news media, does not get the public any closer to the "truth," but, in many ways contributes to the spin-cycled confusion.(25) "Stewart's on-air persona is that of the outraged individual who, comparing official pronouncements with his own basic common sense, simply cannot believe what he – and all of us – are expected to swallow." (26) Many working journalists, who are likely every bit as intelligent as the satirist and his followers, surely cannot believe it either. But, in this scenario, the mainstream news media are holding the spoon.

However, as more people become "politically disappointed" and network news ratings and newspaper circulation continue to decline, logic dictates that the press/politician relationship will need to be amended at some point in the not too distant future.(27) Democracy simply depends on it. And while amendment may be the unspoken aim of satire – although rarely do satirists offer solutions themselves -- and "ridicule the general method," it does not seem likely that the poignant, and popular, media criticism from satirists such as Stewart will prompt any real amendments in the manner in which journalists undertake their democratic role.(28) Despite the fact that many journalists agree with *The Daily Show's* point of view, and are aware that the

current press/politician relationship has become dysfunctional in many ways, little, if anything has changed. As Crouse pointed out, journalism is slow to evolve and won't change unless it is "shoved into the future by some irresistible force." (29) The satirical renaissance in America today is, at most, a faint nudge – and perhaps in the wrong direction.

Journalists have every right to be dissatisfied with media-trained politicians who evade questions and incessantly repeat their simplistic talking points. In fact, they ought to be offended. Journalists are the ones who ask the questions after all. Surely they are aware that their subjects are not answering them. The difference is journalists, fully indoctrinated with the concept of objectivity – thoroughly discredited but not replaced – and its component parts (fairness, balance, and neutrality or detachment) do not think it is their place to demand more from their interview subjects. Spin and talking points are the native dialects in Washington. The journalists in the White House press corps are so accustomed to political speak, a language of well-mannered lies, that they likely do not even expect an honest answer to a question directed at a politician or political operative. A growing segment of the public knows they are not getting honest answers either, which explains why they are frustrated with political discourse and have tuned out. The fact that journalists refuse to demand honest answers and politicians are able to repeat their carefully crafted talking points over and over and over again, is why the news media is held up for satirical ridicule. It shows a lack of courage and integrity. Far from watchdogs, the current Washington press corps behaves like lap dogs whose greatest fear is being left outside in the cold. Satirists, such as Stewart, have become the watchdogs of both the politicians and the news media as they engage in their distracting waltz. (30) The

show is a nightly catharsis for the politically disappointed who cannot believe what passes for political discourse.

ABC's Ted Koppel, while admitting that he admires Stewart and his comedy, has expressed concern that so many younger adults get their "news" from *The Daily Show*.⁽³¹⁾ But, as was discussed in Chapter 1, his concern may be misplaced. *Daily Show* viewers were shown to have more complete knowledge of campaign issues than those who do not watch the show, including people who watch the "real" news in print and on cable or the networks. Furthermore, as was also discussed, satirical humour requires a shared bedrock of knowledge in order to be understood and appreciated. If a viewer was not familiar with the conventions of the news media or the political personalities and issues they cover, than they would only be capable of understanding a fraction of the jokes.

But let us assume that Koppel's erroneous interpretation of the various studies about the news consumption habits of young people is correct. What would *Daily Show* viewers be missing if they ignored "real" news? In a media universe filled with the thick fog of partisan spin, staged pseudo-events, and conflict driven reportage that presents issues as a battle between two enemies, the truth belongs to the side that is better able to manipulate the fourth estate and control the message. It is in this climate that such knowable misperceptions as those discussed in Chapter 2 can be held. "Americans are being served by a news media so beset by spin, from within and without that we've lost all sense of what objective truth feels or sounds like," wrote former CBS foreign correspondent Tom Fenton. ⁽³²⁾

No matter how often, or how effectively, Stewart and company expose the systematic failures and blind spots in the news media, they persist and worsen. No matter how many ridiculous segments of Great Moments in Punditry are broadcast on *The Daily Show*, Bill O'Reilly and Sean Hannity are as loud, as ideological, and as rude as ever. If O'Reilly is more than willing to tell guests on his show to "shut up" if they disagree, he's not likely to change his approach because some satirist on cable is making fun of him. And why should he change? Despite the questionable value of his bombastic contributions to the national political discourse, he has a large and loyal audience and he makes millions of dollars a year.

No matter how many times *The Daily Show* mocks the practice of administration officials making the rounds of every Sunday morning talk show, repeating the same relentless talking points in a coordinated damage control blitz, it continues to be an effective strategy. Otherwise they would not continue to use it.

However, the popularity of *The Daily Show* has translated into influence and status for its star. Stewart is in demand by the very journalists and media outlets that his brand of satire ridicules. Stewart has become a media celebrity and a media pundit in his own right. The popularity of *The Daily Show* has elevated Stewart to a position of considerable influence in the fragmented media universe. "Real" television journalists recognize his popularity and invite him on their shows to offer his satirical take on their profession and the charade of political theatre.⁽³³⁾ They do so because they are desperate to draw an audience, particularly Stewart's young audience. While many people enjoy his humour, many also value his opinion and are interested in what he has to say. He is the most trusted man in fake news after all. Bill Maher, host of *Real Time* on HBO and

former host of ABC's *Politically Incorrect*, has a similar influence. He is a regular guest on *Larry King Live*, where the veteran broadcaster asks for his humorous take on the biggest issues in the news, including such queries as "If you were given the opportunity to become president today, what are the three major problems you would take care of immediately aside from Cheney, Rumsfeld and Rice?(34)

During the run up to the 2004 presidential election, Stewart's influence and popularity seemed to be reaching its peak. Following the Democratic National Convention in Boston, *Nightline's* Ted Koppel interviewed Stewart. Koppel is a member of the old guard who has made it quite clear that he does not think it is a good thing that so many people, particularly young people, are turning to David Letterman, Jay Leno, and Stewart for their news.(35) In his opinion, "fake" news is not an adequate substitute. He thinks profit-driven concerns have encouraged an unhealthy amount of entertainment driven "news." His dislike for this trend is understandable given the fact that in 2002 ABC came very close to replacing *Nightline* in favour of taking David Letterman and his *Late Show* from CBS. Letterman opted to stay with CBS, but ABC's apparent eagerness to scrap its most esteemed news broadcast in favour of a comedy show seemed symptomatic of a media industry that clearly values ratings and money over less lucrative pursuits, such as public service.(36) The issue was even satirized in a skit on an episode of *Saturday Night Live* on March 9, 2002, hosted by Stewart. In the skit Stewart and his fellow "news" anchors, including Tom Brokaw, Dan Rather and an assortment of other celebrity journalists are gathered at a party while Koppel hides out in his room and pouts because ABC is courting Letterman.(37)

Koppel's interview with Stewart was an earnest discussion about some of the failures of modern political reportage, all of which have been ridiculed before on Stewart's show. The interview created a minor stir on the Internet, since Koppel appeared almost disdainful of Stewart.⁽³⁸⁾ The discussion began with Koppel noting that rarely does anything unexpected happen at the party conventions anymore. Stewart agreed, adding that nothing *ever* happens at such carefully crafted and stage-managed pseudo-events. Nothing unexpected is supposed to happen. Politicians and their political handlers learned long ago the value and importance of controlling the airwaves, framing stories, and controlling the message. Koppel, standing up for his profession, said it was not so easy 40 years ago when there were only three networks covering such an event.

"When there were only three of us (networks), we were not that easy to manipulate because you could only play A off against B off against C," said Koppel, adding, "Now you got 200 of us. You don't like what Jon Stewart is doing? Go to..."
(39)

Stewart corrected Koppel, pointing out that his show is comedy and not news. ("We're peripheral, we're a Sundae bar. We're reactive and not actual news, so if you don't like Jon Stewart, you'll have to go to another comedy program, not a news program," he said).⁽⁴⁰⁾ Stewart is often self-deprecating when interviewers raise the topic of his influence as a serious political force. The notion clearly makes him uncomfortable. To buy his own hype as an influential media pundit would be akin to admitting his own co-option. Mainstream success and adulation ought to be uncomfortable for a counter-cultural figure, such as Stewart. Can a show devoted to satirizing the news media maintain its edge if its anchor is a star in the same media

establishment that his show is supposed to ridicule four nights a week? It is not surprising that Stewart is eager to downplay his influence over a generation, as well as his status as an influential player in the media spectrum. He knows he cannot be knighted while remaining the court jester.

Yet, despite his discomfort, Stewart seems intent on taking advantage of his elevated platform to express the political disappointment that fuels his satire. Often he makes no attempt to be funny or satirical, but to simply describe the situation as he sees it.

On that note, the Koppel interview continued with a serious tone. People are simply looking for a “narrative,” Stewart told Koppel. (41) In the ever -expanding and ungovernable media universe, people gravitate towards an outlet (s) that confirms and conforms to their particular discursive perspective (narrative). (42) An editorial in the November/December issue of the *Columbia Journalism Review* suggested that perhaps the debate over bias in the media has matters backwards, and perhaps a more useful point of departure would be to examine viewer, reader and listener bias. “Maybe people simply want their own opinions reinforced,” the editorial said, describing this trend as the natural result of news media spectrum filled with spin (“a vast universe of fact and factoid” in which “embracing a political bent is one way of organizing it”). (43)

We live in a thick media fog, advertised and argued at from every available platform. When people watch, say, Jon Stewart’s *Daily Show*, they don’t just want to laugh. They want some clues about what to laugh at, and why. They’re looking, in part, for something serious. (44)

They turn to *The Daily Show* for a “comedic perspective” Stewart told Koppel, and not news. (45) If no consensus truth can cut through the media fog, particularly

because “objective” journalists do not see it as their role to shine a light on it, then one might as well find a news source that appeals to their own worldview.

It was at this point that Stewart explained the extent to which the fourth estate has lost, or perhaps simply surrendered, its position to the powerful. (46) Politicians and political operatives recognized long ago the power and importance of television. In its power relationship with the press, the powerful recognized in the 1960s (circa 1960 and Richard Nixon’s disastrous debate with Kennedy) just how crucial the media was to electoral success and the preservation of power. They devised news strategies and approaches to gain the upper hand in the political communication function, with Nixon once again showing the way in his run for the White House in 1968, which was discussed in Chapter 3. Advertising, image, sound bites and controlling the message would become of paramount importance. Politicians now surround themselves with communication advisors, consultants and advertisers that keep their image and words “on message.”

The news media has still yet to adjust. “If Alexander the Great had TV, believe me, he would have had his spin guys dealing. Napoleon would have people working,”(47) Stewart said, later adding:

“This is the battle for the airwaves. And that’s what we watch, and I think that’s what is so dispiriting to those at home who believe that...I think, there’s a sense here that you’re not participating in that battle, and there’s a sense at home that you’re ABSOLUTELY participating and complicit in that battle.” (48)

Stewart was accusing Koppel and his colleagues of being the enablers of the political spin that now consumes the national political dialogue. Koppel asked Stewart to “go a little further on that.” (49) Stewart then described, in one short example, exactly what a typical “issue” discussion on a cable news show looks and sounds like, and exactly why such point/counterpoint debates between two paid political hacks are so inadequate. In

his scenario, Stewart is a news anchor who is moderating a discussion about health care and the fact that 40 million Americans don't have health insurance. His guests are Democratic strategist Donna Brazile and Republican strategist Bay Buchanan – two guests who appear regularly to debate each other on Judy Woodruff's *Inside Politics* on CNN – before it was cancelled in 2005.

“Let's go Donna.” “I think the Democrats really have it right here. I think that this is a pain for the insurance companies and the drug companies and this is wrong for America.” “Bay.” “Oh no, what it is...” And then she throws out her figures from the Heritage Foundation, and she throws out her figures from the Brookings Institute, and the anchor – who should be the arbiter of the truth – says, “Thank you both very much, that was interesting.” No it wasn't! That was Coke and Pepsi talking about beverage truth. And that game has, I think, caused people to think, “I'm not watching this.” (50)

Stewart's satirical description is poignant because, like all good satire, it is rooted in truth. Anyone who has watched CNN's political shows over any reasonable period of time will have seen Brazile and Buchanan go toe-to-toe, defending their party's side and refusing to give an inch. They know they are not going to be able to convince their adversary of the wisdom of their point of view. That's not what they are paid for. They are paid to be cheerleaders for their team and to convert more fans to their team. Consensus is not the goal of political debates on television. The goal is not to work together to solve the nation's problems in the best interest of the public. The moderator who says “that was very interesting” and thanks them for coming on the show is certainly not going to help in that pursuit. The anchor's job is to make sure they do not both talk at once. Trying to find a verifiable truth, workable solutions, consensus, or even the vast untrammelled middle ground, is not the anchor's job. As a result, politics has become advertising. The company (political party) that best communicates their talking points

(slogans) gets the most votes or percentage points in the polls (sales). It is this notion of politics having descended into a battle of ad campaigns (Democrats/Pepsi vs. Coke/Republicans) that has turned off so many media savvy young adults who have grown up in an environment plastered with advertising. (51) Many resent its pervasive presence and try to avoid it. They mute commercials and they buy software to prevent pop up advertisements on the Internet. This debasement of political discourse clearly frustrates Hall Jamieson's alternative news seekers, Patterson's "disenchanted" voters, and Halstead's pragmatic Generation Xers.

But it does not seem to frustrate Koppel to quite the same extent. Stewart told the veteran journalist that humour does not provide an "answer" to the inadequate form of political discourse that he described, but offers a catharsis, "a sneeze." (52) Koppel then points out the central distinction between the "real" journalist and the satirist. While Stewart can cover the fictitious (yet quite familiar) debate he described and use humour to say, "BS, that's a crock," Koppel says he cannot do the same. (53) The reason, though he did not say so explicitly, is that he is bound by a professional code that does not afford him that ability, regardless of whether he agrees that it is, in fact, "a crock."

"You don't need humour to do that because you have what I wish I had which is credibility and gravitas," Stewart responded. (54)

Koppel seemed less than persuaded by Stewart's logical arguments. At its most basic level, Stewart's statements represent an appeal for journalists of Koppel's stature to use their influence and power to bring some semblance of rationality to political discourse; to use their influence and power to regain their lost grip in the tug of war of political communication. He wants Koppel and his colleagues to help generate productive

debate about issues of importance, to move politicians and operatives off their language of rehearsed talking points and non-responses, instead of simply facilitating verbal sparring matches between well-paid ideological warriors. In short, he wants Koppel and his colleagues to use their influence -- squandered and diminished as it may be in a fragmented media universe filled with bias police and overtly partisan news outlets -- to improve the political discourse so that it becomes a less deserving target of satire. In a bizarre sense, Stewart is calling for reform to the journalistic order, which would ironically mean less material for his jokes. By stating that humour is not the answer, Stewart is clearly not encouraging mimicry, or some kind of mainstream news co-option of his show's formula. He wants Koppel and his colleagues to have the courage and respect for news consumers to expose and reject the absurdity that frustrates Stewart and his audience. Koppel has admitted in an interview that he agrees with Stewart far more than he disagrees, and likely sees this absurdity too. (55).

In a later interview with *The Washington Post*, Koppel admitted Stewart's point had some merit, but he did not know quite how it could work in practice, particularly during a live interview. "He (Stewart) feels I have a responsibility to get in there and tell the public, 'Look, this guy is lying' -- maybe not quite that blatantly," Koppel told Kurtz in October 2004. "I disagree with that only in part...in a live interview you can say, 'That doesn't sound right', but you don't automatically have all the facts at your disposal." (56)

It should be noted as well that the earnestness of Stewart's appeals, which are clearly sincere and quite logically expressed, completely discredit his protestations that he is just a "dancing monkey," a fake news anchor whose show follows puppets who make crank calls and who is not to be taken seriously. During the 2004 election season,

Stewart was quite prepared to use his status as a media celebrity – his own co-opted status – to try and get a debate about media reform going. Koppel did not appear inspired to lead the charge.

Stewart's most notorious, and least humorous, appearance as a media critic came on Oct. 15, 2004. Stewart, the media celebrity du jour, appeared on CNN's *Crossfire* with hosts (on the left) Paul Begala, and (on the right) Tucker Carlson. *Crossfire*, with its rapid-fire yelling matches between staunch (and well-paid) ideological warriors, was one of *The Daily Show*'s favourite satirical targets. The purpose of Stewart's appearance was to promote *The Daily Show*'s new best-selling book, *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart Presents America (The Book): A Citizen's Guide to Democracy Inaction*, and to offer a humorous take on the issues of the day. That didn't happen. Not only was Stewart not funny, he was hostile.

Stewart told Begala and Carlson that he wanted to come on the show because he had often said both privately, and publicly in newspapers and on television, that he thought the show was "bad." He then clarified that the show is not simply bad, but that it is hurting America and called the pair "partisan hacks," who engage in theatre instead of honest debate. (57)

Carlson took offense and accused Stewart of offering softball questions to Democratic candidate Sen. John Kerry when he was on *The Daily Show*, including "How are you holding up?" Carlson's challenge set off the following exchange:

Carlson: Didn't you feel like – you got the chance to interview the guy. Why not ask him a real question, instead of just sucking up to him?

Stewart: Yes. "How are you holding up?" is a real suck-up. And I was actually giving him a hot stone massage as we were doing it.

(Laughter)

Carlson: It sounded that way. It did.

Stewart: You know, it's interesting to hear you talk about my responsibility.
Carlson: I felt the sparks between you.
Stewart: I didn't realize that – and maybe this explains quite a bit.
Carlson: No, the opportunity to...
(Crosstalk)
Stewart: ... is that the news organizations look to Comedy Central for their cues on integrity. (58)

Despite the fact that he has gone on *Crossfire* to accuse the show's hosts of hurting America and other offenses, Stewart still uses the excuse that he is just a comedian in order to shield himself from his own responsibility and contribution to the political discourse. This defense is more disingenuous as Stewart's popularity and influence grow, and as he takes the opportunity to challenge "real" journalists in a non-satirical fashion on their shows. The excuse sounds as disingenuous as any political talking point.

Not surprisingly, the argument escalated and petty insults began to fly, with Stewart even mocking the fact that Carlson wears a bow tie.

Stewart: ...you have a responsibility to the public discourse, and you fail miserably.
Carlson: You need to get a job at a journalism school, I think.
Stewart: You need to go to one. The thing that I want to say is, when you have people on for just knee-jerk, reactionary talk...
Carlson: Wait. I thought you were going to be funny. Come on. Be funny.
Stewart: No. No. I'm not going to be your monkey. (59)

It was at this point that Begala tried to bring a lighter tone to the proceedings and change the topic. He asked Stewart which presidential candidate would provide better comedic material, if elected. Stewart did not exactly take the bait.

That's kind of not how we look at it. We look at, the absurdity of the system provides us the most material. And that is best served by sort of the theatre of it all, you know, which, by the way, thank you both, because it's been helpful. (60)

Then Stewart went right back to challenging the *Crossfire* hosts' claim that they host "honest" debates about the issues. To illustrate his point, Stewart asked them where they go following presidential debates. Carlson and Begala were not sure what Stewart was talking about, perhaps because they have not covered the debates as regular reporters. "The men's room," Carlson answered. "Home," said Begala. Stewart then said they both go to "Spin Alley," as it has come to be called, where paid political operatives for both parties wait to tell the approaching media herd just how convincingly their candidate won the debate that ended just minutes earlier.

"You go to Spin Alley, the place called Spin Alley. Now don't you think that, for people watching at home, that's kind of a drag, that you're literally walking to a place called Deception Lane?" asked Stewart. (61)

Begala defended the integrity of the work of paid political operatives by saying he has no doubt they believe in the candidate on whose behalf they are spinning the journalists. They believe in their candidate and they are simply trying to persuade the journalists to do the same. "That's what they're trying to do by spinning," said Begala.(62)

Stewart agreed that Bush's operatives probably believe he would do a better job as president, and that Kerry's operatives likely believe the same about their candidate. "But what I believe is, they're not making honest arguments. So what they're doing is, the ends justify the means," Stewart retorted. (63) From there the interview degenerated once again, with Stewart even going so far as to call Carlson a "dick" on national television. (64) The interview was so confrontational and so ill-mannered that it caused enormous waves in the media landscape. The 13-minute video clip was downloaded by

670,000 people on the Internet following the episode. (65) Editorials and columns rehashed the surprising confrontation, with most supporting Stewart's brutal honesty. Several big name "real" journalists expressed support for Stewart's rant, including NBC's Brian Williams. "The din of our media has reached the point where we could use a have-you-no-sense of decency-sir-at-long-last moment," he said. (66) Many commentators seemed to agree with Stewart's negative assessment of the merits of *Crossfire* and thought it cathartic that someone finally said what many news consumers have felt for so long. Alessandra Stanley of *The New York Times* wrote,

Mr. Stewart's Howard Beal (of "Network") outburst stood out because he said what a lot of viewers feel helpless to correct: that news programs, particularly on cable, have become echo chambers for political attacks, amplifying the noise instead of parsing the misinformation. Whether the issue is Swift boat ads or Bill O'Reilly's sexual harassment suit, shows like "Crossfire" or "Hardball" provide gladiator-style infotainment as journalists clownishly seek to amuse or rile viewers, not inform them. (67)

Comedy Central received over a thousand letters of feedback about Stewart's appearance on *Crossfire* – 10 times the normal amount – most of which were supportive of Stewart's outburst. (68) Even CNN/U.S.'s newly minted president, Jonathan Klein, agreed with Stewart's criticism. In January 2005, Klein announced that the 24-hour news network wasn't going to renew Carlson's contract, nor would it continue to produce *Crossfire*. "I guess I come down more firmly in the Jon Stewart camp," Klein told the *Associated Press*. "I doubt that when the president sits down with his advisors they scream at him to bring him up to date on all of the issues," Klein added. "I don't know why we don't treat the audience with the same respect." (69)

Despite the flow of supportive commentary in the mainstream news media, popular fan support, and even the cancellation of the show that Stewart despised so

strongly, there was an undercurrent of commentary in the ‘blogosphere’ and in the mainstream news media that did not view Stewart’s outburst in such a favourable light. Many, including devoted fans of *The Daily Show*, began to suggest that the *Crossfire* incident was proof that Stewart, who had been profiled on *60 Minutes* and had graced the covers of national magazines, was beginning to believe his own media hype. Built up by the same media/celebrity machine that he mocks four nights a week, the satirist on a once obscure cable channel was beginning to take himself too seriously, some warned.(70) The fake newsman who ridicules the news media for a living had become a newsmaker himself. (71) Stewart’s outburst, which featured a potent whiff of self-righteousness, would surely have been fodder for *The Daily Show* under any other circumstances. “One way the system punishes you for speaking out is that it overdoses the reactions,” Jay Rosen, the chair of the journalism department at New York University, told *USA Today’s* Olivia Barker. “The message that comes through is that you think you should be dominating the conversation.” (72) The cumulative effect of the torrent of reaction following his appearance on *Crossfire*, combined with Stewart’s own over-hyped media exposure during the 2004 election season, left some wondering if Stewart had reached a point of overexposure. “Once you hit *60 Minutes* decibel level, beware,” Tom Rosenstiel, director of the Project for Excellence in Journalism, told Barker. “If you’re a counter-cultural figure, you don’t want to go too much further.” (73) Rosenstiel explained that satirists who begin to take themselves too seriously usually have a shorter shelf life. He said Stewart did not cross that line, “but I think he became aware of that line.” (74)

Other commentators thought Stewart had clearly crossed that line. “The Jon Stewart backlash should start right about now,” Ana Marie Cox, also known as blogger

Wonkette, told Howard Kurtz in a *Crossfire* post-mortem, adding that Stewart had painted a target on his chest as a result of his outburst on the cable shoutfest. “To say his is just a comedy show is a cop-out in a way,” she continued. “He’s gotten so much power. So many people look at him that you can’t really be the kid in the back throwing spitballs.” (75)

Stewart’s own popularity and saturated presence in the media landscape is a form of mainstream co-option. There appeared to be a growing conflict of interest as the counter-cultural satirist had gone from court jester to the royals’ favourite son.(76)

The Daily Show’s executive producer Ben Karlin addressed the possibility of overexposure. Karlin admitted that there was likely a backlash already underway, but he was confident it would pass with the end of the election season, which always results in added attention for *The Daily Show* and its star. (77) Karlin also said Stewart is aware of how the media build people up and then promptly tear them down. In fact, it’s a phenomenon that *The Daily Show* ridicules. “It’s very easy to go from media darling to media whore to washed-up-on-the-street-corner. That’s a path that we’ve seen many, many times,” said Karlin. (78)

The excessive attention surrounding Stewart calmed in the months following George W. Bush’s re-election. *The Daily Show* has continued to produce biting satire that continues to pull no punches. On the one hand, it could be argued that Stewart’s appearance on *Crossfire* achieved, at least to a small degree, the unspoken (and academically contested) goal of satire – to inspire a remodeling of the institution it ridicules. CNN’s Klein said he agreed with Stewart’s perspective and canceled the show just a few months after his controversial appearance. (79) But this interpretation is

problematic for a number of reasons. Firstly, it was not *The Daily Show's* satire that made Klein realize that *Crossfire* was an inadequate forum for political debate that no longer had a place on CNN. There was nothing satirical about Stewart's outburst. In fact, the torrent of reaction that followed is a direct result of Stewart's newfound status as an influential media celebrity – a status and image created for him by the very mass media machine that he satirizes for a living. Secondly, though Klein admitted publicly to agreeing with Stewart's rebuke of *Crossfire*, the show would not have been cancelled had it still been a solid ratings performer. Klein did not take the show off the air because Jon Stewart made him realize the show was terrible. Outmatched by the sound and fury of right-wing blowhards on Fox News, *Crossfire's* ratings had been falling like a stone for some time. The show was averaging just 447,000, which was a 21 per cent drop compared to the year before. (80) Stewart himself acknowledged afterward that the show was "vulnerable." "Look, as much as these guys talk, if Pol Pot's talk show was doing really well in the ratings, he'd still have a talk show," Stewart told reporter Julie Hinds.(81)

Neither Stewart's satire, nor even a highly publicized and highly controversial public outburst, have the power to cause the kind of widespread institutional and professional reform of the journalistic order that would cease to make today's news media such a deserving target of satire. Even if his *Crossfire* outburst caused CNN executives to see the light and cancel the dreadful show, Stewart would then have to go on every news show that he dislikes and give the hosts a stern tongue lashing to provoke the kind of widespread reform that is needed. Not only would that plan fail, but Stewart would become as annoying as any know-it-all pundit his show lampoons. If the main

evidence of satire-inspired reform is the fact that *Crossfire*, arguably one of the worst offenders in the news media universe, was cancelled after Stewart launched a self-righteous rant, than there is certainly no satire-inspired revolution of the journalistic order in the works.

When all is said and done, the only force strong enough to cause institutional reform or a rethinking of the central premises of journalistic profession is simple supply and demand economics. If *Crossfire* fails to compete with loud yelling matches between ideological warriors on Fox News, then it will get cancelled. The fact that the show offered a toxic contribution to the national political dialogue is largely irrelevant.

If news consumers are indeed growing more disenchanted and disappointed with the political realm and the news media's presentation of it, then they must speak with their attention. By watching a particular news show, or buying a particular newspaper, or visiting an online newsmagazine, or listening to a particular radio news broadcast, news consumers are expressing an opinion about the kind of journalism they value. Many of the corporate executives at the shrinking number of massive conglomerates that own and control the American media landscape may not all be terribly familiar with the mission of journalism and its role in the democratic process, but one thing they all understand is supply and demand. Think *Crossfire* is hurting America? Don't watch. Think Ted Koppel and *Nightline* are a critical source of in-depth coverage of the important issues in a news media machine increasingly fixated on entertainment-driven news values? Then stop watching Letterman and turn the channel to ABC.

This simple supply and demand formula becomes a little more complicated in the case of *The Daily Show*. Executives look at the numbers and lick their lips at the apparent

appetite for news presented in a less formal, more humorous fashion, delivered by a younger, more affable anchor. This analysis is misguided, however. Stewart was correct when he told Koppel that “humour” is not the answer to what ails the journalistic profession. Humour is the catharsis. Fake news exposes what is wrong with the current political communication function. Satire, while more satisfying than “objectivity” in many ways, is not an alternative. Satire is a diagnosis of the inadequacy of the now discredited and thoroughly exploited regime of objectivity, which is proving both increasingly ineffective in holding the powerful to account and informing the public, and increasingly unpopular for its failings.

While there is certainly information and media literacy value in watching *The Daily Show*, Koppel is justified in his concerns that the consequence of the popularity of Letterman, Leno and Stewart as sources of news is that the news media will become increasingly entertainment driven.

What concerns me though, is not so much people like Jon Stewart, Jay Leno and David Letterman. They are very, very smart, very funny guys. I’m not really concerned if they’re dealing with issues of importance. Satirists have been doing that for hundreds of years and they do it extremely well. I’m much more concerned about the fact that newsmen are trying to act like entertainers than I am by the fact entertainers are pretending to be the news. (82)

There is mounting evidence that Koppel’s concerns are coming to fruition. His own show, *Nightline*, underwent a major revamping – without his participation. Following Koppel’s departure, the show now features three anchors, in different locations, with one introducing segments from Times Square in New York to add more “pizzazz” to the proceedings. (83) The show no longer features one story per episode, which is examined in depth, and usually over several nights. Instead, the new *Nightline* is

expected to feature three shorter stories a night. (84) The new features may seem like a watering down of the original, but they are far less drastic than other infotainment models the executives at ABC were considering. “One show tested recently, according to reports, was set in a nightclub. It had white tablecloths, candles, a jazz quintet, a live audience at little tables and – this is not a joke – faux fog.”(85)

CBS was planning its own remodeling of its flagship *Evening News* in conjunction with the unceremonious departure of Dan Rather, whose reputation suffered a severe blow after a flawed *60 Minutes II* report about President George W. Bush’s service, or lack thereof, in the Air National Guard during Vietnam. In fact, all three of the big network news anchors are gone. Tom Brokaw retired from the anchor chair at NBC and ABC anchor Peter Jennings died of lung cancer in 2005.

CBS chairman Les Moonves envisioned big changes for the *Evening News*. Similar to *Nightline*, Moonves told reporters in Los Angeles that he was leaning towards having two anchors, possibly in different cities. The days of the trusted news anchor “preaching from the mountain” are over, according to Moonves. (86) The goal, he said, would be to give the show an ensemble, younger feel. Moonves even hinted that Jon Stewart, who also works for CBS’ parent company Viacom, could have a role on the revamped broadcast. (87)

“Where would you put him (Stewart)?” wondered Bob Zelnick in an article in *The Weekly Standard*. “After the terrorist bomb that killed 105, or the new AIDS virus story? Or perhaps let Jon ridicule the one or two legitimate enterprise pieces that fought their way into the show.” (88)

With the exit of the old-guard anchors (Brokaw, Jennings and Rather), the networks are clearly more committed to entertainment values than ever as they look to jazz up their broadcasts to attract younger audiences. The anchor of this new era will likely be in the mold of CNN's Anderson Cooper, a youngish and affable former host of a reality TV show, who travels from one disaster or war zone to another, wearing his emotions on his sleeve as he tries to communicate the scale of the devastation he finds. Personality, charisma and "likeability" are more important than experience, credibility and gravitas as qualities in a news anchor. The latest example of this trend is the fact that CBS eventually decided to hire NBC's beloved and perky morning host Katie Couric to replace Dan Rather on the network's *Evening News*, as opposed to one of their own talented reporters, who have years of experience covering hard news. (89)

In 2005, CNN fired Aaron Brown, who has been described as having the charisma of a dentist, and gave his prime time slot to the youngish and hip Anderson Cooper. (90) Network president Jonathan Klein was convinced that audiences connected with Cooper's emotional brand of reporting following the tragic aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, which devastated the Gulf Coast and was followed by an ineffective response from all levels of government and borderline civil chaos in New Orleans. Similar to other journalists, Cooper failed, or perhaps didn't try, to keep his emotions in check as he covered the tragic story. After promoting Cooper, Klein publicly endorsed his brand of emotional reporting, which included breaking down in tears on camera. "It's very important to help the audience make an emotional connection to a story, and some people just know how to do it instinctively," Klein said. "Anderson is one of those people

because he feels the connection to a story himself, and he lets that emotion pass through to the screen. He's not afraid to show how much he cares." (91)

The most famous display of Cooper's emotional reporting was his interview with Louisiana Sen. Mary Landrieu. When asked if the federal government bears responsibility for the social chaos that followed the hurricane and if they ought to apologize for the inadequate response to the disaster, Landrieu responded by thanking other politicians for their efforts and "strong statements." She then pointed out that Congress was going into session to pass a \$10 billion supplemental bill to fund relief efforts. Cooper could barely contain his frustration. (92)

Excuse me, Senator, I'm sorry for interrupting. I haven't heard that, because, for the last four days, I've been seeing dead bodies in the streets here in Mississippi. And to listen to politicians thanking each other and complimenting each other, you know, I got to tell you, there are a lot of people here who are very upset, and very angry, and very frustrated. And when they hear politicians slap -- you know, thanking one another, it just, you know, it kind of cuts them the wrong way right now, because literally there was a body on the streets of this town yesterday being eaten by rats because this woman had been laying in the street for 48 hours. And there's not enough facilities to take her up. Do you get the anger that is out here? (93)

Emotional reporting is problematic for a number of reasons, not the least of which is the fact that journalists should never cry on the air -- journalists need to report the news, not emote it. In addition, the news should be more than simply covering tear-worthy tragedy after tear-worthy tragedy. As Tim Goodman explained in an article about Cooper's promotion in *The San Francisco Chronicle*,

Cooper's tears were real and his pain at the plight of those ruined by Katrina was palpable. He hit a nerve -- at the time. He was anointed in the press. But natural disasters come and go, and nobody can sustain that kind of reportorial demeanor in the long term -- nor would people want to watch it. (94)

Nonetheless, the aforementioned exchange with the senator does represent an example of Cooper expressing through emotion (frustration) that which Stewart might ridicule with humour. He was not prepared to accept the senator's talking points and he was not concerned about appearing impolite to his guest in the process. He wanted her to answer like a human being instead of politician, just as he was behaving as a human being instead of an "objective" journalist. For once, political-speak was not going to be acceptable. The trouble is it took dead bodies being eaten by rats in the streets of Waveland, Mississippi for a journalist to demand a real answer.

Stewart and *The Daily Show* offer satire to engage their audience, while Cooper offers charisma and occasionally unabashed emotionalism to connect with his viewers. There are also Bill O'Reilly and his colleagues at Fox News who offer constant outrage to engage and enrage their audience. The news is presented through a variety of filters – the passive objectivity of mainstream journalists being another.⁽⁹⁵⁾ The question is which filter can both properly inform the public while keeping them engaged. Or perhaps it is time to conceive of an entirely new filter. ⁽⁹⁶⁾

Satire is indeed inspiring a remodeling of the journalistic order. Only instead of causing "real" journalists to engage in a debate about the flaws in the conventions that govern how they report the news, the executives running news outlets are looking for ways to spruce up their products, even going so far as to court the satirists who mock them. The effect of the renaissance of political satire in America, led by Jon Stewart's *Daily Show*, will be to push the mainstream news media, who are jealous of the show's popularity, further towards entertainment values as opposed to public service. News executives who care more about ratings and demographics will continue to be more

concerned with the bottom line over public service. The news will become even more driven by entertainment values and increasingly deserving of ridicule. The true media satirist will have more material than ever and the growing ranks of the politically disappointed will continue to laugh in a collective catharsis at the absurd spectacle of it all.

Conclusion

Many of these shortcomings of contemporary political reporting were diagnosed long ago and are now blatantly obvious for even the most casual news consumer to see. One of the most common, for example, is the argument that the news media is far too concerned with political strategy as opposed to policy substance, and the horse race of political campaigns, as opposed to platforms and the consequences of the policies being proposed by the candidates. This is hardly a new concept and would likely strike an experienced media scholar -- or even a second-year journalism student at university for that matter -- as beyond redundant. "Tell me something I don't know," they might say.

Perhaps. But the reason this particular criticism of political reportage remains important is the simple fact that it still exists. The profession of journalism has not solved or remedied this particular shortcoming in the way it undertakes its vital role in the democratic process. The same goes for most of the problems identified by media scholars in their rows of volumes in every academic library in North America. Journalists and media academics have been quite astute in identifying problems, but collectively impotent when it comes to solving them.

The fact that they persist and are so obvious is the very reason why political satire that targets the news media and its conventions and products has become so popular. The popularity of political satire across all media explains why professional reform is so critical. The flaws of the profession of journalism are being exposed to millions. That is bad news for a profession that is in the midst of a prolonged and escalating credibility crisis with the public.⁽¹⁾ The audience for such satire is loyal and growing because they

agree with the critiques that underlie the satirical humour. The exaggerated strain found in such satirical jokes may be funny, but the plausible strain rings true.

But reform, particularly when it comes to journalism, is not an easy task. The journalists who comprise the mainstream news media, who are bound by pressures of time, professionalism, ambition, and a natural pack mentality, rush to produce their daily news products, relying on the same practices that produce the brand of reportage that a growing segment of the news consuming public -- and the growing ranks of satirists -- have deemed inadequate and worthy of ridicule.

However, to be fair, most of the volumes which so ably identify these shortcomings offer solutions to help remedy the problem. The real challenge is how to implement profession-wide reforms in such an enormous and fractious and competitive industry that is filled with rival companies who do battle on a daily basis -- in some cases hourly basis -- for ratings or circulation. Complicating matters further is the fact that the definition of a journalist has become blurred in recent years with the emergence of different kinds of political storytellers using different media. The most obvious example would be Internet bloggers -- an increasingly influential force in the political spectrum with their own set of values.

Fox News' loud, conservative, and patriotic brand of televised talk radio may indeed be a toxic form of journalism that does its audience more harm than good.⁽²⁾ The network may indeed be a big reason why so many Americans held so many misperceptions regarding the reasons for and the results of the war in Iraq. But, it is the top-rated cable news channel in the U.S. Why in the world would it -- or should it -- change its journalistic ways? The public has spoken with its attention.

It is the schizophrenic nature of the news business that makes wide-ranging industry-wide reform nearly impossible. Professional journalists like to believe -- and are taught to believe -- that they are providing a public service; they are the watchdogs of the political realm. However, it does not take long for a novice reporter in the working world to discover that he or she is part of a business; a business no different than any other. They are sellers of information and opinion and their market is flooded and relentlessly competitive. Constantly under the clock, journalists follow conventions and formulas to meet both their deadlines, as well as the expectations of their superiors. They must produce. There is rarely enough inches of copy space, seconds in the story count, nor hours in the day for a journalist to explore truly innovative approaches with their reporting. This is not a climate that is conducive to reform. Some days, basic quality control is the best that can be expected.(3)

But, seeing as news outlets are more businesses than public services, the corporate masters and the newsmen and women who aim to please them are concerned with what is popular -- what the public is watching, listening to, or reading. What is increasingly less popular is "objective" journalism. However, instead of co-opting fake news as a solution to their falling bottom lines, media outlets, and the profession of journalism as a whole, would be well-advised to consider the critiques exposed by the endless jokes at their expense. They ought to let the satirists win, and reform their institution. But as was discussed in the previous chapter, this seems highly unlikely.

While media satirists lampoon and exaggerate just about everything journalists do, beginning with the tone of voice used by self-important correspondents, there is one

common, fundamental critique that explains the very existence of such satirists: objective journalism enables political spin and is no longer democratically helpful.

It is the very same conclusion that the most astute of those books on the shelves of academic libraries – and the books that most inspired this study and this writer – have reached.(4) Objectivity, though never truly possible, served to transform journalism into a true profession; one with a noble mission, codified practices, and professional standards. But it has become a handicap for journalists in their perpetual tug-of-war with the politicians they cover. Punditry, which would appear at first glance to be the exact opposite of objective journalism, actually owes its very existence to journalism's sacred professional religion.(5) As Alterman explains, if journalists were not compelled to be objective – to abstain from passing judgment, to give both sides of a debate equal time or space for the sake of balance, etc – than surely there would be no need for an elite pundit class to “analyze” the news.(6) He even suggests that the journalists who spend their days learning about specific issues through interviews and research are more qualified to provide “analysis” than the celebrity pundits who do far less journalistic legwork, yet make definitive pronouncements on just about every subject on television and in columns and are often ideologically committed.(7)

In truth, most professional journalists, not to mention most academics who teach the next generation of journalists, would privately admit that objectivity is not possible. They have known as much for years. Still, many of those same professors continue to preach the religion in journalism schools across the land. Objectivity is still something to strive for; it remains the ideal. It's component parts (fairness, balance, neutrality) determine the manner in which journalists collect information and construct their

narratives.(8) It was deemed unattainable long ago, but the question ought to be whether it is truly ideal at all. And even if there was a professional consensus that the regime of objectivity was well past its best before date, there remains the problem of finding and defining its replacement. This quandary remains, but the declining credibility of journalists, along with the declining consumption of their work, combined with the escalating popularity of political satirists who make fun of them, has made the need to find the answer even more urgent. “In a literal sense we journalists no longer know what we’re doing; there is no consensus on what the goals of journalism really are, nor is there agreement as to whom or what we are obligated,” wrote E.J. Dionne Jr.(9) This widely cited passage, and the entire chapter from *They Only Look Dead* where Dionne described the schizophrenic nature of modern journalism, was written with a sense of urgency. The contradictions inherent in the profession, Dionne argued, are “deeper than they have been for decades.”(10) His book is now 10 years old. He was correct then, and, unfortunately, is perhaps even more correct today.

It should be noted, however, that creating a new professional ethic that is better equipped to hold political leaders accountable would not represent a cure all for what ails the news media. It would neither curb the natural entertainment properties of television, for example, nor would it rectify the values, pressures, and even censorship that result from the industry’s corporate media structure. And, as long as raincoat wearing journalists throw themselves into the middle of every hurricane that hits Florida (its wet, windy and destructive, we get it!) then satirists will always have reasons to make fun of the media. As long as there are celebrity criminal trials that consume hour after hour of

coverage, day after day on cable networks, mainstream journalism will always be the butt of jokes.

Nonetheless, replacing the regime of objectivity with a new professional ethic, endorsed by major outlets and taught in journalism schools, would be a miraculous first step towards restoring the credibility of journalism, particularly in the case of political reporting.

So, what form should this new governing ethic take? What will be the new set of values and rules that govern the way journalists undertake their democratically essential role? That task is too large, too complex for one mind, so it won't be found herein. It is time for stake holders, including working journalists, academics, corporate owners, and news consumers to enter into a dialogue. This is not to say the pursuit and communication of "objective" and verifiable truths should not remain the primary goal of journalists. Post-modernism notwithstanding, there are facts that can be proven. The real problem with the regime of objectivity is the conventions that define how it is implemented in practice, including neutrality, balance, and fairness, which can make journalists overly passive when confronting their interview subjects. These practices are clearly not the best approaches or tools to help journalists uncover and express "objective" realities, but rather, enable politicians and political operatives to express and propagate their own self-interested conceptions of reality.(11)

Judith Lichtenberg correctly argued that most criticisms of objectivity represent a repudiation of the values, practices or methods of the regime of objectivity, and not the concept in its core sense. (12) This does not mean that journalists ought not operate on

the principle that objective truth is possible.(13) The problem lies in the “transition from objectivity-as-an-ideal to objectivity-as-a-method.” (14)

“In part they (criticisms of objectivity) stem from a confusion between objectivity and appearance of objectivity. Questioning the remarks of an important public figure may look partisan, while leaving them unchallenged does not; but appearance is misleading and only skin deep.(15)

Some have already considered the question of the future of journalism and how to properly educate and prepare the journalist of tomorrow. In 2002, Columbia University president Lee Bollinger established a task force of 30 prominent journalists, educators, academics, and news executives to meet several times and ponder what kind of education the journalist of tomorrow requires. The task did not produce a collective final report based on their discussions, but rather Bollinger, the task force’s chairman, released his own 8-page statement that was influenced by the discussions of his esteemed colleagues.(16) Bollinger’s statement stressed the vital role of journalism in democratic society and in an increasingly globalized world. “Journalism has an ascending importance in the modern world, and more than at any time in human history the character of the press is a key determinant shaping and defining national and global society.”(17) But the profession faces obvious challenges, Bollinger wrote, including concentration of ownership and the “understandable anxiety that monetary pressures are threatening the quality and standards of journalism.”(18) His solution: for journalism to “embrace a stronger sense of being a profession, with stronger standards and values that will provide its members with some innate resistance to other competing values that have the potential of undermining the public responsibilities of the press.”(19) In Bollinger’s opinion, that sense of professionalism begins at journalism schools, which ought to not only teach the fundamentals of the craft of writing and reporting but take advantage of their place inside

great universities, by working with other faculties to allow aspiring journalists to develop “a base of knowledge across relevant fields that is crafted specifically for what leading journalists need to know: for example, a functional knowledge of statistics, the basic concepts of economics, and an appreciation for the importance of history and the fundamental debates in modern political theory and philosophy.”(20)

The idea of investing more money in journalism programs and ensuring that students acquire a strong academic foundation across several important fields is surely valid. Many schools, including Carleton University’s Bachelor of Journalism program, make a modest attempt to do so by requiring students take Canadian History, a French course, and at least five credits in a discipline outside journalism, as well as a specialty reporting course (political, arts, business, international) in fourth-year. The graduate program at Columbia is only a one-year program, which Bollinger expressed a desire to expand to two years to afford students more time to develop this bedrock of knowledge.(21)

The problem with Bollinger’s statement, however, is that he did not mention the word objectivity – the governing ethic of the profession which is conditioned into the minds of all journalism students who attend Columbia or any other school. In the context of political reporting, a well-educated journalist may know more about international relations than the president himself, but if that journalist has been conditioned to be a devout follower of objectivity then he or she will ignore their own critical thinking and knowledge and defer to official power for a definition of reality. At best, the well-educated journalist will use his or her considerable academic knowledge to provide a

paragraph or two of context that would otherwise have required an hour or so of research using the Internet and electronic databases.

In short, arming journalists with knowledge and academic credentials is certainly a good idea, but one that will provide only limited benefits if the handcuffs of objectivity are not removed. Knowledge and analytical skills serve little purpose if they cannot be put into action.

Journalism reform must begin with a significant re-definition of objectivity. Specifically, it must involve a re-examination of the defining tenets of objectivity which have come to determine how the concept is implemented in practice. For the sake of getting the discussion started, one concept that ought to be fundamental to the profession's new governing ethic is found in the most fundamental difference between the "fake news" satirist and the "objective" journalist: the expression of one's common sense. The appeal of Jon Stewart and his contemporaries is that they say what many journalists know to be true, but do not feel professionally empowered to point out. He mocks talking points, lies and political spin, ridicules the manipulative theatrics of politics and holds the pundit class responsible for their immature behaviour and wildly inaccurate prophecies. Hence the frequent quotes from journalists like the late Peter Jennings, who described Stewart as "the man who often says in public what the rest of us tend to say only in the newsroom."

One of the most significant flaws of objectivity in its purest form is that it forces journalists to turn off their considerable and highly-educated brains. Objectivity is the reason they do not challenge politicians who offer talking points instead of answers, factually provable lies instead of the truth, and Hollywood-style theatrics instead of a

sincere dialogue about the challenges society faces and the best approaches to solving them. Objectivity and its emphasis on neutrality, balance, and fairness, turns journalists into passive vessels for political advertising, instead of critical-thinking watchdogs of the political realm. As a result, the political class has clearly gained the upper hand in the tug of war of the political communication function. It is this obvious imbalance, which is the root source of Stewart's frustration and the humour it produces. (22)

It is time for journalists to adjust their grip and start pulling back. The lesson of satire is not that journalists should try to be funny and it is certainly not a call for increased partisanship in the way they cover the political realm. It is at its most fundamental level, a call for journalists to find their courage, to use their common sense (bolstered by journalistic legwork and investigation) to expose lies, artificiality and absurdity in the political realm, no matter what side of the political spectrum produces it. Other scholars have come up with different names for basically the same concept – (Jeffrey Scheuer chose Critical Thinking, Hackett and Zhao defined it as Critical Realism, and Hall Jamieson and Waldman coined the Reasonable Person Standard). (23)

In the simplest terms, all three basically call for journalists to use informed common sense.

The process of gathering and packaging the news inevitably represents a filter. In the case of many columnists and pundits, events are filtered through a screen of ideological commitment and outrage. In the case of Anderson Cooper and some new guard journalists, events are filtered through a screen of personality and emotionalism – the bigger and more tragic the catastrophe the better the story for the emotional journalist. Most political reporters today screen events through a gaping filter of objectivity, which

lets the political class pass just about anything through. As David Mindich correctly asserted in *Just the Facts: How Objectivity Came to Define the News*, in this era of fragmentation mainstream journalists need to ensure their filters are better than those of Bill O'Reilly and other "journalists." (23) "What we need (Dan) Rather to do is explain his filters, to tell us how he interprets reality and why we should buy his interpretation. To do so would mean abandoning the myth of "objectivity." (25) This is particularly important, Mindich argues, in the age of fragmentation and choice across numerous media. Objectivity is losing ground in the competition with other filters, including emotionalism, outrage and satire. "With so much news and so many storytellers, there must be something more than passivity for responsible journalists to offer." (26)

Journalists should aspire to be politically neutral and independent, but they should not be neutral or ambivalent towards the truth. The filter of professional journalists ought not to be one of satire, partisanship, ideology, or passivity, but simply one of informed common sense, which is designed to reject bullshit – for lack of a more academic term. All of which, however, is much easier said than done. This new approach would require a full-scale professional culture change. Journalists are conditioned to turn off their own common sense and remain detached from the subjects they cover. A political journalism that requires them to engage their own critical reasoning skills would certainly expose them to public criticism. Heavily-funded partisan watchdog groups will no doubt holler and complain, but journalists might find that many news consumers see things the same way and will reward their intellectual honesty with loyal attention.

In short, journalists need to define a new set of conventions that enable them to share with news consumers that which they know is true, but only dare utter when the

‘On Air’ light is off. Exposing hypocrisy, dishonesty, artificiality in the political realm and expanding the bounds of legitimate debate beyond the rigid talking points of political parties ought to be the work of serious political journalists, not just comedians.

Introduction – Endnotes

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Chapter 1 -- Endnotes

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EJ Dionne Jr., *They Only Look Dead: Why Progressives will dominate the next political era* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996), 243.

Jay Rosen, *What are Journalists for?* (New Haven: Yale University, 1999), 164. Rosen correctly points out that White's books appeared after the election and "were never intended to inform the electorate while it still had choices to make."

Media critiques which describe the way in which contemporary political reportage situates the news consumer as a spectator as opposed to a participant in the political process include:

Thomas E. Patterson, *Out of Order* (New York: Vintage Books, 1994), 25. Patterson wrote, "News coverage has become a barrier between the candidates and the voters rather than a bridge connecting them."

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