

THE PENNSYLVANIA STATE UNIVERSITY
SCHREYER HONORS COLLEGE

DEPARTMENT OF JOURNALISM

FROM STEWART TO SATIRE: ALTERNATIVE JOURNALISM IN LATE NIGHT TV

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SPRING 2015

A thesis
submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements
for a baccalaureate degree
in Journalism
and honors in Journalism

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ABSTRACT

The blurring of lines between entertainment and news is a growing phenomenon in broadcast television. This blurriness is often to as infotainment that includes the “fake news” genre. Scholars have increasingly turned their attention to understanding and evaluating the impact of fake news by looking to *The Daily Show* with host Jon Stewart and Stephen Colbert’s *The Colbert Report*. In America’s changing media environment defined by corporate interests, discursive integration, and technological advancements it’s becoming increasingly difficult to define what “real news” is. This paper argues that Stewart and Colbert use their satire to perform an alternative form of journalism that educates and informs while re-envisioning the journalism landscape. It also challenges Stewart and Colbert’s rejection to being associated with journalism because their use of fact-based satire creates a quasi-journalistic product. It looks at research conducted by scholars and interviews with other journalists to reinforce the importance of what Stewart and Colbert do for journalism. They might not be considered traditional journalists because they don’t always follow core journalism principles, but they function as media critics and help make journalists better. The growing influence of fake news is also leading to an emergence of new people that may be doing a better job than Stewart or Colbert. John Oliver’s new show *Last Week Tonight*, defies the typical format and style of its predecessors, and takes the time to do well researched alternative journalism. Oliver who also rejects any claims to being a journalist, is taking what he learned from his mentor Stewart and creating his own wry satire. Another program called *The Nightly Show* is taking over Colbert’s time slot to give a voice to the underrepresented in America. At a time when *The Colbert Report* is off the air and Stewart has announced his imminent departure from *The Daily Show*, this paper also analyzes the transition of late night alternative journalism.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank everyone who helped make this paper possible. Among them: Curt Chandler for helping me all year and dedicating his time and ideas to craft my paper into what it is; I'd like to thank my parents for their constant support and encouragement; Brian Shoenfelt who helped secure the space and videotaped all multimedia aspects of the paper. Sophia McClennen for taking time to have multiple discussions with me and show an interest in my work; Julia for fielding every thesis question I asked over the past year; to my roommates Nick, Bernie, Aaron, and Dave for always helping out; and everyone else who helped and supported me. In the words of Brandon McCartney, "You gotta think before you move, speak before you cry, you gotta live before you die."

Chapter 1

Who is the Real Journalist?

On February 10, 2015 two major media news stories developed. The first took place around 7 p.m. when Comedy Central sent a tweet announcing that Jon Stewart, the host of *The Daily Show*, would be stepping down from the anchor desk and his time on the show was coming to an end. The second story broke about an hour later when NBC News President Deborah Turness announced the suspension of anchor Brian Williams of *NBC Nightly News* in a memo to the news staff. Williams who has a reputation built on trust, was suspended without pay for six months following his admission that he made up an account about his helicopter being hit in 2003 by anti-aircraft fire (McCoy 2015).

As the stories continued to build momentum, *New York Times Now* published both stories on their website. Jon Stewart stepping down was the lead story. Within a few hours, whether it be on Facebook, Twitter, or the depths of the internet, people were calling for the two anchormen to simply switch positions. Let that settle. Something that may seem totally insane to hear at first, could actually happen. Scott Simon from NPR played with the idea and tweeted, “I can’t be the first person to notice that Brian Williams & Jon Stewart both seem available in about 6 months” (McCoy 2015). The reason why this doesn’t seem so unimaginable is because over the years Jon Stewart has turned himself into much more than just a comedian.

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Over the past decade, self-proclaimed “fake news” programs, like *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report*, have taken on the responsibility usually reserved by the traditional mainstream media, encouraging deliberative political discourse and dissent. Jon Stewart and Stephen Colbert are much of household names now as Walter Cronkite was in the 60’s. Their success is rooted in fact-based satire. In 2008, the Pew Research Center for the People & the Press found that Stewart ranked fourth as the most trusted journalist, higher than Wolf Blitzer at CNN and Peter Jennings at ABC (Pew 2008). In U.S. history there have been satirists like Ben Franklin or William Rogers who used their wit to write news columns and comment on public issues. According to Penn State professor Sophia McClennen and Penn State student Remy Maisel who co-authored the book *Is Satire Saving our Nation?*, this is the first time in the modern era of U.S. network news that a satirical comedian has been on the same level with a

journalist as an admired source of news. They also believe that the news media has become so increasingly disconnected from the public as a source of information that satire from Stewart and Colbert has become a source of information and sometimes the only source the public consumes (McClennen and Maisel 2014).

During the mid-2000's when *The Daily Show* was hitting its stride and becoming more influential, scholars were starting to wonder if it would help educate and inform the public. In 2004, *The Daily Show* won a Peabody Award for its "Indecision 2004" coverage of the presidential election. They were honored for "its unmatched wit and unorthodox approach in putting the 2004 Presidential Election in perspective without diminishing its importance" (Peabody 2004). *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report* started to blossom at a time when America had more shows and pundits than ever before and with the quality of journalistic work decreasing. Changes in the once-authoritative nightly news led to it being taken over by 24 hour cable news punditry and network "news lite" shows. This is when audiences, mainly younger, started to catch on to the entertaining dissemination of news and the shows grew almost out of a necessity (Baym 2005). According to author of the book *Entertaining Politics*, Jeffrey Jones

"Audiences are receptive to, if not also hungry for, political programming that is meaningful and engaging to them—programming that connects with their interests and concerns, provides new ways of thinking about politics, criticizes that which needs scrutiny, and speaks to them through accessible pleasurable means" (Jones 2010).

The ability for the shows and their satire to be both entertaining and informative, has been a key component of why they have become an influential source in the media landscape.

Some critics and scholars are alarmed by the growing 'infotainment' culture, suggesting that shows like Stewart and Colbert's can erode the public's democratic need for practical, in-depth coverage of national and world events. Infotainment is the term given to the blurred line between information and entertainment. Media theorist and cultural critic Neil Postman believes

that the relationship between television and entertainment will lead to the decline of political intelligence. Postman and other theorists are concerned that the United States will become a society where citizens medicate themselves on entertainment and bliss (Burton 2010). They fear that since entertainment based television is designed for passive viewing, it won't be able to facilitate debate and rational inquiry that is necessary in a democratic democracy (Baym 2005). Many scholars are concerned that the distinction to separate news from non-news is becoming untenable and shaping the nature of journalism. As fake news outlets become more popular, hard news venues may be tempted to become more entertaining further blurring the lines with infotainment (Meddaugh 2010).

Another concern is that this type of programming promotes cynicism, especially among a younger demographic, about the democratic and political process of the country (Baumgartner and Morris 2006). Critics suggest *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report* should not be considered journalism, but just an imitation lacking the morals behind journalism.

Communications ethics professor Sandra Borden and journalism professor Chad Tew say that Stewart and Colbert do not subject themselves to the same moral commitments as journalists in order to perform their satire or their version of journalism as they do (2007).

Although Stewart, Colbert and their staff all refer to their work as fake news, it's hard not to look at their fact-based content and not call it journalism. The hosts insist their agenda is simply to make people laugh. Their moniker of fake news doesn't quite characterize what both shows are engaged in. The notion of fake depends on a counter idea that there is a conception of real. With the professional guidelines built on whether the reporting is fact-based, news can be defined and constrained by "cultural practices, informal and often implicit agreements about proper conduct, style, and form that today are in flux, increasingly multiple, debatable, and open

for reconsideration” (Baym 2005). The issue regarding Stewart’s show as journalism is clearly described in an interview that Jon Stewart had with Bill Moyer. He asked Stewart if *The Daily Show* is “an old form of comedy” or a “new form of journalism” (PBS 2003). Really, the show is a product of both, based on the latter.

In a time of decline and lack of trust in mainstream journalism and the loss of modern ideals, *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report* represent an alternative approach to delivering the news. As journalism and political communications professor Geoffrey Baym, known for researching Stewart and Colbert, said in his essay *Stephen Colbert’s Harvest of Shame*, “Simultaneously serious and silly, rational and rambunctious, critical and commercial, the two programs have become influential sites of democratic information, commentary and conversation” (Baym 2013). The shows utilize satire to question power, critique contemporary news and leading figures, and use dialogue to create an environment for deliberative democracy. Both shows mirror major news outlets like CNN, MSNBC, and Fox News in form and content. They then take that mirror to criticize the media for exaggerated or poor coverage to reveal the underlying truth.

This paper explores whether *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report* should be understood as an alternative form of journalism that is becoming more influential in the modern media landscape, using fact-based satire to encourage a deliberative democracy. It will look at the growing degree of satire in the news landscape and how the Internet is making the two shows more powerful. This paper is being researched at a time of transition. Jon Stewart announced that he will be leaving *The Daily Show* and Stephen Colbert is heading to the *Late Show* on CBS. However, as *The Colbert Report* spun off of *The Daily Show*, there are more shows being created to help fill the void. Shows like *Last Week Tonight* and *The Nightly Show with Larry Wilmore*

are taking the satire they've learned from their predecessors and continuing to engage in this alternative journalism.

Chapter 2

Examining Satire and Satire News

Jon Stewart and Stephen Colbert satirize the news four nights a week in their own individualized way. Stewart uses his rational wry satire, while Colbert uses a heightened parodied version of a conservative news pundit to satirize the news. The two use satire and comedy as the foundation of their shows to talk about the news. There is comedy that exists for the sole purpose of evoking laughter, but satire is usually an “act of political communication, and the laughter it produces signifies that a political alliance of sorts has been struck” (Cutbirth 2011). Nobody is safe from satire and it can be used a tool against institutions, individuals or nations. This chapter looks at what satire is and how Stewart and Colbert use it.

Satire

First, it is important to distinguish the terms humor, satire, and parody because they are often used interchangeably, but have important distinctions. Henry Reed defined the term humor in the mid-nineteenth century as the “happy compound of pathos and playfulness” (Burton 2010). Jonathan Gray, Jeffrey Jones, and Ethan Thompson describe humor in their book *Satire TV* as a “form that is always already analytical, critical, and rational, albeit to varying degrees” (Gray et al. 2008). Parody and satire are considered to be under the umbrella of humor, but not yet synonymous. Parody is an approach to humor that “attacks a particular text or genre, making

fun of how that text or genre operates” (Gray et al. 2008). Parody is often employed to criticize by using exaggeration, or a heightened image of an individual or institution. However, according to Gray et al., while parody is based on mimicry and imitation, when it is mocking the institutions that are responsible for educating the public, then parody overlaps into satire (2008). Satire can be viewed as the comedic genre most related to politics. Merriam-Webster’s dictionary defines satire as, “a way of using humor to show that someone or something is foolish, weak, bad, etc. : humor that shows the weaknesses or bad qualities of a person, government, society, etc” (Satire Merriam-Webster). For Stewart and Colbert, satire is more than its basic definition and is a form of comedy intended to educate the public.

McClennen and Maisel in their book *Is Satire Saving our Nation?* offer this theory of political satire and how it plays a significant role in shaping public perceptions about major political issues today. According to McClennen and Maisel, satire is a major form of “public pedagogy” (2014). They say that programs like *The Daily Show* teach the public about vital issues that are critical to the health of U.S. democracy. Satire and humor can be a very influential tool in the political education process. A major reason for the popularity of these late night satire shows is their ability to frame important political and social issues in ways that are easy for the average American to discuss because making humorous remarks about an issue is a way for individuals to safely engage politically with each other. Humor serves as a buffer to keep the conversation light and avoid letting the subject go to extremes. Darrell West and John Orman explain in their book *Celebrity Politics*, “[Satire] is a way to boost public interest in a subject about which many Americans are not deeply absorbed. The idea is that politics doesn't hurt as much if you are laughing at public officials” (2002). While framing hard news in a humorous context is not a new phenomenon, it is a major feature of *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert*

Report. The public is engaged in ways that are more in line with their own perceived interests.

David Klatt has been a *Daily Show* web producer for five years and is now with *The Nightly Show with Larry Wilmore*. In an interview, he said they use their style of humor to be honest and to educate their viewers.

“We love comedy and looking at the issues of the day. We’ve worked hard to maintain our place in the cultural landscape and we want to keep pushing those boundaries... There is a lot of un-funny work that goes into creating a funny show each night and that involves a lot of reading, watching, and seeing what is being said about a certain issue and balance that against other facts and opinions out there. The goal of it is to use satire to see a different side of an issue, to point that out. I think there is something inherently honest about humor, and political humor, that help make the show so relatable and understandable” (Klatt 2014).

Communications professor Craig Stark studies media literacy and argues that seeing the world through a satire lens can teach college students to see the other side of issues. Once the satire is consumed, it increases awareness among students and can help them take the next step to becoming informed citizens and critical of the media. His work focused on students but he concluded the same findings can be applied to an older and broader audience (Burton 2010). Thus, satire could help influence its audience to be active and work for change in either the political or journalism sphere. Stark explains that the process of understanding the joke helps the audience connect with key societal information that is central to their role as a citizen (Burton 2010).

Critics of satire argue that entertainment based political humor can create cynical attitudes, trivialization of public life, or the influence of an institution’s bias. Gray et al. say that some scholars believe that modern satire can be boiled down to simple aggressive ridicule, usually that of authority figures with little positive outcome (2008). McClennen and Maisel say one of satire’s most notable features is ridicule and that critics argue it has the ability to create social scorn. However, the critics fail to recognize the empowering role of humor as a means of

public judgment and rebuke. It makes its damning indictments in a more playful manner turning the aggressive ridicule into something more socially acceptable. Satire's playfulness makes an attack humorous and creates less reprimand (McClennen and Maisel 2014). Gray et al. argue that the critics are ignoring the issue that "satire is provocative, not dismissive" when looking at its role in public discourse (2008).

Satire and humor can be powerful tools for societal critique. In an interview Penn State Media Studies Professor Matthew Jordan said, "Satire only works if there is something to satirize. As a trope it usually depends on the trope of irony that is showing that something has the exact opposite meaning of what it is. You can use satire as a tool to tear anything down" (Jordan 2014). Satire does not need to invoke laughter to be effective, and may possibly elicit a gasp. Gray et al. argue that "while laughter is certainly an important outcome, if satire is to have its full effect, we disagree that laughter is a necessary component or distinguishing feature of satire" (2008). *The Daily Show* programming is designed to entertain, but also to make its audience think critically and for them to engage with public life. Mainstream media is becoming a loser in the news equation because it may be the brunt of satirical jokes diminishing its authority. This is allowing for satire to actually become a source of information, rather than just a critic of it (Gray et al. 2008). Lizz Winstead, the creator of *The Daily Show*, spoke about the disengagement of major news outlets and how it's important for comedy and satire to be an agent of change and said, "In the world of sound bites and stump speeching we live in now, none of it is very inspiring, and a satirist's job can be to break through" (Burton 2010). Stewart and Colbert use their humor to cut through the clutter of information saturation by engaging their audiences on key issues.

Satire News: *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report*

In order to understand how these satire news programs can be influential, it helps to see how they work. This literature review examines the premise that *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report*'s main idea is to mimic or parody traditional news programs and offer satirical critiques on politicians and present a different format to late night comedy shows.

Dannagal Young and Sarah Esralew break down the shows' main content in the book *The Stewart/Colbert Effect*. Each show is about twenty-two minutes in length and offers several distinct politically relevant forms of content using a hybrid of elements lifted from traditional hard news and entertainment programs. *The Daily Show*'s opening title sequence is very suggestive of a typical network news outlet with a full screen graphic, the date, narration, and images like an American flag and a globe. An emphasis on the daily nature of the show is a technique used by broadcast journalists to emphasize the idea of immediacy (Esralew and Young 2011). Also, when the voice over narrator uses the phrase, "world news headquarter in New York" it invokes the power and respect of national news (Baym 2005). The shows begin with the day's "headlines." The majority of these stories satirize recent events and are critical of politicians, political parties, public officials and other policies. *The Daily Show* airs reports from fake "correspondents" using a green screen to make the "reporters" appear to be at different locations. The second part of each episode includes an interview segment with Stewart or Colbert and a "politically savvy guest, including public officials, journalists, historians, scholars, and presidential candidates" (Esralew and Young 2011). The sit down interview process can run as long as 10 minutes, constituting half of the show. From the very beginning both shows interweave different levels of discourse borrowing techniques from authoritative news shows and entertainment talk shows. The entertainment aspect is not used to detract from the news aspect of

the show, but to compliment it. The entertainment roots are revealed by the use of an introductory monologue followed by a sit down interview, a technique shared by late night talk shows like David Letterman's *Late Show*. Both Letterman and Saturday Night Lives "Weekend Update" present stories in a rapid-fire fashion moving between information and joke. This style of comedic news can be referred to as the "now this" format where no topic is placed in a wider context, but is simply referenced for the punch line (Baym 2005). However, Stewart and Colbert's shows blend pop culture and public affairs with a serious concern for current events and add more elements common to news.

The Daily Show and *The Colbert Report* offer a considerable advancement from allusion to news packaging over their late night comedy show counterparts. Each show feels more like a network newscast with video clips, sound bites, and reporter/anchor packages. The first two segments of both shows often tackle national and global issues of significance. In "No Joke: A Comparison of Substance in *The Daily Show* with Jon Stewart and Broadcast Network Television Coverage of the 2004 Presidential Election Campaign" Julia Fox, Glory Koloen and Volkan Sahin discovered that *The Daily Show's* coverage during the 2004 presidential campaign contained as much substance as broadcast network evening news coverage (2007). Another study found that in the first four months of 2005, Stewart focused on political topics and that over one fourth of each show was devoted to policy issues (Cutbirth 2011). The programs often abandon the "now this" model of making jokes about one story and moving to the next, looking at single-issue coverage for anywhere up to 8 minutes. It places the stories in a wider context, usually providing background information and linking the story to related issues employing context more frequently than news (Baym 2005).

Usually, the shows will take sound bites from newsmakers and pundits to make up the

main content in the first segments. This style is reminiscent of the way network news builds its shows around sound bites from political actors or lawmakers. The comedians construct a newscast by aggregating the same raw material available on the average cable television station. Each show pulls sound from CSPAN, 24 hour cable news, MSNBC, FOX, Senate hearings, advertisements, Congressional debate, and any other source they can find (Esralew and Young 2011). Although they employ this strategy to resemble network news, they often violate certain principles and use the sound bites just for the joke. In an interview, Kelly McBride, the Vice President of Academic Affairs at the Poynter Institute, said they often mistreat the use of sound bites, “Stewart and Colbert will manipulate a quote or sound bite for them to make a joke rather than show the most important part of the quote” (McBride 2015). This treatment of sound bites is one reason Stewart and Colbert don’t consider themselves journalists—a subject that will be explored in Chapter 4.

Sit down interviews that create a dialogue with a guest are important for both *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report*. Although it is modeled after the late night celebrity couch interview, the discussion may differ drastically. A celebrity or political guest may appear on the show largely as a marketing strategy for a book or political campaign. However, while they are on the fake news shows they engage in an honest discussion to circulate ideas and arguments. Stuart Bailey a former producer of *The Daily Show* said “the goal of it is to connect to an ongoing national conversation, to make the show’s content relevant to a wider political discussion” (Baym 2005). For example, it is known that when Stewart has Bill O’Reilly on the show, they won’t be promoting too much but will be engaging in a deep debate. [O’Reilly appeared on the October 15, 2014 episode](#) to discuss the fall out of the Ferguson incident and talk about race in the United States. Stewart’s goal was to get O’Reilly to say that he believes in

white privilege. O'Reilly, who has long denied the claim said, "Maybe you haven't figured out that there is no more slavery, no more Jim Crow, and the most powerful man in the world is a black American, and the most powerful woman in the world—Oprah Winfrey—is black!" (The Daily Show 10/15/14). Stewart responded, "Oh, boy, slavery and Jim Crow are dead, but the residual effects of that systemic subjugation exists today" (The Daily Show 10/15/14). By the end of the interview O'Reilly only admitted that subjugation exists for everyone today. Stewart's interview was successful in creating an exchange of ideas on one of the biggest issues at that time.

Many scholars believe Stewart's interviewing style should be modeled by television journalists interested in rehabilitating public discourse, citing Stewart's ability to focus discussion and deliberation (Faina 2013). A key to Stewart's success is to conduct each interview with an interpersonal exchange that comes off as if it were a conversation among friends or at least respectful colleagues. This style of dialogue can last up to 10 minutes contrasts, but is proving to be more engaging than the sound-bite laden forms typically employed in traditional news interviews. Stewart may not garner as many laughs in an interview, but he accomplishes his goal of making the audience think critically (Baym 2005). His blend of rhetoric, humor, and the willingness to engage with difficult issues is helping to sustain a deliberative democracy. He is achieving a dialogical form of democracy and one that depends on the first instance of active deliberation among citizens (Faina 2013).

Stephen Colbert uses satire in a much different way than Stewart does. Both are playing characters, but Stewart often comes off as the prankster and the straight man while Colbert employs the exaggerated persona of a hard-line conservative pundit. Colbert relies heavily on parody for his humor to work. The character he is portraying is a parody of the man he calls

“Papa Bear” Bill O’Reilly. *Colbert* operates very similar to *The Daily Show*, but includes more special segments and personal packages. One of Colbert’s most successful recurring segments is “Better Know a District,” which profiles congressman from across the nation. Colbert uses his funny persona to draw attention to the political role played by the House of Representatives in a country where many citizens don’t even know the name of their local congressman (McClennen and Maisel 2014). Colbert tries to educate the public on key civic issues by introducing the nation to its legislators in an entertaining way. For example, a Colbert interview with Utah’s 3rd District Representative ([in his 53rd installment in the 434 part “Better Know a District”](#)) began with a conversation about diversity and illegal immigration and ended with Colbert leg wrestling Chaffetz (The Colbert Report 1/6/2009). It differs from mainstream news that typically focuses on the executive branch while Colbert directs attention to the politicians. McClennen and Maisel say that mainstream news typically focuses on the executive branch while Colbert directs attention to legislators. It is also having an effect. Geoffrey Baym writes in “Representation and the Politics of Play” that every one of the 27 members of Congress who appeared on “Better Know a District” won in the 2006 midterm election (2007).

Media studies professor Matthew Jordan compares Stewart to French sociologist Michel Foucault because of his “focus on critical irony aimed at truth that is more helpful than hurtful in today’s mass media democracy” (2009). Media critics like Neil Postman argued that entertainment media is causing voter disengagement, while others think the irony and satire create a cynical view to news and the democratic process. Satire only reveals constraints to truthful debate in the media or political sphere, they argue, thereby offering no solutions to the appropriate form of political discourse. Jordan says that such claims ignore the fact that the satirical shows are actually a model of communicative action for the public interested in

examining the truth so often left behind by the mass media (Burton 2010).

Conclusion

This literature review reveals that satire and satirical news are unique. Satirical news cannot be defined simply as infotainment, because it is fact-based. The revealing function essentially leads to journalistic truth telling, civic education and political understanding. The following chapters will explore how Stewart and Colbert do the work of journalists and what their impact is on the nation.

Chapter 3

The Case for Stewart and Colbert

The Daily Show and *The Colbert Report* represent an important experiment in journalism and one that contains much significance for the constant redefinition of what news is. In both, comedy is interwoven with the serious to create an innovative and influential form of public information. Media critics have suggested that Jon Stewart could be the solution to CNN's ratings problems and is one of the most trustworthy news figures (Baym and Jones 2010). Have Stewart and Colbert assumed a role in the dissemination of truth and public information once reserved for journalists? Stewart and Colbert are not just important because they attract an audience by being entertaining. They are important because they are keeping their audience informed as they engage in serious criticism. The fake news label grants the shows freedom to be more critical and serve a bigger purpose. In an interview with the Poynter Institute's leader in journalism ethics, Kelly McBride, she said the shows serve an important function. "It's a form of journalism that exists to point out the absurd, which is a very important role in a democracy... Somebody needs to call bullshit on major authority and hold [politicians] responsible" (McBride 2015).

Many scholars view Stewart and Colbert as operating within a "neo-modern" paradigm of the post-network age and as an extension of journalism that seeks to make public life more effective by engaging people in issues at a deeper level (Baym and Jones 2010). There is a need for public service journalism, but Stewart and Colbert have proven there is room for more creative and engaging formats that get people to understand the substance of politics and news. With the growing popularity of this type of satire, it might be true that the best way to rationalize the democratic process and get more people to participate is by encouraging them to become

more playful and passionate. This section will show how *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report* serve as a powerful form of alternative journalism that is influencing the changing news landscape.

Jon Stewart the Watchdog

Today, television news looks very different than it did during the traditional network era of Walter Cronkite and Peter Jennings because programs like *The Daily Show* have become part of the mix. Jon Stewart says the intent of his show is strictly comedy and shouldn't be considered news. "The whole point of our show is that we're a fake news organization. What's more appropriate than going to a fake news event? Everybody knows it's a trade show" (Jones 2010). However, he does seem to be acknowledging his influence is on par with the mainstream media. This is when the real and the fake news intersect. Even though Stewart may deny his connection with authentic journalism, he is doing something that is very similar. Over the years, there have been many examples of Stewart and his writing staff engaging in quality alternative journalistic work that is critically recognized for its success.

The importance of *The Daily Show* is that it informs its viewers by using journalistic-style fact gathering to create satire that inspires action. One of *The Daily Show*'s most influential episodes called attention to financial and health benefits for 9/11 first responders that were stalled in Congress. The first responders were lobbying for better health care, but were struggling to get support. The bill looked like it might not pass. Stewart educated his audience about the issues the first responders were facing and [invited them on the show to talk about the bill](#). Stewart rallied a considerable fan base to pressure the government to pass the legislation.

Threatened by a Republican filibuster, the bill eventually passed. The founder of the New York City Firefighter Brotherhood Foundation, Kenny Specht, credited Stewart with the success of the Zadroga bill (McClennen and Maisel 2014). Recognizing Stewart's influence, Syracuse Professor Robert Thompson placed Stewart alongside Edward Murrow and Walter Cronkite as television advocates who had been able to alter policy and legislation by directing attention to a serious issue (McClennen and Maisel 2014). The *New York Times* media reporters Bill Carter and Brian Stelter recognized Stewart's work and said, "What Mr. Stewart engaged in that night—and on earlier occasions when he campaigned openly for passage of the bill—usually goes by the name 'advocacy journalism'" (Carter and Stelter 2010).

Scholars are recognizing the influence of Stewart and Colbert because the type of alternative journalism they are using is working. Communications professor Dannagal Young studies political satire and media effects and says there is definitive proof in her essay *Lighten Up: How satire will make American politics relevant again*:

"People who watch Stewart and Colbert participate in politics more; they vote more; they discuss politics with friends and family more; they watch cable news more; they get news online more; they listen to NPR more; and—this is a good one—they have more confidence in their ability to understand and participate in political life. And studies consistently indicate that exposure to political satire increases knowledge of current events, leads to further information-seeking on related topics, and increases viewer interest in and attention paid to politics and news" (Young 2013).

Young is not alone in her conclusions about the impact of the shows. For example, a 2007 Pew Research study found that viewers of *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report* were among the most informed, scoring much higher than cable news network audiences (Young 2013). Although this demographic may not solely be getting their news from either show, McClennen in an interview said that the direct correlation does exist, "They are informing their viewers more than the regular news, this is a fact. If you watch the Colbert Report only and

MSNBC only, you'll score higher on your knowledge of current issues if you watch *The Colbert Report*" (McClennen 2015). The fake news show does seem to be producing effects that would be expected to come from a real news show. Independent journalist Amy Goodman of *Democracy Now* describes Stewart and Colbert's work as examples of "good journalism," especially when compared to that found on cable news (McClennen and Maisel 2014). Media studies professor Megan Boler describes Stewart as the only one who can tell the "real" truth. She said, "While real news shows refuse to check political claims against reality, it has taken a 'fake' news show to do actual research necessary to prove many of the lies politicians tell" (McClennen and Maisel 2014).

During a time when trust in the news media is going down, people are looking to Stewart to be the guiding light. McClennen and Maisel said, "[Stewart] embodies something important for the public that they are not finding in mainstream news. And one of those things is that he is *not* claiming to be an accurate source of news; he is just doing it" (McClennen and Maisel 2014). The fact that Stewart and Colbert don't claim to be fair and balanced, but more in the words of Stewart, "opposed to bullshit" makes them more believable in telling the truth (Jones 2010). Jeffrey Jones conducted a study comparing 2004 presidential campaign coverage by *CNN* and *The Daily Show*. Stewart came out on top. Not only did Stewart offer equivalent degrees of information, Jones claims, he went further in helping viewers to construct an understanding of what may seem to be random events in traditional reporting (Jones 2010). Therefore, not only can he be trusted, but his information is accurate, more contextual and provides better forms of critical reflection.

On October 30, 2010, Stewart and Colbert hosted the Rally to Restore Sanity and/or Fear to satirize Glenn Beck's Rally to Restore Honor staged two months prior. The comedians

delivered a one, two punch with Stewart's wry rationalism playing against Colbert's right-wing swagger (punctuated by Colbert wearing a red, white and blue Evil Knievel jumpsuit). One spectator who drove all the way from Wisconsin to D.C. for the event said, “I find it incredibly ironic, that I had to come to a rally sponsored by a comedian to get at the truth” (Hesse 2010). Many journalists looked at this move by the two, but mainly Stewart, as stepping into a more powerful and influential position. *USA Today*'s television critic Robert Bianco said, “Stewart solidified his position as one of TV's most influential opinion-shapers” (Carlson and Peifer 2013). Another media critic from the *New York Times*, David Carr, said that Stewart is assuming a “role as a political leader, which is what you call somebody if he hosts a rally on the Washington Mall for over 200,000 people” (Carlson and Peifer 2013). Their ability to draw a crowd speaks to their fan base and trust. One sign held by Steven Crawford from York, Pa read “This is my comedy channel,” with the Fox News logo. The other side of the sign, illustrated with a Comedy Central logo, read: “This is my news channel” (Hesse 2010).

Stewart vs. Cramer

Critics took note of the Jon Stewart takedown of CNBC and *Mad Money* host, Jim Cramer. Once again, the attack was based on good journalism. In the wake of the financial crisis in 2008-2009 Cramer was quick to label people who were taking government bailout money for their mortgages as “losers” mooching off of the government (Faina 2013). Pundits, especially on CNBC, portrayed these citizens as idiots who had bought a more expensive house than they could afford. They did not focus their criticism on the banks, corporations and Wall Street associates who caused the crisis. This is when Stewart stepped in.

The Daily Show aired several segments critical of the news coverage of the financial crisis and bailouts. On March 4, 2009 things came to a critical mass. Stewart aired an eight-minute segment mocking the way CNBC was covering the crisis. The segment offered a rapid succession of video clips with different pundits and analysts. In one shot, Cramer said, “Bear Stearns is fine. Do not get your money out. Bear Stearns is not in trouble.” While the clip was running a graphic ran across the bottom that noted “Bear Stearns went under 6 days later” (Cutbirth 2011). After similar clips of CNBC anchors giving bad advice, Stewart concluded by saying, “If I’d only followed CNBC’s advice, I’d have a million dollars today – provided I’d started with \$100 million” (McClennen and Maisel 2014).

Cramer wasn’t pleased with the critique and said that Stewart took his words out of context. Stewart accepted the challenge and responded on *The Daily Show*:

“STEWART: Well, we went back to the tape to listen.

CRAMER (on tape): Should I be worried about Bear Sterns in terms of liquidity and get my money out of there? No, No, No. Bear Sterns is fine. Do not get your money out...Bear Sterns is not in trouble.

STEWART (in the studio addressing the audience): OK, I was wrong... Actually it was true; he was not saying buy Bear Sterns. He was saying that if Bear Sterns is your broker or if your money is in Bear, your money would not disappear. He was not addressing the value of Bear stock, so, Jim Cramer. I apologize. That was out of context. Technically, you were correct. You weren’t suggesting to buy Bear Sterns. (Pause for comedic effect.) That was something you did five days earlier in your buy-and-sell segment. (Roll tape.)

CRAMER (on tape): I believe in the Bear franchise. You know at \$69 I am not giving up on the thing.

STEWART (to the audience): While Cramer wasn’t giving up on it at \$69, 11 days later, the market was more comfortable with it at (pause): [\$2]... He’s not saying directly I’m asking you to buy Bear Stearns. For that you’d have to go back seven weeks before the stock completely collapsed. (Roll tape.)

CRAMER; I'm asking people who are watching this video to buy Bear Stearns.

STEWART (to audience); Now, that was seven weeks before it completely collapsed. In the interest of context, continue.

CRAMER (on tape): I'm asking people who are watching this video to buy Bear Stearns. Now, Bear Stearns acts much better than it should. Now, that is just intuition, and I don't want to put too much faith in intuition, but I have had good intuition in over 29 years of investment, and I just think that one has a very big upside, very limited downside here. It is I think that the last quarter they staunched the losses... they are very good at cutting their losses at Bear, and Bear I believe is for sale.

STEWART (to the audience and by implication to Cramer): Fuck you!" (Cutbirth 2011)

The feud between Stewart and Cramer [culminated on March 12, 2009 in an interview on *The Daily Show*](#). The confrontation was highly publicized and outlets like the Associated Press, Reuters, and NPR spent a significant amount of time on it. It made the front page of *USA Today*. The episode drew 2.3 million viewers and is the most watched episode in *The Daily Show's* history (McClennen and Maisel 2014). Stewart began the interview exchanging niceties and humorous jokes before diving into more important topics. He told Cramer that his criticism wasn't directed specifically at him, but at CNBC's coverage which, as he stated, "cheer-led the very banks for creating innovative mortgage plans while yelling at people who had lost their homes as the source of the financial crisis" (Faina 2013). He called out Cramer for accepting information fed to him by corporations and, ironically, for letting the entertainment aspect of his show overtake his responsibility as a reporter:

"I understand you want to make finance entertaining. But it's not a fucking game. And I — when I watch that, I get, I can't tell you how angry that makes me. Because what it says to me is that you all know. You all know what's going on. You can draw a straight line from those shenanigans to the stuff that was being pulled at Bear and at AIG and all this derivative market stuff that is this weird Wall Street side bet... Listen, you knew what the banks were doing and yet were touting it for months and months. The entire network was. And so now to pretend this was some crazy once-in-a-lifetime tsunami that no one could have seen coming is disingenuous at best and criminal at worst" (Koppelman 2009).

By the end of the interview Cramer said he should go back to his reporting fundamentals and Stewart should go back to “making fart noises and funny faces” (McLennan and Maisel 2014).

Arianna Huffington ran a special Stewart-Cramer piece for her website, the Huffington Post, and said the interview was, “a pivotal moment -- not just for Stewart, Cramer, and CNBC but also for journalism.” She also said, “It was a bracing reminder of what great research and a journalist more committed to getting to the truth than to landing the big get -- and keeping the big get happy, and ensuring future big gets -- can accomplish” (Huffington 2009). *Newsweek* said: ““Cramer’s excuse: CEO’s lied. Stewart’s retort: act like a real journalist. Stewart did”” (McLennan and Maisel 2014). Emmy-winning political reporter Jim Moore argued that Stewart prevailed against Cramer because he employed a journalistic strategy to frame his comedy. “Jon Stewart has brought back context to journalism by making people in our drive-by culture responsible for their words and even actions” (Moore 2009). In the interview Stewart asked questions from a citizen’s perspective and showed how he is linking journalism practices to actual public concerns. As an alternative journalist, Stewart not only makes values an explicit part of his rhetoric but also asks where there can be a common ground to negotiate for better circumstances, often using humor to do that. Stewart provides a space to better integrate general concerns into a dialogue with figures who have an impact on public life.

Colbert: “Making a Better Tomorrow, Tomorrow”

On the first ever episode of *The Colbert Report*, Colbert introduced the word “truthiness,” on his segment “The Word.” Truthiness can be defined as “truth that comes from

the gut, not books,” or “the quality of preferring concepts or facts one wishes to be true, rather than concepts or facts known to be true” (Truthiness Meriam-Webster). Truthiness went viral and became the 2006 word of the year for both Merriam-Webster and the American Dialect Society (Meddaugh 2010). Colbert’s wit crystalized the problem with pundit-driven news shows.

One of Colbert’s major triumphs before his show ended was tackling campaign finance in the 2012 Presidential Election, better informing his audience about this issue than any other news organization (Annenberg Public Policy Center 2014). In the wake of the Supreme Court’s decision in the *Citizens United vs. Federal Election Committee* case that allows for corporations to give unlimited and anonymous amounts of money to campaigns, Stephen Colbert went on a mission. He decided the best way to illustrate this issue was to start his own independent expenditure-only committee, also known as a super PAC. These committees can raise unlimited sums of money from any entity whether a corporation, person, or union and advocate for or against a candidate. He entitled his PAC, “Americans for a Better Tomorrow, Tomorrow” but it is better known as the Colbert Super PAC. Super PACs have to report their donors to the FEC but they can funnel money through a 501 (c) (4) corporation, which does not need to disclose its donors (McClennen and Maisel 2014). From June 2011 to November 2012, Colbert asked his audience to donate or even start their own super PACs along with their own 501 (c) (4) non-profits. Colbert even hired former Commissioner and Chairman of the Federal Election Committee Trevor Potter to oversee his actions and make sure it was legal (Sneed 2014).

The most important aspect was his engagement with his viewers. Comedy, of course, played a key role. He created the Stephen Colbert’s Super PAC Super Fun Pack to get college students to start their own chapters at their universities. The pack included things like a treasure map, tube socks, and a shirt that said “Turtles Don’t Like Peanut Butter” but also all the proper

paperwork to start an actual super PAC. Colbert had fun, but never lost sight of the bigger picture (Kinkade 2012). Penn State student and co-author of *Is Satire Saving our Nation?* Remy Maisel set up the organization Penn Staters for a Better Tomorrow, Tomorrow. She said *The Colbert Report* enabled her to bring awareness about campaign finance law to Penn State (Kinkade 2012). Politico reported that Colbert and all of his related super PACs made up 2.5% of all the super PACs created in 2012 (Levinthal 2012). He raised over \$1 million in a completely legal way (Bingham 2012). The gag eventually ended with Colbert jokingly announcing his Presidential campaign on the South Carolina ticket and handing over control of his super PAC to longtime partner Jon Stewart. The segment earned *The Colbert Report* a Peabody Award in 2012 and drew national attention to the lack of regulated campaign finance (Sneed 2014).

A study conducted by University of Pennsylvania's Annenberg Public Policy Center said that Colbert was leagues beyond his competitors in explaining the issue of campaign finance during the 2012 election cycle. The study was called "Stephen Colbert's Civic Lessons" and compared his show against Fox News, MSNBC, CNN, and broadcast nightly news, along with talk radio and newspapers as sources of political information. The researchers said that watching *The Colbert Report*, "not only increased people's perceptions that they knew more about political financing, but significantly increased their actual knowledge, and did so at a greater rate than other news sources" (Annenberg Public Policy Center 2014) The lead author of the study, Bruce Hardy, said that there were two reasons Colbert was more successful. One was that Colbert used a narrative structure, walking the audience through the process of creating a super PAC. Every episode was a continuation of that story arc. The second reason was Colbert's use of humor and satire. Hardy, in particular, praised the effectiveness of a segment that compared money

laundering to how 501 (c) (4)s and super PACs interacted. Hardy says Colbert's shows drew in viewers who do not watch traditional newscasts. Hardy said, "His direct engagement was something that no other media source was doing" (Sneed 2014).

[In the June 4, 2014 episode of *The Colbert Report*](#), Colbert, in his fake news persona, cited Hardy's study as proof that his show is doing better journalistic work than major media networks.

Colbert: "This is an historic moment for the Report, I have been ranked the most informative of all American news organizations... and I am incredibly sorry. When we began this show I promised to feel the news at you from my gut, that's why I yank everything I say out of my ass because it's the shortest distance between my gut and you. I never intended to be an educator, what's next? Getting paid like one? (makes groaning noise)" (The Colbert Report 6/4/14)

He vowed to look for a guiding light or anything to show to him how he can provide less information to his audience. He said, "I've let you down nation. Clearly I must work harder at informing you less and to do that I humbly bow myself to the masters" (The Colbert Report 6/4/14). The apology was followed by a fast cut video sequence showing several different anchors at CNN, MSNBC, Fox News, NBC, and ABC talking about Prince selfies, a baby squirrel in a cast, the world's first burrito vending machine, and what your dog is doing when you aren't home. Colbert said, "Wow the bar of lowness has been set very high, but I think I got it" (The Colbert Report 6/4/14). If Colbert the comedian is covering the complexities of campaign finance and Gretchen Carlson of Fox News is talking about a squirrel that got in an accident, who is the better journalist?

Stephen Colbert is making a career changing move by taking over for David Letterman as the host of the *Late Show*. *The Colbert Report* is over but it's hard not to argue that he gave one last impressive example of how influential he is before leaving. The super PAC story illustrates how humor and education are not mutually exclusive, and Colbert was willing to go to great

lengths to research and explain campaign finance to his audience. This alternative approach to journalism allowed for the public to process the intricate and questionable laws behind campaign finance and turn that knowledge into political action. It is important to note the disposition of his funds: Colbert donated \$125,000 each of the Hurricane Sandy relief efforts charities like DonorsChoose.org, Team Rubicon and Habitat for Humanity, along with an additional \$125,000 to the Yellow Ribbon Fun to help support injured soldiers (McClennen and Maisel 2014). It will be interesting to see what the Colbert-spawned super PACs will do in the 2016 Presidential election.

Conclusion

Jon Stewart and Stephen Colbert use satire as a weapon to fight against a faltering media sphere. Geoffrey Baym says that there are news shows that are still doing important journalistic work and giving the public information they need to be free and self-governing (2005). However, there are a number of news organizations that are damaging the product by trying to emulate certain infotainment formats. Baym said he isn't sure how they are still considered real news. Baym views *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report* as a "necessary reaction to the decline of democratically useful news and public affairs programming" (Baym 2005). By doing journalistic work the duo has done their late night civic duty to correct misinformation and advance political discourse through an alternative journalism style.

Chapter 4

The Threat Down on Fake News

Although comedians Stewart and Colbert often deny any relation to being journalists, despite the factual basis of their satire, there are critics who want to make sure people understand the value of serious journalism. Kelly McBride, the Poynter Institute's leader in journalism ethics, said there are reasons why Stewart and Colbert shouldn't be the public's main source of news. By declaring themselves to be fake news, they don't have to abide by certain ethical journalism practices. They get to pick and choose when they want to be serious, and then revert back to humor. They are not bound to the same moral commitments as professional journalists and shouldn't be evaluated the same way. Some critics argue that by promoting a cynical attitude, the rise of entertainment television is leading to the collapse in social capital and political engagement (Burton 2010). Others say the positive effects of these shows are outweighed by the creation of a more cynical outlook towards politicians and news (Baumgartner and Morris 2006). How does cynical detachment balance against political entertainment as fuel for participation and knowledge? This chapter examines the criticism the shows receive.

Journalism Ethics Lesson

The day after Christmas 2010, the *New York Times* published an analysis of the 9/11 first responders' health care bill that was brought to the attention of Congress by an appeal from Jon Stewart. In the analysis, they described Stewart as being like a modern day Edward R. Murrow (Berkowitz and Gutsche 2012). By comparing Stewart to one of journalism's most iconic

figures, it poses the question: who can own legitimate status as a journalist? Fake news critics argue that Stewart and Colbert aren't able to inhabit the role of a journalist. Rather, they perform the functions of journalism and imitate other journalists. Many also argue there are moral commitments and principles of journalism that Stewart and Colbert violate. In an interview, David Klatt voiced the standard "Daily Show" talking point, "It would be a horrible thing if we held the standard of journalism to *The Daily Show*" (Klatt 2014). If Stewart and Colbert are functioning as journalists, should their audiences be concerned that they eschew standard journalism ethics?

In order to understand the ways in which Stewart and Colbert may not live up to journalism ethics, it's important to understand who journalists are and what journalism is. Communications ethics professor Sandra Borden and journalism professor Chad Tew analyze the difference between real journalists in their essay "The Role of Journalist and the Performance of Journalism: Ethical Lessons from 'Fake' News (Seriously)." Any nonjournalist can take an interesting picture, research facts, and tell good stories. However, Borden and Tew think that if these actions are to be considered the work of a journalist, they are motivated by the self-conscious pursuit of excellence as a journalist (2007). "Excellent journalists demonstrate correspondence between intention and performance—in other words, they have integrity as journalists" (Borden and Tew 2007). When Stewart and Colbert deplore any notion of being journalists, it's hard to label them as such if they don't want to uphold the commitments to journalism. They get to criticize other journalists because journalists accept the expectations that come with their role and subject themselves to any evaluation. Media professor Matthew Jordan said in an interview that journalism is incredibly important to America's democracy and journalism done right is necessary to maintain an educated citizenry.

“Since the Founding Fathers made freedom of the press one of the cornerstones of democracy, there has always been the idea that active citizens need information to be able to participate in democracy. We need to be able to have ideas at our hands that we can use to fabricate our own society. When people don’t have that information, you don’t have a functioning society. You have people who are passive spectators of a society rather than active participants, you have consumers as opposed to citizens... People tune into watch *The Daily Show* because it’s funny, it’s something they consume, and they enjoy. I’m worried that it’s something that it constructs to media that if it’s not ‘fun’ then it’s not worth seeing. Sometimes the truth is not out there to be consumed in a fun way. So the age of enlightenment ideals from which the Founding Fathers drew democratic theory is that truth is usually the thing that gets you burned at the stake. It’s the thing you have to fight hard for” (Jordan 2014).

After the Rally to Restore Sanity, many journalists voiced their concern about the potential negative effects of mixing entertainment with journalism. *New York Times* political reporter Sheryl Gay Stolberg called for the preservation of journalism’s authority in serious news after Stewart’s interview with President Obama prior to the rally. She described the lines of entertainment and news as becoming increasingly too blurred (Carlson and Peifer 2013). Pulitzer Prize-winning cartoonist David Horsey, who blends politics with humor like Stewart, also said the lines are becoming too blurred. “Politicians become pundits, pundits play politics and comedians can seem more credible and sane than either one” (Horsey 2010). These critics fear that when Stewart and Colbert change to a more serious tone it creates a threat to “journalism’s jurisdiction within public discourse” (Carlson and Peifer 2013). In an environment when a political satirist (Stewart) has more credibility than a network news anchor (Brian Williams) the possibility of Stewart replacing Williams as the anchor for *NBC Nightly News*, can’t be instantly dismissed. Poynter’s McBride said it should be. “That premise reveals the whole problem with the idea that a comedian could be a primary source of news. They are not. When you watch the nightly news you’re watching an aggregation of information that an executive producer finds to be the most important news that you need to hear to be a democratic citizen” (McBride 2015). She stresses the importance of legitimate journalism’s authority in creating an informed society.

She does admit that Stewart and Colbert do a certain form of journalism, but she says it's important for them to remain subordinate to real journalists.

Borden and Tew argue that Stewart and Colbert's unwillingness to commit to certain moral journalism commitments allows them to do "journalism" the way they want to. They avoid conventions that shape a journalist's performance and responsibility when reporting the news. Borden and Tew say there are three critical principles of journalism ethics: gatekeeping, factuality, and objectivity. In their research, they show how Stewart and Colbert violate these codes. Gatekeeping is a journalist's ability to exercise reliability by putting the most important information first without sensationalizing a story (Borden and Tew 2007). Stewart and Colbert tend to violate this when they use long and arbitrary sound bites to deflate respect for the speaker. By comparison, traditional news shows use "tight" sound bites to make speaker's words more coherent and powerful (Baym 2005). In 2006, when news outlets were covering Mel Gibson's drunken anti-Semitic rant, Stewart used clips from Gibson's movies either of him blowing up cars or drinking alcohol to tell the story. This shows how the clips and sound bites could be manipulated to sensationalize a story, but also to criticize the producers' and journalists' news judgment (Borden and Tew 2007).

Factuality is evidence that can be checked by others and is vital to original reporting (Borden and Tew 2007). Stewart and Colbert base most of their material on content that is already produced by other journalists. Borden and Tew argue that there is very limited original reporting on both shows and their interviews are based on a more traditional late night comedy format. However, they say by using content already vetted by professional journalists they still have quality sources and interpret a topic in a different way (Borden and Tew 2007). This allows for the story to be contextualized in a more detailed way, granting more perceived journalistic

value information to the story. Borden and Tew cite objectivity as a key journalistic principle. Stewart and Colbert consistently play to a liberal agenda. A 2014 Pew Research Center study found that 34% of people who described themselves as “consistent liberals” went to *The Daily Show* as a source of news within a given week (Blake 2014). The study “Perceptions of Bias in Political Content in Late Night Comedy Programs” looked at the biases of *The Daily Show*, *The Colbert Report*, and satire shows like it to see if their content is perceived as more biased than traditional news sources. The results show that late night comedy coverage on different political affairs like withdrawal of American troops from Iraq were perceived as more biased than the coverage of hard news outlets like CBS, NBC, and ABC (Arpan et al. 2011).

The Daily Show and *The Colbert Report* are unique because they live somewhere between the lines of internal and external criticism. These programs were created and produced by nonjournalists who are familiar with the moral standards and performance conventions of journalism, and their front men are constantly being interviewed and respected by bona-fide journalists (Borden and Tew 2007). Klatt, who worked for *The Daily Show*, said it produces work incredibly hard to continue to push boundaries and want real journalists to do the same. “We want to see journalists push that much work and effort into telling stories correctly and objectively” (Klatt 2014). They also have an auditing function, by keeping an eye on the powerful. Their job is to point out what may be unsaid in mainstream media, uncover inconsistencies, and point out the absurdity. CNN reporter Pete Dominick, a comic who once warmed up audiences for *The Daily Show*, recognized Stewart’s comedic freedom as an alternative discursive way to disseminate the news. Stewart’s lack of adherence to journalistic constraints gives him “the freedom that we have journalists don’t really have. So, sometimes we can do a little bit of journalism, we can cover issues in a way and in a fashion that journalists

can't get away with, and we do that. We take advantage of that'" (Carlson and Peifer 2013).

Stewart and Colbert can get away with work that other journalists cannot. Borden and Tew agree that at times Stewart's, "pronouncements strike many as evidence that he can, at times, perform journalism better than journalists themselves" (Borden and Tew 2007).

Late Night's Glass Half Empty

Jody Baumgartner and Jonathan Morris say the long term effects shouldn't be ignored. They found that extended exposure to *The Daily Show* compared to traditional news creates cynicism and that viewership of the show is not related to major increases in political knowledge and or participation for the show's main youth demographic.

Baumgartner and Morris conducted, "The Daily Show Effect", in which they examined the amount of cynicism generated towards political candidates and the electoral system after people watched *The Daily Show*. They used clips during the 2004 campaign between George Bush and John Kerry from *The Daily Show* and CBS Evening News to test and compare the different outcomes. They found that watching *The Daily Show* negatively affected audience perception of Bush and Kerry and that it had an even worse impact on Kerry. Compared to CBS there was no significant influence on their evaluation of either of the candidates (Baumgartner and Morris 2006). Also, after viewing the clip, the test group was asked if they felt they could trust the U.S. electoral system and media. People with more exposure to *The Daily Show* were more likely to disagree with trusting either of the two, proving the increased cynicism (Baumgartner and Morris 2006). However, the researchers noted that even though these statistics are significant and distinguished, the impact is modest. Kenton Bird, Travis Ridout, Brandon

Rottinghaus and Rebecca Self suggested in the essay “It’s Better Than Being Informed: College Aged Viewers of *The Daily Show*” this type of cynical view allows for the audience to “engage the news with a more critical eye” (2008). One college student they interviewed in their forum even concluded that, “He’s [Stewart] just making our generation more critical of the stories we hear in the news and not just taking them for face value” (Bird et al 2008).

Baumgartner and Morris examined the hype regarding the shows’ potential for informing and getting the younger audience to engage politically. In their essay, “Stoned Slackers or Super Citizens?”, they suggest that Stewart is far less politically relevant than most observers believe. Citing research models and surveys from the 2008 presidential election, they concluded that the knowledgeable younger demographic that watches *The Daily Show*, actually relies on other major news sources as much as or more than *The Daily Show* (Baumgartner and Morris 2011). The results show that the heavy viewers of the show aren’t much more knowledgeable than those who never watch the program. Baumgartner and Morris also cautioned that the heavy viewers who rely on the show were the ones who thought they were the most politically knowledgeable, giving them a false impression of what they actually know (2011).

Communications professor and political satire researcher Dannagal Young scrutinized Baumgartner and Morris’s findings and says this is the only documented negative effect that has been produced regarding *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report* (Young 2013). She says that “Avid consumers of political satire have lower trust in the government, regardless of who is in office. While the authors of the initial study that identified this relationship, Jody Baumgartner and Jonathan Morris, political scientists at East Carolina University, described it as a ‘detrimental effect’” (Young 2013). Scholars since have pointed out that low trust in government combined with high knowledge and efficacy creates a potentially desirable democratic formula.

If someone had a low trust in politics but extensive knowledge and confidence in his or her ability to participate effectively, then Young posits the idea that they probably would be likely to be more “skeptical, passionate and engaged” (Young 2013).

Conclusion

Stewart and Colbert may not be able to inhabit the role of a journalist officially, but they are able to function as media critics and this distinction promotes identification between them and the journalists they mock. Stewart and Colbert make fun of and critique journalists’ performances in the current climate of cable TV news, but they also help define the role of journalist and are helping to construct what it means to be an ethical journalist. Borden and Tew suggest that journalists could learn a thing or two from them and in some cases take a subjective stance and call it like they see it rather than just hide behind the veil of objectivity (2007). By acting as watchdogs they are actually making other journalists act more ethically.

Also, the negative criticism regarding Stewart or Colbert as creating a cynical audience is partially part of their job. They are supposed to be critical of government, politics and the media because that’s the function they serve as this alternative form to journalism. Kelly McBride says the value of Stewart and Colbert is in being a compliment to the more rigorous journalism in *New York Times*, CNN, Fox News. She said as a consumer a person can’t rely on them as a source of information (McBride 2015).

Chapter 5

Passing the Late Night Torch: Oliver and Wilmore

The future of late night satire news is changing and not just in style and format, it may be even getting better or more refined. After *The Daily Show*'s correspondent John Oliver subbed in at the desk for Jon Stewart during the 2014 summer, he was given his own show on HBO called *Last Week Tonight*. In the vacant Colbert 11:30 time slot, Comedy Central created *The Nightly Show* with another Daily Show alumnus, Larry Wilmore, as the anchor. Both shows are unique in their approach and starting to gradually move away from their predecessor's show, but for a good reason. The goal of this chapter is to show the changing landscape of late night satire with Jon Oliver primarily leading the way and Larry Wilmore bringing in a new voice for the underrepresented. It will also examine whether their style of alternative satire journalism is coming closer to the real thing.

Last Week's News... Tonight

If there is one person who is shaking up the fake news genre it is John Oliver, who has big shoes to fill after being Stewart's second in command. After more than seven years as a correspondent on *The Daily Show*, Oliver has found his voice and his place in political commentary, separate from Stewart and some argue, better (Kenny 2014). Oliver is providing a greater investigative journalism factor to his show that makes his hybrid comedy-news one-of-a-kind on late night television. Dannagal Young sees Oliver on a trajectory to be the most

prominent fake news figure and said, “I see Oliver as the next logical extension of the genre. He is going beyond traditional satire to give audience members specific directives that allow them to take action on the issues he deconstructs on the show” (Steinberg 2014). He’s not afraid to dive deep into controversial topics, and often emerges with a very acute point of view. *Last Week Tonight* is making fake news more real than ever before.

It’s important to understand how Oliver’s show is transforming satire news not just by content, but in format and style. The show is filmed once a week and is aired on Sunday nights at eleven o’clock eastern time without any commercials for a full thirty minutes. HBO’s premium cable status grants Oliver’s show that thirty minutes without any commercials. It differs from the Comedy Central format where *The Daily Show* is only allotted about 22 minutes of time with commercials. Oliver’s show is not censored, and with no “bleeps” the audience can hear what he really has to say. A spokeswoman for Comedy Central said Oliver stuck to Stewart’s usual four “act” format – an introduction, recap of events from the week, a lengthy investigative segment, and a crescendo into what he’s thinking (Steinberg 2014). Oliver rarely invites guests on the show. There are no rigid times for each segment. The main issue he tackles each week are allotted the most time. These pieces can range from anywhere between 10 to 20 minutes in length. In his first season, he spent 13 minutes on the [net neutrality](#) debate and 16 minutes about [the dangers of dietary supplements](#) promoted by people like Dr. Oz. These investigative segments and critiques are reminiscent of hard-hitting *60 Minute* segments that run around 11 to 13 minutes, according to a CBS newsmagazine spokesman (Steinberg 2014). Amber Day, author of *Satire and Dissent: Interventions in Contemporary Political Debate* says that the lack of commercials allows him to report in a “newsmagazine style,” with the ability to criticize and look at every facet of an issue (Kenny 2014). Unlike Stewart’s show, which is about 22 minutes

in length, HBO does not require commercials and gives him a chance to discuss net neutrality or the United States' prison system at length. The fact that his show only airs once a week give his writing staff the ability to produce quality work and satirize at a higher level. It seems sometimes that Stewart and Colbert were sacrificing quality over quantity to produce four shows a week, and getting repetitive by just bashing Fox News every night. Oliver comments on real issues without need to constantly poke fun at other media outlets. Also, Oliver is not topically censored (Steinberg 2014). He and his writing staff don't think twice about going after major political entities or companies like General Motors. *Last Week Tonight* is using its freedom, time, and schedule to produce ripe satirical news.

John Oliver commands a bully pulpit where he summarizes the weekly news, investigates important issues, and engages with his audience, which seems like alternative journalism or almost the real thing. However, like his predecessors, *Last Week Tonight's* front man denies any claims that what his show is doing is journalism:

““ It's not journalism, it's comedy—it's comedy first, and it's comedy second. It's a comedy show, just about things that we're interested in. So, yeah, we'll kind of look off the map a little bit, which will mean we'll end up looking at Supreme Court cases and foreign elections and international issues just because they're interesting and people don't joke about them much, and there's fun to be had there... There might just be a single serious point wrapped up in 35 stupid jokes”” (Suebsaeng 2014).

Despite this posturing, it looks as if he is separating himself from Stewart and Colbert by becoming *more* journalistic. The show is definitely garnering attention from the journalism community. The Associated Press referred to it as investigative journalism and Robert Thompson, director of Syracuse University's Bleier Center for Television and Popular Culture, dubbed Oliver's work as "investigative comedy" and uses Oliver's net neutrality segment as an instructional tool in class (Bauder 2014). A media blogger for the Poynter Institute, Andrew Beaujon said, ““I don't know what else you'd call that kind of digging through public documents

except journalism. Maybe it's a more iterative, bloggy form of journalism, but I think it's inarguably legit'" (Suebsaeng 2014). Oliver's extended and investigative segments are the best examples of his alternative journalism style. [On the September 21, 2014 episode](#), Oliver dug deep into some claims made by the Miss America pageant. His fifteen-minute segment began with jokes about how dated a pageant seems and his incredulity at some of the questions the contestants are asked. Then he honed in on the organization's claim that it makes \$45 million worth of scholarship money available to young girls each year. His staff compiled a large pile of researched documents and discovered a federal disclosure form that said the pageant spent \$482,000 in scholarships in 2012. *The Last Week Tonight* staff researched more tax forms on statewide pageants and found several scholarship offers that couldn't have been granted and were added together to make the final total (Bauder 2014). They exposed the Miss America deception and explained people shouldn't confuse the money that may be available with the money actually spent. Erick Wemple said, "The pageant thing scarcely qualifies as anything but journalism, what with all the tax records and following up on fishy-sounding information...Hell, the beauty pageant thing even featured the staff crashing on deadline. That sounds like reporting to me'" (Suebsaeng 2014). This story isn't breaking news, but it's shedding a light on a topic and uncovering the truth.

Oliver and his former mentor Stewart are ardently against being labeled journalists, and for a good reason. If Oliver accepts the label of being a journalist then the comedy aspect suffers and his act would seem more arrogant and condescending. The rejection of the journalist tag allows the writing staff room to be more critical and unrestrained. James Poniewozik is a reporter for TIME magazine and said one of the biggest growth fields in the conventional news industry is "explainer journalism," which includes analyzing data and walking an audience through

complex issues (2014). Poniewozik thinks Oliver is doing just that and said, “That’s journalism; a news analysis is journalism; an editorial is journalism... When he spends fifteen minutes arguing the stakes of net neutrality, people actually pay attention and even act on it. If that makes it ‘not journalism’, then it’s journalism that has the problem” (Poniewozik 2014). Oliver’s crew features both comedy writers and journalists. His staff includes former *Vanity Fair* writer Juli Weiner, senior news researcher Charles Wilson (an alumnus of *The New York Times* and *The New Yorker* who now works as the program’s fact checker), and one time magazine writer Tim Carvell who produces the show (Suebsaeng 2014). Although they may be putting up a comedic façade, there is journalism at the heart of this show.

Last Week Tonight not only informs, it engages its audience and uses the Internet to spread its message, which is seeing results. It seems that every Sunday night or Monday morning, either on Twitter or Facebook people are sharing whatever issue Oliver decided to eviscerate the night before. When Oliver wanted food manufacturers to declare the amount of hidden sugars in their products he got the hashtag #ShowUsYourPeanuts. After three days the hashtag generated over 6.25 thousand tweets and the positive content outweighed the negative tweets. The hashtag spiked immediately after the show, dying down on Monday afternoon but saw an upward pivot again Tuesday. “Call to Action” and “Food Industry” were the two most trending topics associated with Oliver (Fratti 2014). During his show, Oliver will challenge his audience and ask them to join along in the joke with him over social media. During the net neutrality segment he called upon his viewers to go the FCC website and use the comment page to persuade them to keep the Internet a level playing field. The website was inundated. The next day, it crashed. A message read, “We’ve been experiencing technical difficulties with our comment system due to heavy traffic” (Carr 2014). The National Cable Television Association,

opponents of increased regulation, held a meeting the same day and a spokesman said ““they knew they had an issue”” with Oliver (Carr 2014). The British comedian also will ask his audience to tweet at or use hash tags to taunt the subjects of his criticism. On the [February 7, 2015 episode he asked his audience to mess with](#) Ecuadorian President Rafael Correa who was publicly shaming teenage critics. The amount of tweets that followed to Correa’s Twitter handle elicited this feeble attempt at humor: ““are there even any English comedians?”” (Ruiz-Goiriena 2014). Oliver’s Internet presence is polished and professional. After every show, HBO posts segments of *Last Week Tonight* so they can be shared. When Oliver went on a [long takedown against FIFA and the World Cup in June 2014](#), the video went viral. As of March 2015 it has almost 9.5 million views (Last Week Tonight 2015). The show has an average audience of four million people, equal to the other politically based debate show *Real Time with Bill Maher* and is close to approaching one of HBO’s most popular shows *Girls* (Carr 2014). Oliver is building enough credibility so that people are looking more towards him to find out who they can and cannot trust.

Success in late night satire is difficult, and often requires originality. That’s what *Last Week Tonight* provides. The show defies nearly all the current norms. Rather than letting a video stand as the sole element of a segment, Oliver gives his sound bites context and doesn’t tend to misquote. He seems to be trying to expand his audience’s attention span. In a culture where people are constantly distracted by their phones and social media, he holds them for the duration of a story, by making it compelling and informative. Brian Stelter, host of CNN’s Sunday media affairs program *Reliable Sources*, said, ““What’s most important is that he’s making people pay attention to long, nuanced explanations of politics and policy. To all those who sniff that viewers won’t watch that, well, he’s providing a counterargument, isn’t he?””(Suebsaeng 2015). The

program is drawing people in by its comedy, but leaving them with knowledge. Even if they aren't trying to do journalism, critics are saying some of Oliver's work is better than Stewart and Colbert. *New York Times* TV critic Neil Genzlinger, said that *Last Week Tonight* is, ““much better [than *The Daily Show*]. It does more, it goes deeper, the writing is smarter, and the research is smarter”” (Kenny 2014). Oliver has more time and a better venue to satirize the news and make it relatable for his audience. With his English background, he has the ability to comment on America's mass media system from an outsider's perspective. Each program begins with the major news of the week, but then he delivers an, in-depth commentary on controversial issues. There is not a perfect formula to be successful in the late night satire genre, but John Oliver and his staff might be on the cusp of the format for the future. The show is evolving the genre to satisfy the needs of the viewers and to engage in a more mobile and Internet connected society.

Keeping it 100 with Larry Wilmore

On January 19th, 2015, *The Nightly Show with Larry Wilmore* premiered with the only non-white host in late night television (temporarily—See Chapter 6). As the fill in show for *The Colbert Report*, Wilmore is already getting praise for his sharp satirical perspective, and is being welcomed for bringing diversity to the late night genre. Much of the early response to the show has been positive, although other comedians have criticized Wilmore for stealing jokes. He's bringing a new kind of approach to late night that offers up a voice for the underrepresented in a panel format. As the former “black correspondent” on *The Daily Show*, Wilmore is creating an open environment to debate controversial topics in America. *The Nightly Show* makes a bold step

in a new direction for fake news by blending several different types of news formats and being the voice for the underdog when it comes to race, gender, or any type of minority.

Wilmore's show is a blend between *The Daily Show* and *Real Time with Bill Maher*. It opens with an introduction monologue where Wilmore seated at a desk, goes over the news of the day, usually crafted as long form stand up rather than a series of quick jokes. For the rest of the show, he invites journalists, scholars, comedians and celebrities to join a four-person panel to talk about a controversial topic. For the premiere episode, Wilmore had New Jersey Senator Corey Booker, comedian Bill Burr, musician Talib Kweli, and local correspondent Shenaz Treasury gather around the table for a civil discussion on race-related issues (Kallison 2015). Guests from the journalistic sphere include Soledad O'Brien and Jake Tapper (Lowry 2015). Wilmore gives the panel serious and humorous questions to discuss. The show gets edgier during the segment called "Keeping it 100" where he asks the panelists a question they may want to dodge, but they have to answer it truthfully. Senator Booker was mocked for giving a not so "100" answer to the question if he wanted to be president (Crouch 2015). They focused on the issues in Ferguson, Missouri and the subsequent protests that followed. Some critics argue that the segment is too short to allow for certain ideas to be explained in full (Lowry 2015). The panel makes the show seem more like a parody of Sunday political shows like *Meet the Press* or *This Week*, compared to how *The Daily Show* rips off of nightly newscasts. Wilmore is a longtime producer and writer prior to his work on *The Daily Show* and knows that the show is likely to evolve and change over time (Deggans 2015). Executives at the show have hinted that the show may differ completely from its original format at some point in order to find the right mix of funny and serious in 22 minutes (Lowry 2015). Regardless of what the show looks like,

it's important to understand what the show is doing and how it's changing the dialogue of late night.

Larry Wilmore entered his show knowing that he would be following behind the watchdogs of Colbert and Stewart, but it turns out he's looking out for the underdogs. Wilmore has a theory on why he gets to comment on the underrepresented. He calls it the "Top Dog/Underdog" rule. He said, "Underdog gets to make fun of Top Dog, but Top Dog can't make fun of Underdog. And people get mad at it, but sorry ... that's just how it is'" (Deggans 2015). His voice for the underdog is not limited to just race, but also to gender, the lower class and to every situation where there is a disparate level of equality. Originally, the show was entitled "The Minority Report", but it had to be changed to avoid a naming conflict with another show (Crouch 2015). Wilmore said he's glad to not have the minority label because it's important that non-white hosts don't have to primarily focus on race. Wilmore said, "I may be talking about Obama's boring budget speech, so the show's not marginalized where I can only talk about a black thing or the Minority Report thing '" (Deggans 2015).

The show includes the kinds of voices that don't normally get much of a shot on Comedy Central, or in the broader Jon Stewart universe of political comedy. The show is committed to the idea of purposeful debate, rather than the superiority of being right. Wilmore's show isn't limited to liberal viewpoints. Recent guests include conservative radio host David Webb and Baptist pastor Michel Faulkner, who talked about his opposition to gay marriage (Crouch 2015). Producer Roy Albanese believes the purpose of the show is to get a conversation started. Albanese said, "It's almost like we are so divided at this point that nobody on either side wants to talk to each other anymore. We are not going to solve anything, but it's a good way to show people you can have some fun with somebody else who might not agree with you'" (Steinberg

2015). Wilmore might not be doing Stewart and Oliver type of journalistic work but his show is opening up space for a free flow of speech and expression.

Wilmore shines as a natural host and has the ability to be funny while responding to his panelists' answers. But the panel format limits the time to air every view. Often, the dissenting opinion is limited, making a guests appearance come off as tokenism (Crouch 2015). Wilmore, who is working on his skills as a facilitator, seems willing to innovate and to can get into more in depth conversations. In one episode about fatherhood in the African-American community, Wilmore skipped his normal first act about the news of the day and went straight into the panel (Crouch 2015).

Replacing Stephen Colbert isn't going to be an easy task, but Larry Wilmore is taking his uniquely personal program and turning it into the newest source for entertaining news and democratic discussion. Like his predecessors before him, Wilmore is the best thing about his show and he's the one who can take it to the Stewart or Oliver level. Ian Crouch of *The New Yorker* says that his biggest struggle going forward is going to be his ability to "convince us that debate and disagreement can be as entertaining as righteous indignation" (Crouch 2015). Wilmore is starting out as the underdog, but may eventually grow to be top dog.

Chapter 6

Conclusion: End of an Era

Jon Stewart filled the role of host for *The Daily Show* for sixteen years, transforming it into the authoritative and satirical show that it is. Now, it's time for someone else to take control behind the desk and be the new face of the show. On March 30, 2015 Comedy Central confirmed *Daily Show* correspondent and South African comedian Trevor Noah will be Stewart's replacement (Itzkoff 2015). Noah acknowledged the announcement and tweeted, "No-one can replace Jon Stewart. But together with the amazing team at *The Daily Show*, we will continue to make this the best damn news show!" (Chappell 2015). Noah appears to be committed to maintaining the same level of value and trust as Stewart. There may be a new host for the show, but it will be difficult to replicate what Stewart did for not just for the show, but for journalism, satire and the truth.

The appointment of Noah promises to add youthful energy and international perspective to *The Daily Show*. Plus he will be one of the only lead nonwhite performers on a franchise late night television show. Most importantly, Stewart endorsed him and said, "He's a tremendous comic and talent that we've loved working with" (Itzkoff 2015). Born to a black Xhosa mother and a white Swiss father, Noah grew up in South Africa in the final years of apartheid. In his comedy, he uses his experiences to be fearless when talking about complexities and contradictions of race (Itzkoff and Onishi 2015). Comedy Central's president Michele Ganeless said he brings a unique and important worldview, which is one of the reasons that makes his humor so "insightful" (Itzkoff 2015). She also noted that Noah's enormous international

followers could boost the American-based audience to unprecedented levels once he takes over (Chappell 2015). Noah described a conversation he had with Stewart after being named the new host. Stewart said to him he was in the same spot sixteen years ago. Nobody really knew who he was and he was just starting to find his voice when he was handed the opportunity to host of *The Daily Show*. Noah responded, “Now, it’s my turn to steer the ship” (Itzkoff 2015).

Final Thoughts

Jon Stewart and Stephen Colbert have proven their satire and humor can credibly enhance journalistic discourse. The two represent a major experiment in helping to construct what news is. The blending of news and satire confronts a system of political communication and results in an informative and powerful form of alternative journalism. Although it is arguable how ethical their version of journalism is, they are helping to refine the profession by being media critics and serving an important function as the watchdogs of American politics and media. Even if the hosts can be regarded as some of the most trustworthy figures in news, all journalism can’t be based on the standards of shows like *The Daily Show*. But fact-based humor and satire is a fueling demand for truth, accountability and reason that is vital for democracy.

The late night fake news genre is definitely a threat to mainstream media, which is continuing to change and evolve. Major news outlets are trying to respond to a loss of audience and the changing economic landscape of news by incorporating an infotainment aspect to promote viewership. While they are working on this, fake news is finding a bigger audience by offering information that entertains, educates, and informs. The beauty of *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report* was their desire to revolutionize and test the boundaries of journalism and

comedy. They broke down barriers for new people like John Oliver and Trevor Noah to become the next voice of late night news. Colbert may be transitioning to a less news related role by moving to *The Late Show*, but Stewart may have more tricks up his sleeve. In an interview with Sophia McClennen she said, “We know that Stewart is stepping down, but he’s not dead. He’s going to do other things and he firmly believes in this so I think we can be hopeful that he’s going to come up with something exciting” (McClennen 2015). It’s a revolutionary time for fans of late night news and journalism. What Stewart realized is that Americans don’t want to go to sleep and forget about the troubles of the day. They want to laugh at the idiocy of politicians, journalists, etc. to engage with news on a more personal level. They also want someone to voice their concerns, which makes their anger feels less terrible. It was Stewart and Colbert who made it possible and now it’s time for a new generation to become the new fake news.

More Information

For more information about me and my thesis work visit my Medium page <https://medium.com/@mjapple>. Also, for the full video interview with Penn State Professor Sophia McClennen visit <https://vimeo.com/123441159> or my Medium page.

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Work Experience -----

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Napa Valley Film Festival Marketing/Programming Intern- SUMMER 2014
Napa, CA

B94.5 Morning Zoo and Eagle 97.8 Radio Station Intern- FALL 2013
Results Radio Station- State College, PA

WTAJ Channel 10 News Intern- SUMMER 2013
WTAJ-10 News- Altoona, PA

The Daily Collegian Writer/Social Media Manager- FALL 2012 - SPRING 2013
The Daily Collegian- State College, PA

Pennsylvania Center for the First Amendment Research Intern – SINCE FALL 2013
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Awards and Achievements in College -----

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