

NETWORK NEWS NARRATIVES VERSUS *THE DAILY SHOW* NARRATIVES:

A CONSTRUCTION OF ALTERNATIVES

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In February of 2015, Jon Stewart announced that he would be stepping down as host of *The Daily Show* within that same year. In mid-April 2015, he put a firm expiration date on his tenure; Stewart would no longer appear as host of *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* after August 6, 2015. Viewers both devoted and sporadic responded to these announcements with disbelief and an immediate need to speculate on how Stewart's retirement would change the show. There is a general consensus among scholars and writers who analyze the show that *The Daily Show* when it began in 1996, as hosted by Craig Kilborn, was merely a talk show dominated by ridiculous jokes that parodied network news and politicians without offering much in the way of substantive opinions on the subjects it covered. In fact, it was "often described as more of a spoof of *Entertainment Tonight*" than as a reflection of serious news programs (Day 97). The show mocked entertainment and political personalities, both conservative and liberal, and network news shows alike without providing an analysis much beyond the fact that these personalities, their messages, and those that conveyed such messages were ridiculous.<sup>1</sup> When Jon Stewart took over in 1999, he continued to host the show in much the same way. However, the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center on Tuesday, September 11, 2001 quickly changed the tone and aim of the show.

*The Daily Show* and Stewart's first episode back after the tragedy on September 20, 2001 proved that the show and its comedian host had the ability to deftly handle serious topics (Jones 8) and were ready to take a stance in order to become a platform for serious news. Stewart, in his opening monologue on the September 20, 2001 episode, pauses several times to recover as his voice breaks due to the strength of his emotions, and he closes with describing the way the view from his apartment changed in the wake of the attacks; the Statue of Liberty filled the hole left

by the World Trade Center, a "symbol of American ingenuity and strength and labor and imagination and commerce" that was destroyed in the attacks ("September 20, 2001"). Much like the remodeled view from Stewart's apartment, *The Daily Show* returned after September 11<sup>th</sup> reshaped, with an emphasis on satire over parody.<sup>2</sup>

Roger Kreuz and Richard Roberts, in their essay on satire, parody, and irony, define satire "as the ridicule of a subject to point out its faults," (100) and parody "as imitation, intended to ridicule or to criticize" (102). The differences between these two genres are subtle but important. Satires demand an understanding of "the time and place in which [they] are written" (103). On the other hand, parodies do "not go beyond the boundaries of the original work to consider societal implications" (103). In the Kilborn era of *The Daily Show*, the content was geared more towards parodying entertainment news shows. During this time period, the show mocked the style and popularity of these shows, which leaned less toward commenting on critical issues in American society and more toward mocking jokes or pointed one-liners. After the events of 9/11, the show, under Stewart's leadership, redirected and began to take aim at the more serious news programs, which made the content seem more meaningful as an avenue for change. According to Jeffrey P. Jones, in the years following this evolution, *The Daily Show* "became a location for some of the most consistent and insistent questioning of not only the [Bush] administration's policies, but also its information management techniques and the compliant news media that aided and abetted those efforts" and has since remained a political watchdog (8-9).

In its efforts to expose and critique, the show turned to a creative use of video clips taken from network news broadcasts, allowing Stewart to both satirize and construct an alternative narrative of individual news reports that overlay or replace the frames and stereotypes that

traditional news networks insist on employing. This paper demonstrates that the way alternative narratives are constructed by *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* in its use of video clips illuminated specific differences between the narratives propagated by traditional network news organizations and the narratives constructed by satirical news programs like *The Daily Show* and reveals the way audience consumption of news and news narratives is changing.

### **Mainstream News as Narrative**

In order to adequately analyze the way *The Daily Show* provides alternative narratives, it is helpful to understand the way that traditional news networks narrativize the news that they report. In its most basic form, narrative is "the unfolding of a story" and "is present in every age, in every place, in every society" (Barthes 87, 79). Narrative is a tool used to deliver information, true and false, that allows humans to understand and create order from the abstract and tangential experiences in time and space, by enabling them with the tools to perceive and communicate what we see (Ricoeur 3). From everything to a worker explaining to his boss why he was late to an adult child telling her parent about the new events in her life, narrative is a part of every interaction we have with others and ourselves. In fact, narrative is such an intrinsic part of the way humans of most cultures experience the world that it "could appear problematic only in a culture in which it was absent—or, as in some domains of contemporary Western intellectual and artistic culture, programmatically refused" (White 1). In other words, relating to the world through the representation of a series of events is only problematic in the rare cultures not already steeped in narrative or when it goes unacknowledged as a representation of the integral way humans communicate, understand, and organize the world around them.

Unfortunately, one of the domains in Western culture where the human reliance on narrative as an organizing force is often refused, or at the very least remains unacknowledged, is

journalism, especially television news reporting. As S. Elizabeth Bird and Robert Dardenne discuss in their study of sensationalism in the news, most "serious" news organizations see their function as being only "to inform, to provide a window on important events in the world" ("News and Storytelling" 33). However, as private businesses, one of most networks' main functions is to also make money, which, in the world of television, means they must keep and hold the attention of as many viewers as possible. To do so, many network news organizations rely on sensationalism to evoke an emotional response in audiences. For instance, news broadcasts often start hours before they are scheduled to with short teaser commercials that play during earlier programming. These teasers never tell all the details, of course, and rely only on the most titillating details to essentially trick viewers into sticking around to watch the news broadcast to get more of the relevant details, which are rarely as interesting as the sensationalistic teasers make them out to be. This narrative choice usually promotes the smaller, more interesting details over the straightforward facts as a whole in order to elicit strong emotions in their potential audience. This strategy is not inherently bad or negative, in and of itself, but the "implicit assumption [of many people is] that such [emotional] responses are incompatible with a reasoned, informed understanding of events" (Bird and Dardenne, "News and Storytelling" 33). This negative correlation usually leads news networks and journalists to strenuously deny sensationalism and, often, to deny that they 'craft' stories at all (33).

For the most part, news networks and the journalists that work for them seem to believe themselves to be mere purveyors of facts, whose efforts are administered with objectivity to inform news consumers of *the* impartial truth. In fact, journalists, instead of being simple transcribers of actions, are actually authors. Journalists are authors because events and facts do not have much inherent meaning until they are given an organization, typically chronological

and, therefore, narrative in some way. The events and facts that these journalists choose to report, emphasize, or omit imbue these narratives with an ideological bent that is inconsistent with objective fact reporting.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, the message that is given prominence in any news report is also an ideological choice. For example, on October 9<sup>th</sup>, 2015, President Barack Obama made a visit to Roseburg, Oregon, recently shaken by the shooting on Umpqua Community College's campus. *CBS Evening News*, *CNN* and, even, *People* magazine chose to focus on the reaction of a group of protestors who disagree with the President's stance on gun control.<sup>4</sup> This choice and its framing has a clear ideological message that might have been different had these news organizations chosen to focus on the group of people who "carried signs welcoming the president" (McAfee). In this way, journalists write and present a narrative of present events that audiences are conditioned to accept as objective truths.

Beyond reordering events and choosing which details to emphasize, journalists act as authors in the language and stylistic features they choose to rely on when reporting the news. According to Bethami Dobkin, "Few researchers still support the idea that there is a transparent correspondence between actual events and news reports of them. Rather, news stories [typically] reorder events [...] and provide the means by which the moral significance of them can be judged" by an audience (145). To illustrate, news reporters typically rely on nominalization, the conversion of a word or phrase into a noun, "which [...] is an effect of discourse rather than a retrieval of facts" (Fulton 251). Nominalization tends to strip a news report's subject of agency at the same time that it promotes the idea that the report is factual, objective, and reputable because it saturates the most subjective evaluation of a subject with the "proper distances between narrator and the events being narrated" (Fulton 251). Helen Fulton's exploration of the most heavily relied upon language and stylistic features in journalism uses a 2005 article headlined

"Americans see War as Mistake" by Alec Russell as an example (248). Of its structure and stylistic choices, she says:

the nominal 'invasion of Iraq', 'devastating attack on a US military base', 'the cost in American lives' and 'the growing disillusionment have been selected instead of corresponding verbal forms: 'America invaded Iraq', Iraqi soldiers attacked a military base', 'American lives have been spent' and 'Americans are disillusioned'. [...] References to 'invasion' or 'attack' omit the people or nation responsible, while the semantic difference between these two concepts [...] implies a qualitative difference between the 'good' Americans and the 'bad' Iraqis. (251)

In these ways, narrative functions in news reporting in an advisory capacity, providing subtle, or sometimes not so subtle, indicators for how viewers should feel about the subject or events being reported (Johnson-Cartee 152-53).

As journalists rely more on sensationalism to structure their reports, "epistemological standards move away from empiricism" (Lewis 288); essentially, journalists place a heavy emphasis on *why* events happened, instead of just that they did. For instance, many of the reports on the October 2015 mass shooting in Oregon include a line or two about how investigators were in the process of combing through the perpetrator's social media accounts and home, looking for the reasoning behind his actions.<sup>5</sup> When what looks like a logical reason is found, the media will most likely report on it, based on how previous mass shootings have been reported on, despite the fact that reasoning behind a mass shooting perpetrator's actions are typically irrational and provide cold comfort for victims, their families, and the nation at large. For example, about a week after the shooting in Oregon, Reuters released a news report describing some details that may have led the perpetrator to kill nine people. The report includes information like the gunman

spent time at a California school that specialized in teaching students with "emotional and mental health disabilities" before he moved to Oregon, his mother described him as autistic on online messaging boards, and how his neighbors perceived him as socially isolated (Johnson and Flitter). In another article, *The New York Times* reports that a week before his rampage, the perpetrator had "an uncomfortable exchange with the teacher" that he eventually shot (Turkewitz). At the same time that these details provide little comfort, a discussion of the perpetrator's motives allows the narrative to move forward towards a kind of closure by shifting the focus to other, tangentially related topics that might someday put an end to mass shootings, such as gun control. The pattern that is realized from these narrative choices has formed a specific kind of master narrative around these mass shooting incidents. Master narratives "universalize and cast dialogues in binary" by providing "a script that specifies and controls how" audiences believe a narrative will be completed (Stanley 14). Perhaps the most universally known master narrative is that of Cinderella. These are deliberate narrative choices made by networks and journalists that do not know how to address a catastrophic and painful problem in American society.

Alternatively, as networks and journalists are crafting these narratives that set the tone for public discussions of systemic problems, they reject the idea that they have any authorial control over these news reports; this rejection allows traditional news journalists "to negate authorship [in] a deliberate obfuscation of the ideological dimension of news" (Johnson-Cartee 158) and deceive consumers into believing "a particular reality, affected by cultural, historical, and economic factors" as truth or fact (Dunne 141). To reiterate using the example of the narratives of mass shootings, the trend again is that once the perpetrator's reasons seem to have been discovered, the conversation shifts away from the tragedy to a heated debate on a tangentially



related topic, like how mental health is handled in America. These discussions, while important, have clear ideological boundaries that tend to detract or distract from the original discussion of the tragedy, which are reflected by the different messages conveyed in how the different news organizations report the events.

Despite the ideological leanings that are always present in news reporting, the perception of news as objective truth, especially in the case of television news, is supported by its strong historical and formal association with unbiased truth-telling (Dunne 141). The public's strong conviction about the trustworthiness of television news could be attributed to the fact that it is a strong visual medium, which gives it a sense of immediacy and authority (140-41); On the other hand, the visual immediacy of television news can also be a hindrance to its credibility as it aligns it more closely with entertainment through the sensational images picked, making it "more eager to please [...] viewers than a newspaper [...] is to please its readers" in order to, again, catch and hold viewership and raise revenue (142). Even when viewers are cognizant of the fact that news reporting has an inherent bias and, therefore, might not be as truthful as historically believed to be, they may not question the news networks they choose to watch because of the shared discourse the networks use to communicate with their audiences. As Helen Fulton explains in her analysis of news discourse, news networks work hard to create "a comforting sense of identity and belonging" in their audience that becomes "an affirmation of the 'rightness' of [the] opinions and values" shared by the network and the audience (247). This use of the shared discourse, or public idiom, supports and reinforces the viewers' worldview, making audiences less likely to critically analyze the news reports they are choosing to watch.

In addition to this public idiom, television news tends to employ and rely on storytelling elements and myths or frames that also re-affirm strongly held viewer beliefs, bolstering their

worldview and explaining "why it seems simultaneously novel, yet soothingly predictable" that events happen over and over again (Bird and Dardenne, "Rethinking" 206). Journalists typically use frames, or "a central organizing idea for making sense of relevant events and suggesting what is at issue" (Gamson 157), to quickly assemble "incoming information or fast-breaking facts" into easily communicated and familiar accounts of unique events (Johnson-Cartee 161). That is to say, they organize facts into easily identifiable narratives, which, to be sure, are influenced by what they think their audiences will recognize and believe. Journalists select and propagate a frame narrative that is in line with their initial impressions of how the events most logically fit together, which supports the fact that news reports are not entirely based in empirical, objective fact (Johnson-Cartee 162). The frames also benefit viewers who want to understand the new and, sometimes, threatening as familiar. If these new or threatening events can fit or be forced into familiar frames, then the audience can, in a way, understand what has happened and take comfort from this interpretation of this new event that lends itself to a familiar narrative.

These frames also lend themselves to an episodic perspective, which tends towards the sensationalism discussed earlier, rather than providing a fuller context of the problem or situation. The kinds of myths that these dramatic and overused frames circulate, typically those that support "the dominant ideology operating in the United States," have widespread cultural implications because they often make use of stereotypes, such as the 'welfare queen' trope often relied upon in narratives that focus on the welfare system in America (Johnson-Cartee 175, 169). This use of stereotypical images "generally operates in ways that promote apathy, cynicism, and quiescence, rather than active citizenship and participation," as well as supporting cultural hegemony (Gamson et al. 373). News reporting seems to take a more negative role on the

cultural stage than it should because of its reliance on sensationalistic narratives that often contain negative connotations for the viewing audience.<sup>6</sup>

### **Cultural Importance of Satirical News/Jon Stewart**

This trend towards more reliance on narrative frames and, therefore, more negative news reporting is a consequence of the deregulation of the media that happened in the 1980s and 1990s, which led to an emphasis on minimizing expenses in order to maximize revenues (Young 27). Today, at a time when 24-hour, 7 days-a-week news coverage is a part of everyday life, this deregulation has led to news reporting that is almost solely composed of cable news networks, like FOX News, CNN, and MSNBC, each fear-mongering and rehashing the same events using the same narrative frames every hour on the hour (Marc ix). However, at the same time that television news became populated with polarizing personalities that seem to care little about substantive discussion about real issues, satellite, internet, and streaming services opened up a world of options that would not have been available even twenty years ago.<sup>7</sup> One such additional choice offered to news audiences in the new millennium was the satirical news program. *The Daily Show*, the first of these satirical news programs, has taken shape as a powerhouse that has spawned many other popular satirical news programs. For instance, *The Colbert Report*, which ended in late 2014, was hosted by Stephen Colbert, an alumnus of *The Daily Show*. *The Nightly Show with Larry Wilmore*, hosted by *The Daily Show*'s previous "Senior Black Correspondent" Wilmore, took *The Colbert Report*'s timeslot when it went off the air. *Last Week Tonight*, hosted by yet another *Daily Show* alum, John Oliver, currently airs on HBO and is shaping up to be even more hard-hitting than Stewart's *Daily Show*.

While the transformation of *The Daily Show* from parody to satire seemed novel in 1999, the use of satirical comedy has a long tradition in television. Since the 1950s, when cable was

transmitted by industrial antennas, notable personalities, like Ernie Kovacs and Peter Cook, have recognized the unique platform television provides for social criticism. However, it was not until 1964, when *TW3* debut, that "the first no-doubt-about-it political satire show on U.S. prime-time network television" hit the air (Marc xii). *TW3*, long since faded from public memory, premiered more than a decade before *Saturday Night Live's* "Weekend Update," arguably the most well-known and longest running satirical news platform (xii). Despite their innovations, these programs and their networks often "maintained an artificial separation between politics and popular culture" (Jones 6). It was not until the 1992 presidential campaign, when candidates made stump appearances on cable and syndicated entertainment shows like *Larry King Live*, that "[t]he conventional lines that once segregated the 'serious' from the 'entertaining' in television programming" began to blur and critics began to fear the "degradation of the electoral process, proclaiming [these appearances] the 'entertainmentization' of politics" (6).

Unlike the critics in 1992, analysts following the last few elections have not seemed appalled by candidates appearing on entertainment television programs because these appearances on shows considered less-than-serious have become smart, politically savvy maneuvers by candidates who know how to use outlets that their desired voters actually tune in to watch (Jones 178). In 2008, presidential candidates had 110 appearances on late-night talk shows, far surpassing the 25 counted in the 2004 campaign (Jones 11). In fact, those critical of entertainment media appearances in 1992 would probably be even more horrified to know that, in 2008, Jay Leno and his *Tonight Show* was the only show that had more candidate appearances than a satirical news program like *The Daily Show*, a show on a channel dedicated to comedy (Baumgartner and Morris 65-66).

To be sure, appearances on entertainment shows are integral to a candidate's strategy today, especially to gain the attention of younger voters, who primarily get their news on social media platforms: "About six-in-ten online Millennials (61%) report getting political news on Facebook in a given week" (Mitchell, Gottfried, and Matsa). And as entertainment shows seem to be friendlier to the short sound bites and quick video clips that populate social media, young voters are more likely to see a clip of *Last Week Tonight* on Facebook than they are a clip of traditional network news programming. For example, *Last Week Tonight's* response to another mass shooting, posted on October 5, 2015 after airing on HBO the previous night, was an examination of the most oft-used scapegoat when a mass shooting happens: the way mental illness is, or is not, treated in America. As of October 9, 2015, the twelve minute video clip had about 1.3 million views, over 30,000 likes, and about 22,000 shares. To compare, the only video shared on the Facebook page of CBS News on October 5, 2015 was a cheerful video report about a French bulldog chasing three bears off at a California property. In comparison, that video was only viewed 255,000 times, with a little over 5,000 likes and almost 4,000 shares as of October 9, 2015. A link posted by CBS News just a few hours later that lead to a report on students returning to the Oregon community college campus that has sparked the latest discussion of gun control and mental health awareness that was the impetus for *Last Week Tonight's* report discussed earlier has just 32 shares and 242 likes. The report itself has 11 comments and has been tweeted 54 times.

Like *Last Week Tonight's* earlier video, a clip, entitled "Whose Win was it Anyway?," posted to *The Daily Show's* Facebook on October 30<sup>th</sup>, 2015 from the October 19<sup>th</sup> episode had over 2 million views, as of November 6<sup>th</sup>, 2015. At the same time, a video posted around the same time as *The Daily Show's* on CNN's Facebook page about a protest at one of Hillary

Clinton's campaign rallies had reached just over 700,000 viewers. The report that this video links to, written by Dan Merica, has no comments. Even though the information on how many times the reports published by both CBS News and CNN have been viewed is not publically available online, it is probably safe to say that they have not gotten nearly as much exposure among young voters as *Last Week Tonight's* report, or even as much exposure as the mighty French bulldog that took on some bears.

*The Daily Show*, and the shows its success have spawned, like *The Colbert Report*, have all used this technique of sharing video clips of especially pertinent sections of their shows on social media platforms with great success. At least, these satirical news shows can show more success on social media platforms than traditional news networks seem to show. These satirical news programs are also recognized in more legitimate ways as well. Jon Stewart, who is emphatic in his claims that *The Daily Show* is not a news program, is often mentioned alongside such media heavyweights as Tom Brokaw and Dan Rather (Heertrum 128). In their respective runs, *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* and *The Colbert Report* amassed twenty Emmys and four Peabody awards, and *Last Week Tonight* picked up its first Emmy win in its very first year of being on the air. These accolades and awards, while in less serious categories like Variety, Music, and Comedy series, do hint at these shows' cultural significance.

What really proves that these shows are having an impact on American culture is the amount of young voters who say they regularly learn about the democratic process by watching them. A Pew Research Center study conducted in 2007 found that:

Almost half [of young adults aged 18 to 24] (46 percent) said they learned from comedy shows such as [*The Daily Show*] 'regularly' or 'sometimes' .... Overall, these findings confirm that young adults not only watch [*The Daily Show*]

frequently, but believe they are learning about politics as a result. (qtd. in Baumgartner and Morris 68)

Jody Baumgartner and Jonathan Morris have challenged the popularly held belief that this exposure to *The Daily Show* and other satirical news programming increases political knowledge and activity because "the measurement of [*The Daily Show's*] audience has been oversimplified" (64). Even if the impacts of these shows on the democratic process are actually negligible because of the over-inflated sense of political intelligence found in this study (64), the fact that young adults cite it as their main source of information is telling.

Baumgartner and Morris do subtly acknowledge the cultural impact of satirical news programming, citing several other scholars who claim *The Daily Show* is "a new journalistic style that eschews strict objectivity and incorporates newer forms of discourse" (66). In other words, as traditional networks and journalists are denying the inherent subjectivity that comes with constructing a news report, satirical news programs are embracing it and young voters are taking notice. In fact, the cultural impact of satirical news programs is largely felt in the way that they have "incited a much-needed reevaluation of journalism's relationship to politics and civic culture" (Reilly 258). Taking aim at traditional network news and the narrative frames it relies on, satirical news programs, like *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*, have carved out a niche that often pointedly proves traditional network news, as it is consumed today, is not generally constrained by objectivity.

### **Case Study**

*The Daily Show* is an effective evaluation of the current media and political climate because of its format; the show represented as a news program, including an anchor and field reporters (Jones 8), is remarkable because of the skill with which it is able to "blend both the

mimetic and the real" and to the extent that it is successful at this creation (Day 85). Mimesis, a narrative concept delineated by Plato and Aristotle, is an imitation or representation of the real (87). According to Amber Day, Plato's foundational definition of the term comes with the connotation that "mimesis is to be viewed with suspicion, precisely because it is an (inferior) imitation of the real" (87). *The Daily Show*, by mimicking the images of a real news program, subtly and realistically mocks serious television news reporting by pointing out that news reporting should be about more than the paraphernalia and the expensive graphics (Young and Esrale 99-100). Additionally, it is primarily by its affectation of a real news show that *The Daily Show* is able to successfully demonstrate and critique the shortcomings inherent in the narratives that news media presents viewers (Jones 180). Stewart and his correspondents are well aware that they are playing at being real news journalist, bringing the audience in on the joke.

Despite being labeled 'fake news,' *The Daily Show* and its news team, who take on "rotating, important-sounding, but vacuous titles ... depending on the particular story they are covering" (Day 87), make a concerted effort to call out the fact that the people who guide American political and economic policy "play a role [...] while they act in their own self-interest, and the [traditional] media reports on the competing roles of the performers as if they were the story—not the effects of their political self-interests" (Colletta 858). In order to prove this hypocritical symbiosis between politicians and the traditional network news platforms, most of the satirical news programs, but especially *The Daily Show*, construct their own narrative of current events, using many of the same resources that traditional news reporting relies on.

Indeed, Stewart himself, in a 2003 interview with Bill Moyers, explained "we don't make things up. We just distill it to, hopefully, its most humorous nugget" (Stewart). Often, the humor can be found in the alternative narrative that Stewart proposes as "the real story behind a



particular issue, [which breaks] down the official rhetoric and media sound bites" (Day 88). *The Daily Show* is able to construct its own narrative of current events, using many of the same resources that traditional news relies on. In doing so, this particular satirical news program often makes clear just how ridiculous the 'real' news is at the start of episodes by referencing a particular issue that is still actively being discussed in traditional news media. This tactic clearly points out that the events and details reported are being constructed by traditional news networks, even as *The Daily Show* is "replaying footage seen on other news programs but with a decidedly comedic angle" (Day 88). As Mark McBeth and Randy Clemons describe in their analysis of 'fake' news, American news networks and "politics [have] become entertainment: professional wrestling in moral arenas with constructed villains, heroes, and victims" (81). Despite Stewart's insistence that he is not a journalist, *The Daily Show* does consistently provide alternative narratives propped up by or built upon 'real' newscasts.

Other scholars have examined the differences between the narratives sold by network news and by *The Daily Show*, but typically for purposes related to the social sciences, like attempting to concretely explain its impact on the democratic political process. A few scholars have used narrative theory to discuss whether *The Daily Show* is impactful enough to be considered 'real' news. Generally, most of these analyses agree that *The Daily Show* does provide much of the same content as 'real' news, usually with a more in-depth analysis.<sup>8</sup> Taking for granted *The Daily Show's* importance to the evolution of news and media, especially in political discourse, the next step is to analyze how the show uses its 'fake' platform to dissect and add to a discussion of real issues.

*The Daily Show's* most successful and hard-hitting alternative narratives make liberal use of video clips that originally aired on network news channels. Instead of existing in a vacuum,

though, Stewart, in his role as anchor, completely ignores the traditional journalistic belief in attempting to relay straight facts. Often, he connects whatever is being talked about in the video clips to similar episodes or incidences that have occurred in recent years, lengthening the narrative. This lengthening of the narrative in connection to similar events seems to be counter to the current trend in traditional news media. In doing so, Stewart provides a stronger "historical and cultural context" than a few remarks made by network news anchors in an attempt to remain objective, which proves the existence of systemic issues in America in a way that traditional news casting, even in this era of continuous, twenty-four hour news broadcasting, fails to do because of an emphasis on speed over thoughtful reporting (Johnson-Cartee 164).

*The Daily Show's* use of their chosen video clips along with Stewart's voice overs and monologues act in tandem to construct narratives that often fall in line with Walter Fisher's narrative paradigm, which views narrative as a form of "human communication [which] should be viewed as historical as well as situational" (2). Fisher proposed his narrative paradigm as an alternative to what he calls the rational world paradigm, which sees human communication as argumentative (2) and "requires [...] participation of qualified persons" (4). The rational world paradigm, therefore, limits participation to those who have been influenced by a Western education, with its emphasis on being rational, who know the shared language, relevant information, the argumentative issues, and who share the values of the state (4).

In contrast, the narrative paradigm is structured under the belief that "humans are essentially storytellers," (7) meaning that all are inherently qualified because of humanity's natural impulse toward narrative (White 1). Unlike the rational world paradigm, which has conditions, this inherent skill in narrative makes the narrative paradigm more accessible to all, meaning that understanding and influence are easier to achieve under the narrative paradigm.

The narrative paradigm is also ruled by "'good reasons' which vary [...] among communication situations, genres, and media" and are affected by their historical and cultural context (Fisher 7). A narrative of the same event could be told differently by several different eyewitnesses, as a person's understanding of a narrative is inherently influenced by their visual and ideological perception. In fact, this issue of unreliable eyewitness memories is one that is of interest to psychologists and those in law enforcement.<sup>9</sup> Traditional network news, by attempting to focus solely on the facts of one incident, do not provide much context and, depending on the ideological perceptions of the news organization, the facts presented can be quite skewed. At the same time, these traditional news organizations are typically seen as more 'qualified,' or legitimate, than satirical news programs, like *The Daily Show*, as sources of information and, as their stories typically have an inherent bias, they are more likely to fit into the rational world paradigm of narrative.

A comparison of the original narratives peddled by the traditional network news media and the alternatives constructed on *The Daily Show* reveal their significant differences, allowing a more coherent analysis of the alternative narratives that Stewart constructs through his use of the clips taken from the traditional news networks. Through this analysis, the alternative narratives constructed by *The Daily Show's* use of Fisher's narrative paradigm and the co-opted video clips become clear. For the purposes of this analysis, the text is comprised of video clips, patched together from traditional network news broadcasts, and Stewart's narration, written by the news team but delivered solely by Stewart, to become the March 11, 2015 *Daily Show* segments entitled "Brotherhood of the Traveling Chants" and "To Catch a Prejudice" ("Common"). These segments occur consecutively at the beginning of the episode, lasting for about ten minutes total. Stewart starts every episode by welcoming his audience, introducing

himself and, briefly, the special guest that will be stopping by for an interview at the end of the episode, which, on March 11, 2015, was the musician and actor Common.

Stewart transitions to his first segment by citing the fact that Common starred in the movie *Selma*, which dramatized the 1965 Civil Rights march that occurred in Selma, Alabama. He then connects the movie to the commemoration of the fiftieth anniversary of this historical event and provides commentary over a clip of President Obama leading protestors who participated in the original march down a street in Selma. Stewart characterizes the commemoration as "an incredibly inspiring reminder of the lengths people had to go to during the Civil Rights Movement, from Selma to the Lunch Counter Greensboro Sit-ins to the Interstate Bus Freedom Riders" before he comically transitions by facetiously quoting Isaac Newton as saying "for every bus bending the arc of the moral universe towards justice, there's another bus coming in the opposite direction, trying really hard to bend that mother(bleep) back" ("Common"). This bus coming from the opposite direction that Stewart is referencing is the one featured in a home video made of two fraternity brothers from the University of Oklahoma chapter of the Sigma Alpha Epsilon (SAE) fraternity leading a racist chant on a bus. After his reference to the fictional Newton quote, a clip taken from a network newscast introduction to the incident immediately plays.

This transitional introduction about Common's role in *Selma* to "The Brotherhood of the Traveling Chants" makes Stewart's position on this fraternity's faux pas clear; he sees the actions of those on this more modern bus as moving away from justice. The audience is able to draw the conclusion that the fraternity brothers are riding in the bus opposing the one that is riding towards justice despite Stewart never verbally making this connection. Stewart's reaction to the blatant racism shown in the video is to laugh, in a sarcastic and fake manner, and then flip the

camera his middle finger, after which he says "Boom." Immediately after this gesture, he provides his own introduction: "That is the University of—that is the University of Oklahoma's Sigma Alpha Epsilon fraternity describing their rush policy—in racist chant form." Next, he plays another home video, taken from clips played on another network news show, of University of Oklahoma linebacker Eric Striker's reaction to the fraternity's racism, attributing it as "putting [the viewer's] feelings into words." Striker's reaction is angry and visceral, accusing white fraternities of being two-faced and hypocritical, containing quite a lot of explicit language and practically yelled into the camera. The live, in-studio audience claps and cheers in agreement with Striker's reaction. This studio audience, one of the only departures from the mimetic copying that *The Daily Show* generally adheres to and rarely seen on screen, provides real-time feedback and confirmation of the narratives propagated by *The Daily Show*. They also provide more immediate feedback than an at-home viewing audience can; if the in-studio audience cheers, it is likely that the at-home audience will as well. Therefore, the in-studio audience is representative of a larger audience and works to confirm the construction of the chosen alternatives before the more populous at-home viewers are exposed to them.

Continuing to set up the alternative construction to this report on the racist actions of the fraternity brothers, Stewart looks pensive and conflicted before injecting some levity, admitting "I felt that" and dropping another joke, claiming that the fraternity was changing its name to a more explicit moniker that Striker calls them in his reaction video ("Common"). Stewart acknowledges that most people probably felt a great deal of anger at the racism displayed by the fraternity, but says "Luckily, we got a speedy apology." The segment then launches into another clip taken from a network news broadcast, wherein Striker apologizes for the profanity in his reaction video. Stewart then mockingly jumps in, "Oh, I forgot to mention the first one to

apologize for this entire incident wasn't the bus full of racist chanters, but the guy who made the mistake of swearing when he reacted to the bus full of racists." In a little under three minutes, Stewart has cut away to four clips, taken from different network newscasts, all about three to five seconds long. However, all these clips used to illuminate Stewart's voiceovers have been setting the stage, explaining the background and setting up the problem. It is not until about five minutes in that the message that *The Daily Show* writers are getting at becomes apparent.

At about the four minute, forty-five second mark, Stewart acknowledges that "there was outrage" before a barrage of clips featuring network newscasters using words like "disgusting, horrible, racists, vile, and vulgar" to describe the offending fraternity brothers' actions, which transitions into Stewart admitting that the fraternity chapter and its members saw some consequences as the chapter was disbanded and two members expelled "for the disgraceful display [for which] there's no excuse. Or so you would think." With this statement the segment "To Catch a Prejudice" begins, and a clip is played, showing those who *do* try to excuse the behavior of the fraternity brothers. MSNBC's *Morning Joe* attempted to excuse the fraternity's actions by claiming that hip-hop music is replete with references to racial slurs but is marketed to a white audience, apparently making drunken white nineteen year olds think it is appropriate to use racial slurs in their everyday interactions ("Common"). To this logic or frame, Stewart scathingly replies with two rebuttals, "First of all, the kids on that bus [...] were gleefully performing one of their fraternity's old, let's call them anti-negro spirituals, featuring a word that predates rap and probably folk and thought" ("Common"). His second issue with *Morning Joe's* frame of this incident is the fact that it is essentially victim blaming. In an effort to point out this overused narrative frame, Stewart asks,

How come, when conservatives talk about African Americans, they say 'these people need to take responsibility for themselves, pull up those pants, and get a job,' but when white people do something racist, they're all 'how could those children know wrong from right after being driven to madness by the irresistible power of the hippity-hoppity?' ("Common").

These two thoughts succinctly, but humorously, get to the crux of the argument made implicitly in Stewart's alternative narrative.

After asking these two pointed questions, he rehashes, again using clips from network newscasts, the "string of really public racist incidents" that have occurred in the past few year, including Cliven Bundy, the Nevada rancher who suggested blacks were better off under slavery; Donald Sterling, the ex-owner of the Los Angeles Clippers who was removed by the NBA after being caught on tape making racist remarks; and the Department of Justice's report on the systemic racism that was pervasive in the Ferguson, MO police department. Instead of acknowledging the "deep, problematic racial divide in our nation," some newscasters, namely the ones shown in the clips chosen to air during this segment, like Bill O'Reilly and the hosts of *Morning Joe*, choose to present them as "an unending series of isolated events" ("Common"). Using this one example of a relatively well-done *Daily Show* takedown of a flaw in how news reporting is packaged, a pattern of the way *The Daily Show* works to construct alternative narratives can be fleshed out.

The chronological development of the report, pieced together from the various original sources make up the moving parts of the narrative that can be changed, depending on the message intended. The beginning of the chronology that comprises this narrative would be the videoing of the racist chant; next, the video is uploaded to social media, where it catches local

attention, sparking protests on campus, and then network news media's attention, where it becomes national news, which leads to it becoming fodder for a *Daily Show* segment. The text, which is not the constricted, traditional narrative texts comprised of words on a page, but video clips, comprised of visual and auditory elements that form "another, non-linguistic sign system" to create meaning: a full twenty-nine 3 to 10 second video clips culled from varied network and cable television news broadcasts (Bal 4). Both of these narrative elements that make up these particular events remain relatively unchanged throughout the narration on the traditional newscasts and on *The Daily Show*. The clips cherry-picked by *The Daily Show* remain visually the same, if shorter due to time constraints. At the same time, *The Daily Show's* editing of these clips does exactly what Stewart claimed; they are distilled down into a seemingly more truthful, at least according to Stewart, and humorous form.

Returning to the original clip that *The Daily Show* repackages in order to make its argument, the narrative constructed by MSNBC's *Morning Joe* is clearly disconnected from the cultural context because they were attempting to fit the events into the frame that present this incident as an isolated event and from a culturally hegemonic point of view. One of the anchors, Joe Scarborough, begins the discussion by asking the guest on *Morning Joe*, Marc Morial, president of the National Urban League, about comments made by Gene Roberts the day before about how these incidences of racism are happening in places outside of the "deep, deep South" ("Fallout at Oklahoma University"). Morial responds by acknowledging that these incidents, no matter where they happen, are upsetting, but then he shifts the discussion to David Boren, the president of the University of Oklahoma, in order to acknowledge his leadership and to commend him for his swift action, only to shift it back very quickly to a race issue by bringing up the fact that, apparently, this racist chant was taught to the fraternity brothers. Morial believes



that this fact "means it must be part of the culture and the tradition of this fraternity" on a national level. He then goes back to praising Boren before bringing the focus back out to the national level by saying that these events sometimes provide "a wakeup call" that shows that pretending racism does not happen in America is not the best way to deal with a systemic racial issue ("Fallout").

The hosts, both Scarborough and Mika Brzezinskiz, never respond to these very appropriate points. Instead, under the guise of reporting new information about a rap artist who cancelled a show at the University of Oklahoma after viewing the SAE chant video, Scarborough and Brzezinskiz attempt to shift the responsibility for these poor decisions. These anchors seem to argue that since the racist term is used in hip-hop music that these fraternity members listen to, it is only logical that these boys would begin to use the term in their everyday speech. In fact, one of the funniest moments of the reports on this incident comes, not from *The Daily Show*, but from this moment, listening to Brzezinskiz try to pronounce Waka Flocka Flame, the aforementioned hip-hop artist who cancelled his show. At the beginning of their segment on this incident, Morial was attempting to point out much the same thing that Stewart does in the "To Catch a Prejudice" segment: the actions of a few thoughtless fraternity brothers are a symptom of a deeper issue in American culture. Morial is consistently ignored, despite his efforts to start a conversation with the hosts of *Morning Joe* about race issues. The hosts of *Morning Joe* can claim they have done their part in addressing this issue simply by Morial's presence on their show, but by refusing to engage with him, they contribute to the idea that this incident of racism in a fraternity is an isolated event.

Scarborough does give some very off-hand acknowledgment of Morial's views, but then immediately turns the conversation to the 'issue' of hip-hop music's influence, if any, on the

incident ("Fallout"). Both Scarborough and Brzezinski's handling of Morial's comments and input signify that they do not believe it to be valid or, at the very least, worth exploring in their efforts to report the facts, despite the fact that they consistently give their own opinions on the influence of hip-hop music on young, white men. So, Stewart, twelve hours later, reconstructs this MSNBC segment and proves that the deeper issues of systemic racism are there and are influenced by more than Waka Flocka Flame's lyrics and the use of racial slurs in hip-hop. The most thought-provoking moments of *The Daily Show's* alternative narrative are the concluding comments, connecting this SAE incident with the incident with Cliven Bundy and the incident with Donald Sterling and all the incidents in Ferguson, Missouri, that prove that these issues of systemic racism, much like Morial was trying to point out, need to be acknowledged. The show does so by bringing Scarborough and Brzezinski's lack of cultural awareness into the construction of the narrative, instead of purely relying on or trying to justify a video of young men using a racial slur in their fraternity chant. This alternative narrative is formed by comparing a moment of youthful stupidity exhibited on the bus full of fraternity brothers to the systemic cultural blindness exhibited by Scarborough and Brzezinski and connecting it to other, seemingly small, isolated incidents that, when connected, show a worrisome trend in racial relations that is often ignored or glossed over by traditional news media.

Perhaps this alternative narrative and others like it are not so unusual to people who are able to connect these singular incidents to a larger cultural and historical context. If this is the case, then the lack of attention paid to the social and historical context of events or stories reported by traditional, 'serious' news media is a flaw. If *The Daily Show* can construct a cultural context necessary for proving that individual incidents add up to systemic racism in a little under ten minutes in a thirty minute show, then a news program given three hours every morning

should be more than able to do the same. In fact, often it is the episodic nature of sensationalist journalism that cuts into the context of a narrative and "creates a discursive space where readers are less likely to fully appreciate, understand or interpret the implications of events and issues" (Johnson-Cartee 164). However, like the scholarship and Stewart acknowledge, certain people do not acknowledge racial bias because it does not suit their ideological leanings, which are supported by the networks in an effort to create the public idiom necessary to keep viewers loyal.

### **Conclusion**

This analysis presents Stewart and *The Daily Show* in a very positive light. At the same time, it should be acknowledged that the show is presenting its own construction of reality, and it could be seen by some as equally untrue to the narrative presented by *Morning Joe*. Stewart, as a cisgender, heterosexual, white male, who "does not appear out of place in the television expert's chair," has a very privileged perspective (Day 101). In fact, this privileged perspective has led to some clashes between Stewart and some of his less inherently privileged writers. In July of 2015, Wyatt Cenac, an African-American writer and comedian that worked on *The Daily Show* from 2008 to 2012, mentioned in a podcast interview that Stewart and he disagreed on a planned impression of 2012 Republican presidential candidate Herman Cain; Cenac was uncomfortable with it and found it to be ignorant, and when he tried to raise his objections during a writers' meeting, Stewart "got incredibly defensive" (qtd. in D'Alessandro). No matter how liberal or progressive an audience would like to think Stewart is, he still has a very privileged status in society that can be hard to overcome.

Even as Stewart fills a sort of everyman role as news anchor, *The Daily Show* has a distinctly liberal viewpoint and message. As Amber Day says in her analysis of the use of the mimetic in *The Daily Show*, Stewart and the writing staff often articulate a perspective through

their segments and bits that "is distinctly critical of the status quo of political debate in the United States" (101). In undertaking these critiques, they may access different master narratives or frames than the traditional news media, but they could still very much be using these framing devices that constrain news reporting to fit facts into a predetermined narrative. In an idyllic world, traditional news reporting would "provide its readers [and viewers] with some coherent sense of the broader social forces that affect the conditions of their everyday lives" (Gamson et al. 391). Since most network news reporting falls short of fulfilling this duty in a variety of ways, *The Daily Show* and other satirical news programming like it have carved out a niche for themselves, pointing out this failure and then attempting to provide the cultural and societal context that is helpful for understanding how a bus full of thoughtless fraternity brothers affects or is related to a broader problem or population.

To conclude, the fact that news comes from large shows aired by even larger networks brings up a tangentially related avenue of additional research: authorship. When Stewart narrates over the clips appropriated from other shows, his words are a product of a writers' meeting held before taping, which he sometimes refers to off-hand. This collaboration means that Stewart-as-the-host becomes an amalgamation of ideals contributed by different people. In short, he becomes an implied author. The same phenomenon happens, with perhaps more emphasis, to Bill O'Reilly and his 'talking points' during his show *The O'Reilly Factor* and Stephen Colbert's character on *The Colbert Report*. Both Stewart and, to a more extreme extent, O'Reilly and Colbert-as-the-host have become televised versions of implied authors, or "the author image evoked by a work and constituted by the stylistic, ideological, and aesthetic properties for which indexical signs can be found" (Schmid). Both are real men who may, to some extent, believe the words they are saying on screen, but they are not the genesis of the every single word that comes

out of their mouths. This added complication of implied authorship does not negate the fact that *The Daily Show*, by tearing apart network news narratives and shows and piecing them back together in a different way, constructs alternative narratives, but it could add another dimension to this issue with further research.

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<sup>1</sup> See Hugar; Jones 8; Wisniewski 164-165; Day 97.

<sup>2</sup> See Marc ix.

<sup>3</sup> See White 25; Johnson-Cartee 157-58; Gamson 157; Dobkin 145.

<sup>4</sup> See McAfee; Blackstone, "President Obama;" Holmes.

<sup>5</sup> See Sidner, Lah, Karimi, and Young.

<sup>6</sup> See Bird and Dardenne; Gamson, Croteau, Hoynes, and Sasson; Johnson-Cartee.

<sup>7</sup> See Dunne 141; Young 28; Jones 5; Marc xi; Grondin 348.

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<sup>8</sup> See Jones, “Fake News vs Real News;” McBeth and Clemons, “Is Fake News the Real News?;” Tally, “I Am Mainstream Media (And So Can You!); Williams and Carpini, “Real Ethical Concerns and Fake News.”

<sup>9</sup> See Eakin, Schreiber, and Sergent-Marshall; Henkel and Carbutto; Pansky and Tenenboim; Zaragoza, Belli, and Payment.