

Satire as the Fifth Estate

*The Daily Show and The Colbert Report as
News Source and Media Critique During the
2012 Presidential Election.*

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Abstract

During the years of the George W. Bush administration, political satire had a renaissance in the United States. In 2004, a national Annenberg Election Study claimed that viewers of *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* were better informed about the candidates than those who just watched regular news. During these years, *The Daily Show* had a quick rise in popularity that resulted in the spin-off show *The Colbert Report*. In an increasingly polarized news media culture, these two shows became known for having a certain influence on political discourse in the country, and were dubbed the fifth estate by some scholars. In January 2009, the Bush years were over, and this thesis has researched how the status of these two shows held up with a Democratically run White House. The research found that the change of administration did not change the polarization of the media, but merely shifted the focus of the criticism dealt by the two satirical news shows from the president to the media. With the election of 2012 as a frame of reference, this thesis shows how *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report* find different ways to convey the news as comedy, how they keep their audience well-informed about current issues in the process, and how they fulfill their work as the fifth estate through criticizing the news media when needed, with particular emphasis on criticizing the conservative network Fox News.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

There seems to be a consensus among scholars that the news media is deteriorating and that journalists are no longer filling their role as the fourth estate. There is also agreement across the board that the worst case is found in televised news, particularly *political* coverage on 24-hour news networks, and that audiences may need to look elsewhere to find the most trustworthy coverage. In an article from 2007, professor of philosophy Rachael Sotos argued that the popular *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* was a strong contender in filling the gaps left by the regular news media. Sotos stated that *The Daily Show* acted as a fifth estate, or a watchdog of the watchdogs of government. The years after the September 11 terrorist attacks on the US became a polarized time in American news media, and during the years of George W. Bush's presidency many scholars agreed with the idea that *The Daily Show* had something to add to political and public discourse. While Bush was president, satire rose in popularity, something the editors of *Satire TV* took note of when they dedicated the book to Bush: "To W, an inspiration to satirists (and satire scholars) everywhere."¹ This thesis will research and discover how these two shows hold up in their roles as the fifth estate, nearly four years after Bush left office, during the course of the presidential election campaigns of 2012. In this thesis, the fifth estate will refer to the idea that these two shows are a watchdog of the watchdog, keeping an eye on the media, which in turn is supposed to keep an eye on the establishment. The fifth estate lets the media know when they are not sufficiently covering their bases, either by doing the job for them or by telling them, and by informing the public.

¹ Jonathan Gray, Jeffrey P. Jones, and Ethan Thompson (editors.) *Satire TV*, p. vii

The election of 2004 was a breakthrough moment for *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*, and that year marked the start for the show to be seen as more than comedy, perhaps even news. A 2004 National Annenberg Election Study found that viewers of *The Daily Show* were better informed about the candidates than viewers of regular news², and CNN reported the same year that Stewart was “Young America’s News Source.”³ One year after the 2004 Election, the format of *The Daily Show* was so popular that a spin-off called *The Colbert Report* was created, which quickly became equally popular. When the Republican Party released their “post-mortem” report, the *Growth & Opportunity Project*, after the defeat in the 2012 election, they stated that “Republican leaders should participate in and actively prepare for interviews with *The Daily Show*, *The Colbert Report*” when making efforts in youth outreach.⁴ The 2004 election being a breakthrough moment for Stewart is the reason why this thesis will explore the standing of *The Daily Show* and its spin-off in the most recent presidential election, that of 2012. The significance of the two shows is not being questioned here; it has been established as a fact through public opinion and by how they are presented as important tools for political outreach among young voters. The questions are rather how they act as the fifth estate, why it is still relevant in a post-Bush era, and why the shows are important in current public discourse. The aim of this thesis is to discuss *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report* acting as the fifth estate, both as a news source and as critics of the media, while tackling the coverage of the 2012 Presidential Election, both as a news source and as critics of the current state in American media. The discussion will be placed in the framework of satire as a literary genre, as well as a factor in public and political discourse through history, and as social commentary. The discussion will focus on the methods the two shows use and how they differ from each other. In discussing these satire shows as media critics, it will be necessary to step out of the framework of the 2012 election, but the discussion will stay in the post-Bush political climate.

The current significance of these two comedy shows is part of an interesting development in the media today. American television is a capitalist business controlled by a handful of large conglomerates. They make money by selling advertisement space, and the higher your ratings are, the more money you can make on selling these spaces. In that sense, all American television has to compete for ratings, and to win that race you have to appeal to

² Jason Zinser. “The Good, the Bad, and the Daily Show”, *The Daily Show and Philosophy*, p. 46

³ Michael Gettings. “The Fake, the False, and the Fictional: *The Daily Show* as News Source”, *The Daily Show and Philosophy*, p. 16

⁴ Growth & Opportunity Project, p. 22. *GOP.com*

as many consumers as possible. This was argued, among others, by Sociology Professor Todd Gitlin as early as the 1970s. “The medium has to be mass” and the product of mass media is the attention of the audience who in turn also need to be “mass”. You only create a mass audience by organizing a message to fit as many people as possible.⁵ The medium is the message, and the message of television is manufactured to fit in with as many as possible, which in large part will be easier if there is an entertaining element to the programming. According to Geoffrey Baym, German sociologist and philosopher Jürgen Habermas agrees with this, saying that the public sphere has been “colonized by a commodified mass media and, with it, conversation” is “transformed into a commercial product packaged to sell.”⁶ This is further argued by Baym when he presents what he calls a shift from the “Network Age” to the current state of American media. Baym argues that the post-network era shows that television news anchors are no longer the most trusted men in America, they are hardly trusted at all, and an increasing number of people distrust what they hear or even abandon news altogether. A survey done by the Pew Research Center in 2008 found that the Cable News Network (CNN) was the most trusted name in news, but were still only trusted by 30% of participants.⁷ Baym claims that there is a form of identity crisis within the news media, caused by, the “profound conflation of journalism and entertainment,”⁸ and that the news media of today has chosen quantity over quality.⁹ Jeffrey P. Jones chimes in with the argument that the post-network era has been marked by a “transformation of media business from content companies to audience companies,” stating that the product has to be appealing enough to where the audience will choose that specific product. “Crafting a distinctive and attractive brand is one important way to accomplish this,” Jones argues, and attributes that accomplishment to Fox News, and their clearly defined ideology in particular¹⁰. It is here that *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report* come in the help fill the gap, illustrated by the surveys, like the National Annenberg Poll from 2004, that show how these programs tend to inform the public and that Jon Stewart is a highly trusted news source.

⁵ Todd Gitlin. “Spotlights and Shadows: Television and the Culture of Politics”, *College English* 38.3 (1977), p. 790

⁶ Geoffrey Baym. *From Cronkite to Colbert*, p. 5

⁷ Baym. *From Cronkite to Colbert*, p. 2

⁸ Baym. *From Cronkite to Colbert*, p. 4

⁹ Geoffrey Baym, “*The Daily Show*: Discursive Integration and the Reinvention of Political Journalism,” *Political Communication*, 22.3 (2006), p. 259

¹⁰ Jeffrey P. Jones, “Fox News and the Performance of Ideology”, *Cinema Journal*, 51.4 (2012), p. 180

Primary Sources

The Daily Show is a New York-based, half-hour satirical show on the cable television network Comedy Central and is hosted by comedian Jon Stewart. It airs Monday through Thursday at 11 P.M. The show was originally hosted by Craig Kilborn and was from the start a spoof on nightly news broadcasts. Stewart took over hosting after Kilborn left at the end of 1998, and made the format a much more political one. The changes Stewart and his team made to the program in taking it in a political direction fused with the post-9/11 American media and political climate made the show the award-winning success it is known as today. The shows generally consist of three segments, where the first two are skewed views on issues or stories that are in the current news cycles, and the third is an interview with the guest of the evening. Throughout the program, Stewart remains at his news desk while recurring correspondents are sent out to cover the stories where they are happening, although most of these are filmed with the aid of a green screen in the studio.

The Colbert Report is also a New York-based half-hour satirical show on Comedy Central, airing right after *The Daily Show*. *The Colbert Report* is a spin-off of *The Daily Show*. Host Stephen Colbert was a correspondent on the show from 1997 to 2005, when he left to host his own show. Unlike Stewart, Colbert is in character during his shows. Colbert bases his on-air persona of the same name on conservative political pundits from several shows airing mainly on Fox News, naming his number one hero as “Papa Bear” Bill O’Reilly of *The O’Reilly Factor*. Colbert’s persona takes being a right-wing conservative to an extreme, but not so extreme that it is not recognizable. For instance, Colbert does not deal with facts, he *feels* the truth. In his premiere show he invented a word, “truthiness”, which he defined as “truth that wouldn't stand to be held back by facts.”¹¹ He has later used this word to define the way politicians and pundits back up their own views, most of whom have been conservatives. Like the format of *The Daily Show*, *The Colbert Report* usually consist of three segments with a guest interview as the final one, but unlike *The Daily Show*, *The Colbert Report* has more recurring segments such as “The Word”, where he reasons with a current theme in politics or news, but is accompanied by words on the side of his screen that is for the audience only, and that counter some of his arguments, or at least satirize the topic he discusses; “The Threatdown”, where he tells America what the top 3-5 threats are at the moment; and “Better Know a District”, where he interviews members of Congress about the

¹¹ *The Colbert Report*, episode dated October 17, 2005

district they represent. Unlike Jon Stewart, Stephen Colbert plays a character on his show. Since his character shares a name with the man behind it, the lines between the actor and the persona are sometimes blurry for people unfamiliar with the show, which is something *The Colbert Report* often takes advantage of in creating somewhat awkward situations for comical effect. Colbert has also published several books, all written as an extension of the television show, including *I Am America (And So Can You)* (2007), *America Again: Re-becoming the Greatness We Never Weren't* (2012) and the children's book *I Am a Pole (And So Can You)* (2012) about an American flag pole.

The Daily Show has risen in popularity since Stewart took over, with particular growth after the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001. The show has won 8 Primetime Emmy Awards for Outstanding Writing for a Variety, Music or Comedy Program between 2001 and 2012, and they have won the Primetime Emmy Award for Outstanding Variety, Music or Comedy Program every year between 2003 and 2012, making their Emmy wins 18 in total. Among other awards won are special recognition from the GLAAD Awards (2005) and a Peabody Award for their coverage of their episode "Indecision 2004" covering that year's election night.¹² *The Colbert Report* won the Primetime Emmy Award for Outstanding Writing for a Variety, Music or Comedy Program in 2008, 2010, and 2013, and won its first Primetime Emmy Award for Outstanding Variety, Music or Comedy Program in 2013, breaking the streak of *The Daily Show*. *The Colbert Report* also won a Peabody Award in 2008, and Stephen Colbert won a Satellite Award in 2007 for Best Actor in a Series, Comedy or Musical.¹³ In 2009, a short time after Walter Cronkite had passed away, Time Magazine conducted an online poll asking who was now America's Most Trusted Newscaster, a poll Jon Stewart won by 44% in front of NBC News' Brian Williams with 29%. The top four placing in the poll made up 99% of the vote, no 24-hour news channel anchors were among them, although Williams is sometimes featured on MSNBC.¹⁴

Both shows' influences reach beyond that of entertaining the masses. This is perhaps best illustrated by the time Stephen Colbert was asked to testify at a House Judiciary subcommittee hearing in September of 2010. He testified sitting next to the president of the labor union United Farm Workers (UFW), and the reason he was called in was a segment produced for his show earlier that year where he took on a challenge from UFW called "Take

¹² The Internet Movie Data Base. "The Daily Show with Jon Stewart: Awards." *IMDb.com*.

¹³ The Internet Movie Data Base. "The Colbert Report: Awards." *IMDb.com*.

¹⁴ Linkins, Jason. "Online Poll: Jon Stewart is America's Most Trusted Newsmen." *HuffingtonPost.com*

Our Jobs” where Colbert spent a day in the life of a migrant farm worker. What made the appearance special was that Colbert came in character as he always does, but found it difficult to stay in character throughout. Lucy Madison of CBS News pointed out a specific moment where Colbert seemed to step out of character when saying: “I like talking about people who don't have any power. It seems like some of the least powerful people in the United States are migrant workers who come and do our work, but don't have any rights as a result. And yet we still invite them to come here and at the same time ask them to leave. And that's an interesting contradiction to me.”¹⁵ Although many politicians saw Colbert’s testimony as a mockery, the event marked a turning-point for *The Colbert Report* as it had been thrown into the “real” political debate, even if other characters who have testified before Congress have included the puppet Elmo from *Sesame Street*.¹⁶

In addition to the two satirical shows, the primary sources include selected appearances by Jon Stewart on Fox News’ *The O’Reilly Factor* with Bill O’Reilly and *Fox News Sunday* with Chris Wallace. Fox News is a 24-hours news channel owned by media-mogul Rupert Murdoch and run by Roger Ailes. It first launched in October of 1996 and has since grown to become the most-viewed news channel in America. Some of their more prominent shows, with high viewership in their respective time slots, are often referenced or mocked through *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report*. One of the reasons for this mockery is that Fox News is often viewed as having a conservative bias, and Fox’ opinionated hosts often accuse the rest of the media to be on the opposite side. That Fox News is “offering a conservative ideological voice under the heading of ‘news’” is really an established fact at this point, proven by scholars, media watch-dogs, and the network’s audience¹⁷. Fox News is often the target of Jon Stewart’s media criticism, and Stephen Colbert’s persona is inspired by some Fox News employees.

¹⁵ Lucy Madison. ”Stephen Colbert Testifies Before Congress on ’Vast Experience’ as a Migrant Laborer”, *CBSNews.com*.

¹⁶ Marcus, Ruth. “Stephen Colbert becomes another circus of Congress's making.” *WashingtonPost.com*.

¹⁷ Jeffrey P. Jones, “Fox News and the Performance of Ideology”, p. 179

Historiography

Professor Neil Postman, former chairman of the Department of Culture and Communication at New York University, wrote in *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business* that television had changed the game of public and political discourse. One example he uses is Richard M. Nixon, who believed he had lost the 1960 election due to the fact that his debates were televised and that he had been “sabotaged by makeup men”.¹⁸ Years later, when Senator Edward Kennedy was considering a run for the Presidency, Nixon advised him to lose 20 pounds. With television, image became increasingly important to political candidates as well as other media personalities, a reality that concerned Postman as early as the 1980s.¹⁹ He wrote the book in 1984, the year George Orwell had written about many years prior in *Nineteen Eighty-four*, and Postman concluded that the Orwellian vision was not what the world had come to, but that he rather found himself in a world prophesized by Aldous Huxley in *Brave New World* from 1931. In Orwell’s vision the public would be oppressed, constantly watched and never truly informed by “Big Brother”, whereas in the Huxleyan version of the future, the public would be overly informed, and the truth “would be drowned in a sea of irrelevance.”²⁰ Postman saw the media reality of the 1980s as a Huxleyan age, where culture had become “a burlesque”.²¹ Postman argues that the form of media communication available to a population has great effect on the culture and intellect of said population, and that the shift he sees in American media communication is not a good development for the American population.²² He sees what he calls “the decline of the Age of Typography and the ascendancy of the Age of Television”²³ which is taking the course of cultural, social and political life toward entertainment rather than information.

Although Postman writes of his concern with the development, he is clear on the point that the fact that people watch television is not the problem, the problem is rather *how* they watch it. And the only solution to the problem would be to educate people on how to watch and to understand the “dangers” of the medium they choose to adhere to. One suggested answer to the problem, according to Postman, could be to make television programs about how to watch television programs, a meta-television program if you will, but he problematized this solution by pointing out that the hosts of these programs would themselves

¹⁸ Neil Postman. *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business*, p. 4

¹⁹ Postman. *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business*, p. 7

²⁰ Postman. *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business*, p. xix

²¹ Postman. *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business*, p. 155

²² Postman. *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business*, p. 9

²³ Postman. *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business*, p. 8

become a part of the problem.²⁴ The description he gives of these meta-television programs can have some resemblance to *The Daily Show*, particularly in the context of its criticism of how the news media operates today.

In reading more recent scholars' take on the state of the American news media, we can see that the development discussed by Postman has continued and the media has experienced another huge shift. Some sources discuss how the political climate after September 11th, 2001 changed the way the media handled covering the government. Assistant Professor of Performance Studies at Bryant University, Amber Day, points to this shift as a mixture between the limited transparency of George W. Bush's administration and the care the mainstream media took to not "appear adversarial" in the post-9/11 years. This led to policies and political rhetoric going unchallenged by the media, and Day points to the media's failings as a watchdog of the government in the build-up to the war in Iraq as an example.²⁵ Professor of Philosophy, Jason Zinser voices that the news media has failed to live up to their expected standard in the last decade or two, which has given way to other forms of media to enter the playing field.²⁶ While journalism has become more and more like entertainment, some parts of the entertainment business has been creeping in the other direction in response, becoming more like journalism. Geoffrey Baym echoes this when arguing that *The Daily Show* places itself in between journalism and entertainment with having the look and feel of a nightly news show at the same time as being an entertainment program.²⁷ One of the arguments he uses for why the show leans toward being a news show, or political show, is that the vast majority of his guests for the interview segment are politicians, journalists, and authors, rather than Hollywood celebrities, like most other shows would have, although there are exceptions.²⁸

Baym adds that some of the blame for the deterioration of real news should be given to journalistic conventions. "Professional journalists are trained to ignore long, rambling verbal presentations; quotes with poor grammar or misstatements; and sound bites with long pauses or any significant absence of verbal content."²⁹ In the case of covering Bush's presidency, this created a goldmine for satirists who could use full, unedited segments of speeches by the President, where the regular news media edited the speech down to its key points. Baym's example of this is a speech by Bush made about former CIA Director George Tenet. In the

²⁴ Postman. *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business*, p. 160-162

²⁵ Amber Day. *Satire + Dissent: Interventions in Contemporary Political Debate*, p. 4-5

²⁶ Zinser. *The Daily Show and Philosophy*, p. 42

²⁷ Baym, "The Daily Show: Discursive Integration and the Reinvention of Political Journalism," p. 262

²⁸ Baym, "The Daily Show: Discursive Integration and the Reinvention of Political Journalism," p. 271

²⁹ Baym, "The Daily Show: Discursive Integration and the Reinvention of Political Journalism," p. 264

regular news, the speech was edited down to just a few seconds of statement, and Stewart's version of the speech included all the pauses and the misstatements. In between the pauses, Stewart was able to insert his tries of finishing Bush's sentences, for comedic effect, at the same time as exposing the president as one with perhaps a lack of focus and sincerity.³⁰ For the entertainment shows, this shift has not caused any problems, but for the programs who are supposed to act in a journalistic manner, the problem still lies within the shift toward the importance of image and entertainment value. We are still amusing ourselves to death, as Postman put it. Scholars argue that this has largely to do with money, which is not hard to imagine.

Political satire has had a bit of a renaissance, and Rachael Sotos, Adjunct Professor of Humanities at the New School for General Studies, has dubbed political satire, or more specifically *The Daily Show*, the fifth estate.³¹ *The Daily Show* is there to make sure the media does their job, or, when necessary, do their job for them. While the post-9/11 era has been "bad" for trustworthy news sources, it has been equally "good" for political satire. American political satire has been around since the early days of the nation, and Sotos calls it "the most important political literature" during the time around and during the Revolutionary War.³² She argues that political satire today has taken on the role of a fifth branch of government, because the fourth (the media) has failed. She moreover credits *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* and *The Colbert Report* with carrying out this role, citing research that has indicated that viewers of *The Daily Show* in particular tend to be better informed than viewers of regular news shows.³³ Amber Day connects the rise of satire and the audiences' pull toward the ironic with the "manufactured quality" of current political discourse. As she argues, almost everything we see and hear from politicians in this day and age is staged and scripted, and the public is more or less aware of this, and so the "satirical perspective," that openly admits to being scripted, seems "refreshingly authentic" to many viewers.³⁴ Associate Professor of Communication, Jeffrey P. Jones, agrees and states that popular culture has become a more open arena for political discourse in recent years.³⁵ This is an opinion echoed among several sources, many

³⁰ Baym, "The Daily Show: Discursive Integration and the Reinvention of Political Journalism," p. 265

³¹ Day. *Satire + Dissent*, p. 1,

Rachael Sotos. "The Fake News as the Fifth Estate", *The Daily Show and Philosophy*, p. 28-40

³² Sotos. *The Daily Show and Philosophy*, p. 30

³³ Sotos. *The Daily Show and Philosophy*, p. 34

³⁴ Day. *Satire + Dissent*, p. 3

³⁵ Jeffrey P. Jones. *Entertaining Politics*, p. 5

of which point to 2004 as a year of great significance, especially in terms of the increasing power and influence of *The Daily Show*, and its host Jon Stewart.

2004 was a presidential election year and the United States was fighting two separate wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. In addition, the political climate was marked heavily by the growing presidential power of George W. Bush and the earlier stated lack of transparency in his administration. What made that year significant for Jon Stewart, in many scholars' view, were two separate events. One was findings pertaining to the election itself where the National Annenberg Election concluded that Stewart's viewers were far more informed about the candidates than those who did not watch any late-night television.³⁶ The other event was the now infamous appearance by Jon Stewart on CNN's political talk show *Crossfire*. The show was based on having one so-called liberal and one so-called conservative co-host and guest debate issues of the day, in an attempt to have a balanced conversation offering all view-points. On October 15th, 2004, Stewart was the guest of hosts Paul Begala (liberal) and Tucker Carlson (conservative) and Stewart had one plea: "Stop hurting America."³⁷ What makes this appearance significant in the rising power of political satire was that Stewart here acted as what Rachael Sotos called the fifth estate (or branch), while refusing to play "the entertainer", and told the media figures face-to-face that they were not doing their job.³⁸ According to Stewart, this program was not doing what it claimed to do; creating a balanced conversation reaching across the aisle, but what they were was playing up stereotypes and talking points.³⁹ Some credited Stewart with *Crossfire*'s subsequent cancellation. Whether he caused that or not, his appearance marked an important point in the recent history of journalism and satire.

In addition to being praised by scholars for his contribution to the American political arena, Stewart and his television show has been presented with awards for both entertainment and journalism, including a Television Critics Association Award for Outstanding Achievement in News and Information.⁴⁰ The latter nails down a point many scholars have made; that this self-proclaimed "fake news" show is not really that "fake" at all. Amber Day

³⁶ Amber Day. "And Now... the News? Mimesis and the Real in *The Daily Show*", *Satire TV*, p. 100, Zinser. *The Daily Show and Philosophy*, p. 46

³⁷ Gerald J. Erion. "Amusing Ourselves to Death with Television News: Jon Stewart, Neil Postman, and the Huxleyan Warning", *The Daily Show and Philosophy*, p. 5

³⁸ Joanne Morreale. "Jon Stewart and The Daily Show: I Thought You Were Going to Be Funny!", *Satire TV*, p. 104-5

³⁹ *Crossfire*, episode dated October 15, 2004.

⁴⁰ Jonathan Gray, Jeffrey P. Jones, and Ethan Thompson. "The State of Satire, the Satire of State", *Satire TV*, p. 4-5

calls the show mimetic, and at times even real, and Day is not alone in denouncing the label of “fake news.” The show does not make up news stories, or impersonate figures, what *The Daily Show* does is deconstruct the news and political debates, with the result of actually informing as well as entertaining. Michael Gettings, Associate Professor of Philosophy at Hollins University, argues that where Stewart sometimes inserts false information, it is generally cued or so outrageous that the audience can draw the line between what the real part of the segment is. Gettings goes on to call it “fake news, real messages.”⁴¹

A major argument made by most scholars is the idea of *The Daily Show*, and its spin-off show *The Colbert Report*, as social and political criticism. Both shows use comedy to uncover absurdity in contemporary American democracy.⁴² Philosophy Professor Liam P. Dempsey makes light of the ability the shows have to demonstrate what he calls “misuses of reason in political life”.⁴³ In this way the shows can both help inform the public about such misuses and help inspire and educate the audience in critical thinking⁴⁴, which is why another Professor of Philosophy, Terrance MacMullan, calls Jon Stewart a “new public intellectual”⁴⁵ and that he is perhaps effective as a public intellectual when he finds himself in dialogue with figures on the opposite side of the political aisle.⁴⁶ Steven Michels and Michael Ventimiglia of Sacred Heart University compare Stewart to Greek philosopher Socrates, as both characters instigate critical thought in their respective societies.⁴⁷ A study on the impact of *The Daily Show* has proved that Stewart’s audience are generally less trusting of the political system and government, and that they tend to have a negative view of the media. Although this can be seen as a negative impact, Michels and Ventimiglia argue that an increase in critical thought is a positive development.⁴⁸

Besides being social and political critics, the shows are also critical of the media itself. James Trier of the University of North Carolina stated in 2008 that *The Daily Show* was “the best critical media literacy program on television,” and argued that every teacher of media

⁴¹ Day. *Satire TV*, p. 85, Gettings. *The Daily Show and Philosophy*, p. 26-27

⁴² Steven Michels and Michael Ventimiglia. “Can *The Daily Show* save Democracy?”, *The Daily Show and Philosophy*, p. 81

⁴³ Liam P. Dempsey. “*The Daily Show*’s Exposé of Political Rhetoric”, *The Daily Show and Philosophy*, p. 121

⁴⁴ Roben Torosyan. “Public Discourse and the Stewart Model of Critical Thinking”, *The Daily Show and Philosophy*, p. 107

⁴⁵ Terrance MacMullan. “Jon Stewart and the New Public Intellectual”, *The Daily Show and Philosophy*, p. 57

⁴⁶ MacMullan. *The Daily Show and Philosophy*, p. 67

⁴⁷ Michels and Ventimiglia. *The Daily Show and Philosophy*, p. 82

⁴⁸ Michels and Ventimiglia. *The Daily Show and Philosophy*, p. 89-90

literacy should watch the show.⁴⁹ Baym, one of Trier's sources for that statement, argues that The Daily Show often discuss how the media is failing to do its job, with one issue being the "real" news' "interest in the trivial at the expense of the consequential." Baym cites Stewart's direct approach of stating the failings of the media as fact, as well as the satirical news reports, where "correspondents" file a report that sometimes resemble an exaggeration of reality's reporting, as an example of the media criticism found on *The Daily Show*.⁵⁰

One last point that is often made about the popularity and the impact of political satire is that the likes of Stewart and Colbert are more free than many journalists to express what they really mean. As comedians they are not bound by the same codes as journalists and politicians are, and are in some ways free to use profane and blunt language,⁵¹ although they do have to follow the rules of the Comedy Central sensors. This is also attributed to other comedians by such scholars as Jeffrey P. Jones, who exemplifies the bluntness comedians are allowed to use with the 2008 treatment and ridicule given to Sarah Palin by comedy show *Saturday Night Live* and an interview on talk show *The View* where guests John McCain and his wife Cindy were asked directly about some campaign ads that included lies about McCain's opponent Barack Obama in the 2008 election. This was not expected on such a "soft-edged" show and Cindy McCain later complained: "They picked our bones clean."⁵²

Stephen Colbert is often mentioned, sometimes praised, sometimes criticized, for both acting as a social critic and for saying what no one else dare to say, famously so for his appearance in 2006 at the annual White House Correspondents Association Dinner. Colbert appeared in his *Colbert Report* persona thanking President George W. Bush for "trusting his gut over facts found in books" and praising the press corps for letting the President do his job undisturbed.⁵³ The reactions after the speech were many, and varied in opinion, but the event makes for a great point for discussion on who are the better watchdog; the real news media, or the "fake", satirical news shows.'

⁴⁹ James Trier. "The Daily Show with Jon Stewart: part 1." *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy* 51.5 (2008), p. 424.

⁵⁰ Baym, "The Daily Show: Discursive Integration and the Reinvention of Political Journalism," p. 268-9

⁵¹ Jonathan Gray. "Throwing Out the Welcome Mat: Public Figures as Guests and Victims in TV Satire", *Satire TV*, p. 154

⁵² Jones. *Entertaining Politics*, p. 3

⁵³ Sotos. *The Daily Show and Philosophy*, p. 35,

Michels and Ventimiglia. *The Daily Show and Philosophy*, p. 86,
Gray, Jones, and Thompson. *Satire TV*, p. 3-5

Theoretical framework

This thesis is not analyzed through conventional theories, but rather a framework of scholarly writings about what satire has been through history and what it is and is supposed to be now, all in the context of a literary and theater genre. It will also discuss how Jon Stewart and *The Daily Show* fits in as a social commentator like Greek philosopher Socrates did in his time. This is meant to explain how satire has evolved and how these two shows in present time still use conventional satirical methods.

Satire is a comedic literary genre that has been around for a long time as a way of criticizing those in power by making fun of their stupidity or other shortcomings. Satire is therefore most often linked to politics, society, and the public, as stated by author and literary scholar Jean Weisgerber in "Satire and Irony as Means of Communication" from 1973. A satirist is "deeply committed" and speaks directly to the people about what is wrong with their society, hopefully convincing a great number of them that change is in order.⁵⁴ A common tool in satire is to use a fictitious character, or a persona, to hide behind when unveiling the perhaps controversial wrongdoings of those being criticized or ridiculed. Weisgerber notes that a satirist "never hurls himself into the fray," but rather stays "one step removed from the public," keeping a comfortable distance while implementing his or her view upon others.⁵⁵ Satire has always demanded a level intellectual work from its audience. One of the most important tools for satirists is to simply tell the truth, which can be powerful when for instance discrediting political spin, but sometimes the more comic effect will come from saying the exact opposite of what the truth is, or at least the satirists opinion, and that is where the audience must be able to detect this insincerity and understand what is really being said.⁵⁶ It is important for the success of a satirist to not alienate the public, and the success rate will be linked to how his or her opinions and values match those of the audiences.⁵⁷ Weisgerber argues that satire is rarely solution oriented, and a satirist rarely tells the audience how to solve the problems that has been brought to light by his or her work. Weisgerber asks his readers if art can influence society and if satire can "change the course of history."⁵⁸

⁵⁴ Jean Weisgerber. "Satire and Irony as Means of Communication." *Comparative Literature Studies*. 10. 2 (1973), p. 157, 160

⁵⁵ Weisgerber. "Satire and Irony as Means of Communication," p. 162

⁵⁶ Weisgerber. "Satire and Irony as Means of Communication," p. 163

⁵⁷ Weisgerber. "Satire and Irony as Means of Communication," p. 161

⁵⁸ Weisgerber. "Satire and Irony as Means of Communication," p. 160

Satire has been around for a very long time, and can be traced back to places and times like ancient Greece, Medieval and Renaissance Europe, and the early days of American literature, with at least Jon Stewart citing author Mark Twain as an inspiration and someone he feels more comfortable being compared to than journalists, like he often is.⁵⁹ In this context, the whole history of the genre must be acknowledged, as both TV shows borrow methods from a variety of satirical sources through history. Since both shows rely on performance, it is perhaps more relevant to look at satire found in theater history. *The Daily Show* has quite a lot in common with the early dramas that came out of Greece, both comedies and tragedies. The tragedies would often take on a role of critiquing wars and tyranny in Greek society, with Euripides (480-406 B.C.) as one of the more famous writers of the era. Where some playwrights would stick with writing the ideal rather than what was real, Euripides had a “tendency to expose the truth relentlessly, no matter how awful” it could be.⁶⁰ Some comedies did the same thing, but used satire to get the point across. The Peloponnesian War was a common theme in Greek plays of the 400s B.C.⁶¹ Euripides wrote his tragedies with that backdrop, and Aristophanes (446-386 B.C.) used it as a plot point in his comedy *Lysistrata*, where one woman organizes a sex boycott to end the war. This play satirizes both the war itself as well as men’s weakness when it comes to sex. This shows that the tendency for satirists to mix social or political criticism with an “easy laugh” has deep-seeded roots. One common method used in comedies was to have a chorus speak for the public as an outsider during performances, they were a part of the script and the performance themselves, but the chorus’ lines were often not acknowledged by the other players on the stage. This is a method used by *The Colbert Report*’s recurring segment “The Word,” where Colbert speaks about an issue and comments he supposedly cannot see are posted on a split screen graphic.

Stephen Colbert’s persona can be compared with characters from the 16th and 17th century Italian theater genre called *Commedia dell’Arte*, where masked men would play caricaturized figures of Italian society at the time.⁶² One such character, Pulcinella, was later the inspiration for a puppet named Mr. Punch in British puppetry, which in turn inspired the British satirical magazine *Punch*. The most famous character from *Commedia dell’Arte*, however, is Arlecchino, better known in English as Harlequin. *Commedia dell’Arte* was a product of its time, when southern Europe was “ravaged by war, plundering, aggression,

⁵⁹ *Fox News Sunday*, episode dated June 19, 2011.

⁶⁰ Erika Fischer-Lichte, *History of European Drama and Theatre*, p. 26-27

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

⁶² Robert Henke, *Performance and Literature in the Commedia dell’Arte*, pp. 12-18, 31.

famines and the plague,” in other words, a time where political satire was needed to both lift spirits and criticize the establishment. This is comparable to the time where Stewart and Colbert had a rise to fame with their political satire, when the US government got the country engaged in two wars in the Middle East, where at least one was seen as unnecessary by a large portion of the country. Like the actors in *Commedia dell’Arte*, Colbert puts on a mask, although his is metaphorical, to portray a character in society. And like the theater genre, Colbert thrives on improvisation, particularly in his interview segments, where few comments are scripted.⁶³ These forms of theater have evolved over time and the most significant difference from then to now, is the arena in which they can perform their comedy. Satire has moved from the town square or the amphitheater to a mass distribution through television in the modern world. And although many methods remain the same, satire has changed and moved into a post-modern sphere.

In “Satirical Fake News and/as American Political Discourse,” literature scholar Dr. Ian Reilly names these two TV shows as “a ubiquitous form of popular political discourse,”⁶⁴ placing this particular form of satire in the postmodern sphere. Postmodern satire is, according to Lisa Colletta, more critical of the masses themselves than satire originally was, and postmodern satire makes its audience well aware of their own inclusion in the critique and/or ridicule.⁶⁵ This is possibly because the modern masses are more likely involved in bringing the governing body to power, and with television and the Internet the gap between the satirist and his or her audience is decreasing. Colletta also argues that in the postmodern world, the line between what is real and what is not is blurred, both on the satirical side and the political side, indicating that postmodern politics is more often than not “staged”, and that all political parties seem equally fake.⁶⁶ In this postmodern world, fake news and real news may not be so different. Although both shows use these satirical tools to get their points across, Colbert, with his on-screen persona, follows it more clearly, whereas Stewart has a few methods of his own that stretch a little further than satire and delve into public discourse and philosophy.

Professor Judith Barad argues that Jon Stewart is highly comparable to famed Greek philosopher Socrates, both in how they are/were viewed by their contemporaries and in their

⁶³ Henke, *Performance and Literature in the Commedia dell’Arte*, p. 12

⁶⁴ Ian Reilly. “Satirical Fake News and/as American Political Discourse.” *The Journal of American Culture*. 35.3 (2012), p. 258

⁶⁵ Lisa Colletta. “Political Satire and Postmodern Irony in the Age of Stephen Colbert and Jon Stewart.”

⁶⁶ Lisa Colletta. “Political Satire and Postmodern Irony in the Age of Stephen Colbert and Jon Stewart.”

passion and method. While Socrates was trying to fight the influences of the "sophists," so-called experts of the day who proclaimed that those taught by them would rise to fame and fortune, Stewart is fighting the sophists of our time, political pundits in the media.⁶⁷ This argument also ties into Terrence McMullan's idea of Jon Stewart as a New Public Intellectual.⁶⁸ According to Barad, the sophists' main objective was to teach their students the art of persuasion, regardless of *what* they were trying to persuade others of. Sophists taught how to argue either side of a case equally well, and in doing so they risked teaching students how to persuade others to go along with the weaker argument. The question of morality was, and is, never something considered by sophists, what matters is whether what is argued will increase their power or further their career.⁶⁹ Barad points out that this is the same method used in the news media today. Both political sides are arguing their own views convincingly enough to where their audiences can easily lose grasp of what is actually true or false, and when the viewers only follow the pundits they themselves already agree with, they make themselves susceptible to ignorance, which in turn "often gets in the way of pursuing the truth," meaning that every individual may only know their own version of the truth. This phenomenon, for instance, is what made it necessary for Stephen Colbert of *The Colbert Report* to make up the word "truthiness," to better describe individual versions of what *feels* true.

The comparison created by Barad between Socrates and Stewart and his team is quite convincing when considering the methods used in trying to pry the truth from these sophists. The Socratic Method, named for Socrates himself, is a method of asking the *right* questions to draw out the truth from the person being questioned.⁷⁰ Socrates would take on some of the experts of his time and let them lecture him about what they knew, particularly in topics of politics or religion. He added what is called Socratic Irony to it, which means he pretended to know less than he actually did⁷¹, before finding loose ends in the experts' argument that needed tying up, and trapping them in a web of contradictions or nonsense. Most of these experts had only a shallow understanding of their topic, which could not withstand deeper questions. With this method, Socrates exposed the sophists for what they were, self-proclaimed experts with a lack of expertise, and he encouraged his followers to question

⁶⁷ Judith Barad. "Stewart and Socrates: Speaking truth to Power", *The Daily Show and Philosophy*, p. 70

⁶⁸ Terrance MacMullan. "Jon Stewart and the New Public Intellectual", *The Daily Show and Philosophy*, p. 57-67

⁶⁹ Barad. *The Daily Show and Philosophy*, p. 71

⁷⁰ Barad. *The Daily Show and Philosophy*, p. 74

⁷¹ Barad. *The Daily Show and Philosophy*, p. 77

customs generally accepted in their society. Barad finds this method to fit perfectly with what Jon Stewart and the correspondents on *The Daily Show* do in their interviews with opinionated people who have found their own version of the truth, be they members of Congress, political pundits or journalists. The job of those using the Socratic Method becomes to expose the ignorance of those who falsely act as wise men or women. *The Daily Show* does this by using the method itself, as well as by calling their correspondents an expert, with the title Senior Correspondent, in whatever they are reporting on, illustrating that on television *anybody* can be called an expert.⁷²

Barad argues that Socrates and Stewart are both active players in the discussions, and that they never talk down to their opponent. They are not elitist, and often admit to being quite ignorant about a topic. The two also compare in their listening skills and their attempts to see the other side of the story. One important aspect in why they are different from sophists and pundits is that Socrates and Stewart do not play a discussion like a game they can win. When the goal is to win a discussion it is easy to default into anger and raised voices, which ultimately leads to a shouting match instead of a calm and collected debate.⁷³ The self-inflicted ignorance that gets in the way of the public's pursuit of truth is what Socrates and Stewart, as public intellectuals, have to fight against. They are, in their respective times, aware that democracy fails if the people in it are not well-informed about their societal issues and are capable of critical thinking, and by reaching out to their followers and teaching them how to ask critical questions, they can help keep their democracies effective.⁷⁴

Structure

The following chapters will analyze *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report* as news sources and as media critique. Chapter 2 is about the coverage of the 2012 election on *The Daily Show*, with particular emphasis on the Republican and the Democratic national conventions and the presidential debates held in the few weeks before Election Day. These two events captured a lot of the essence in what were issues for both campaigns, and are sufficient in showing how the show works as a so-called “fake news” program. The analysis here will reflect upon whether *The Daily Show* is acting as the fifth estate in the form of a

⁷² Barad. *The Daily Show and Philosophy*, p. 73

⁷³ Barad. *The Daily Show and Philosophy*, p. 73, 75

⁷⁴ Barad. *The Daily Show and Philosophy*, p. 76

news source, and if so, how they are doing it through the use of satire and/or the Socratic Method. The analysis will involve both Jon Stewart and his correspondents. Chapter 3 will look at the coverage of the election on *The Colbert Report* and determine how the show adds to the fifth estate term with its own methods of using the satirical persona Stephen Colbert. This chapter also touches upon Stephen Colbert as a media critic, and how he critiques directly and indirectly by basing his persona on media personalities. Chapter 4 will discuss *The Daily Show*, and particularly Jon Stewart, as a critic of the media, both before and during the election. This will be discussed through examples from *The Daily Show* itself, and will include the coverage of Election Night 2012 by Stewart, his correspondents, and, to an extent, Colbert. It will also include comments of media criticism Stewart made in a debate he had with Fox News' Bill O'Reilly in 2012. Chapter 4 will also discuss examples from instances where Stewart has appeared on news opinion shows and shared his own opinions about them. Chapter 5 will conclude the research.

Chapter 2

Satire as News – *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*

The Daily Show has the look of a regular news show. Its introduction has news-like music playing with an announcer giving the date of the day and saying "from Comedy Central's World News Headquarters in New York this is *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*." The introduction is accompanied by a spinning globe and an overview shot of host/anchor Jon Stewart sitting at his desk wearing a nice suit, like any real news anchor would. At first the music sounds like a typical news program as well, but it turns into a more entertainment-like style when the camera sweeps the studio and finds the desk and the host. With the exception of this music and the fact that the program airs on Comedy Central, the show looks deceptively like a professional news program, and as soon as you have been welcomed to the show Stewart starts talking about news stories. Geoffrey Baym argues that this illustrates how the show mixes two "levels of discourse" and meet somewhere in between nightly news and entertainment talk show.⁷⁵ In some shows, Stewart will reveal that this is, in fact, not a real news show early on, but an unfamiliar viewer could be fooled into thinking they are watching the news for a few minutes.

Stewart's form of political satire takes on the look of what it mocks, in his case a news show. But in the process of mocking news shows, the show becomes a news show itself, and sometimes it can even become more than a news show. Under the disguise of comedy, *The*

⁷⁵ Baym, "The Daily Show: Discursive Integration and the Reinvention of Political Journalism," p. 262

Daily Show can tell it like it is and be a straight-shooter, perhaps saying what many people are thinking, without worrying about being objective, like news shows are supposed to strive to be. Some real news anchors even agree that the show has its moment of serious reporting, like *NBC Nightly News*' Brian Williams who once said in an interview with National public radio that "a lot of the work that Jon and his staff do is serious. They hold people to account, for errors and sloppiness."⁷⁶ Professor of journalism, Hub Brown, admitted that he became a fan of the show during the early stages of the Iraq War, when in his mind "most of the mainstream media were swallowing the [Bush] administration's spin rather than challenging it," but *The Daily Show* "had no qualms about second-guessing the nation's leaders."⁷⁷ During the Bush years, many, particularly young people, turned to the show for their news updates and to see politicians exposed for who they were. These years were an easy time to make fun of, because of the sometimes comical character of President Bush and the lack of transparency in his administration. It is now time to see if the job *The Daily Show* did then is still needed and being done. The following will analyze how *The Daily Show* covered the major party conventions and the presidential and vice-presidential debates during the run-up to the 2012 Election.

When covering the Republican National Convention in Tampa in August 2012, we got a glimpse of the straight-shooting in the special opening of the shows of that week. The new opening had the regular announcer talking over images of Mitt Romney and the GOP logo in a dramatic voice: "A party too patriotic for facts, a candidate too successful for taxes, a city too humid to breathe. From Tampa, Florida, this is the Republican National Convention: The Road to Jeb Bush 2016."⁷⁸ The first two statements in that opening left little doubt as to where the show stood, and said very bluntly what at least opponents of the Republican Party were thinking at the time. The renaming of the show for the occasion was clearly stating that they had little faith in a successful election for Romney, when indicating that the party was already looking ahead to the next presidential election.

Stewart's guest on the show on August 28 was Senator Marco Rubio (R-FL) who had been on the short-list for becoming Romney's running mate. Stewart told Rubio that he dodged a bullet when Romney went with Paul Ryan, since it would be awkward for him if Romney won this election and Rubio had to run against him four years later, which was a stab

⁷⁶ Howard Kurtz. "Jon Stewart, Mocking Both Sides," *WashingtonPost.com*

⁷⁷ Rachel Smolkin, "What the Mainstream Media Can Learn From Jon Stewart," *American Journalism Review*, June/July (2007).

⁷⁸ *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*, episodes dated August 28-31, 2012.

at Romney's lack of support from his own party.⁷⁹ The fact that Senator Rubio agreed to be a guest on the show would help indicate that *The Daily Show* holds some significance in the political television circles, particularly since Rubio probably knew he would have to endure some jokes made to his face about his party and the candidate. After a few jokes about Romney, the conversation turned a little more serious, with Stewart and Rubio having a conversation about economic policies and the difference between the Republican way and the Democratic way, with emphasis on the private versus public sector solutions. Although it was clear that Stewart did not agree with Rubio's view, he allowed him to speak his mind and asked a few follow up questions, until Stewart ended it with a joke about tax cuts⁸⁰, indicating that *The Daily Show* can get into real issues, but not for too long at a time.

Most of the coverage of The Republican National Convention was executed in a straight-shooting fashion, where Stewart and his correspondents pointed out double-standards or self-contradictions at a high pace. In many instances, the comedy really only appeared through what was said by the convention-goers when compared to other things said by the same politicians or party members. This made the show, at times, almost look like a news show with accidental comedy, and not the other way around. This effect was most apparent in the segments handled by Stewart behind his desk, pointing out factual errors in speeches and badly created political spin from pundits and politicians. The show's convention coverage stretched out over four days, which is an entire *Daily Show* week.

The coverage from the first day of the convention on *The Daily Show* focused on some of the speeches and recurring themes throughout the evening, as well as what they found to be a misuse of Obama's aforementioned quote. Among the speakers was Mitt's wife Ann Romney, and she was portrayed by Stewart as an adorable woman unsuccessfully trying to get everyone to love her husband, saying that unless Mitt could take every voter to a dance, no one would be charmed by him in the same way she had been when they met. Another speaker, who did not focus on the greatness of Romney but rather on how wrong Obama was, was Republican National Committee Chairman Reince Priebus who said: "Barack Obama has never run a company, he hasn't even run a garage sale or seen the inside of a lemonade stand,"⁸¹ which tied in as an antithesis of the theme of being a self-made man who built his own success. The first day of convention events had been given the theme "We Built That,"

⁷⁹ *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*, episode dated August 28, 2012.

⁸⁰ *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*, episode dated August 28, 2012.

⁸¹ *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*, episode dated August 29, 2012.

which was a reference to the speech made by Obama earlier in the campaign where the sentence “you didn’t build that” created uproar among the media and Republicans. Stewart’s analysis of that was that “Republicans have shitty lives too,” indicating that members of the Republican Party have lived the American Dream from humble beginnings to building the successful business and life they have today. This was followed up by a medley of speakers’ testimonies about exactly that. This led Stewart to take on the Obama quote this was in reference to, showing the context of it from a July 13th speech which gave the quote a different meaning: “Somebody helped to create this unbelievable American system that we have that allowed you to thrive. Somebody invested in roads and bridges. If you got a business, you didn’t build that,” proving that the *that* Obama was referring to was the infrastructure in and around communities.⁸² Stewart made a point out that it could be problematic creating the convention’s theme on something the President never actually said, and that the convention perhaps was guilty of overkill in usage of said theme, bringing home his point by showing country singer Lane Turner singing “I Built It,” written for the occasion, on the convention stage.

Every day of the convention coverage, Stewart had one or more correspondents go out among conventioners to report from the convention center. The correspondents’ roles on the show differ from Stewart in the way that they play characters more than he does. Although Stewart is playing the role of head anchor, he rarely leaves his own personality behind in his coverage, whereas his correspondents take on a new persona, a lot of the time making it seem like they agree with those they interview, perhaps putting themselves in their subjects’ place to get more information out of them.

This was the case when correspondent Samantha Bee went around the convention center interviewing Republicans about Mitt Romney’s stand on abortion, which was a hot-button issue during the campaign. The party platform, ratified at the convention, specified that abortion should be illegal without exception, and supported an amendment to the constitution giving personhood to unborn children, while Mitt Romney was clear on the fact that there should be “exceptions in cases of rape or incest and when the life of the mother is at stake.” The interviews Samantha Bee conducted made most of the subjects contradict themselves on the right-to-choose issue without knowing. This segment was a good example of how *The Daily Show* uses the Socratic Method to expose ignorance, as Judith Barad argued in “Stewart

⁸² *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*, episode dated August 29, 2012.

and Socrates: Speaking truth to Power.”⁸³ Bee asked delegates if it was okay for them that Romney disagreed with the party’s abortion policy, and the answers she got were that “he is allowed to choose.” Here, in a Socratic fashion, Bee let the people she interviewed be the expert on the topic before asking them a few deeper questions that trapped them in a contradiction, although most of them did not seem to know they were contradicting themselves, not that they were really talking about an issue within an issue. On some occasions, Bee simply let the interviewee finish before she shared the facts behind their statements with them more bluntly. One delegate thought the exceptions on abortion bans Romney wanted in cases of rape would be okay, because of the very unlikely chance of becoming pregnant from rape. “I don’t know if that’s even in the equation because they say that percentage is, like, almost impossible, not impossible, but close. There have been some cases,” a female delegate claimed, with the answer from Bee being that there are about 32,000 cases of pregnancy from rape per year in the US. Bee then moved on to talking to some male delegates asking why it was okay for Romney to disagree with important platform issues. These guys were caught in a contradiction or two when it comes to the right to choose. “We live in a free society. It’s up to any human being to choose, to decide what is best for themselves [sic],” one delegate answered. Another answered with another question, asking “who are we to tell someone how to act?” Bee further equates Romney’s choice with the abortion question saying that he is obviously begging for the platform and should therefore just accept the reality of it being there, like a woman would have to accept getting pregnant if she has acted immorally with a man. After this, Bee had the delegates saying that Romney could not have made his decision on the matter lightly, and that it was not up to them to judge him unless they had experienced having to make the same decision, and at the very end of the segment several of them explained how Republicans stand for individual liberties, and that the government should not have a right to take those liberties away from the public, except when it comes to abortion. Bee signed off by introducing her uterus to a male delegate, saying he owned a piece of it. Bee ended by pretending to speak for her uterus, saying “Hello. I belong to everybody!”⁸⁴ In addition to using Socratic Irony, segments such as this illustrates what Lisa Colletta said about postmodern satire and how it mocks the public as well as the establishment.⁸⁵

⁸³ Judith Barad. “Stewart and Socrates: Speaking truth to Power”, *The Daily Show and Philosophy*.

⁸⁴ *The Daily Show*, episode dated August 29, 2012

⁸⁵ Lisa Colletta. “Political Satire and Postmodern Irony in the Age of Stephen Colbert and Jon Stewart.”

The following night, Stewart again used a correspondent to take on the role of those they satirize to report on the convention. The second day of the convention had a new theme saying “We Can Change It,” and the biggest speech of the evening was by Republican running mate Paul Ryan. Before involving correspondent Oliver, Stewart started the coverage of Ryan’s speech by showing pundits and Republicans talking about the candidate as one who was not afraid of telling the truth and Bill O’Reilly claiming that both Republican candidates would “run on facts,”⁸⁶ foreshadowing an analysis of the hard truth in Ryan’s speech. The first clips from the speech showed Ryan promising spending cuts, new jobs, strengthening Medicare, and putting “government back on the side of men and women who create jobs,” leading Stewart to ask for the hard truth about the details of the candidates’ plans. Unfortunately, none of the clips Stewart showed had any details about how they would follow through on these promises, prompting Stewart to impersonate part of the speech with “a Romney/Ryan administration will do good, not bad, for bad is the lesser of those options.” Stewart also fact-checked some complaints Ryan had with the Obama administration, such as a \$716 billion cut in Medicare and having done nothing about a proposal from a congressional committee regarding debt reduction. Stewart quickly mentioned that the payment cuts in Medicare were of the same amount as had been proposed in the Republican budget proposal spearheaded by and named for Paul Ryan himself, and that the debt reduction proposal was never formally put up before congress because it was voted down by Ryan among others. Ryan also told an anecdote about a General Motors plant in his congressional district in Wisconsin where then-candidate Obama had spoken and said that with the right support from the government, plants like that one would still be around in a 100 years, yet that the plant in question had closed within a year of him saying that. Stewart then showed part of an article where the plant had announced they would be closing as early as June of 2008, which would mean it was set to close before Obama ever took office.⁸⁷

This fact-checking was followed by clips from the Republican spin zone, where other politicians tried to tone down the inaccuracy of the speech, and focus on the bigger issues like the state of the American economy, with the reel culminating in a clip of former Mayor of New York Rudy Giuliani saying to CNN’s Piers Morgan that when someone is giving a speech “not every fact is always absolutely accurate.” Stewart then brought in Oliver and the following scene on *The Daily Show* stage was a conversation between the two, an elaborate

⁸⁶ *The Daily Show*, episode dated August 30, 2012.

⁸⁷ *The Daily Show*, episode dated August 30, 2012.

sketch to bring home the point that is brought up in their opening credits every day; the Republican Party is “too patriotic for facts”:

Stewart: “You were on the floor; you saw the speech last night.”

Oliver: “I did, Jon, and it really hit home for me. I guess because my parents once owned a small business, a scented candle emporium in Akron, Ohio. In 2009, President Obama visited and promised it would become the biggest candle company in the world. Two weeks later it burned to the ground in a terrible, beautifully scented fire. Honestly, I tear up every time I smell lavender.”

Stewart: “Right. It’s a powerful story. Obviously none of that is true, your parents are teachers in England.”

Oliver: “Yeah, that’s not the point, Jon. What was the theme of last night’s convention?”

Stewart: “We can change it.”

Oliver: “Exactly! And that is what I’ve just done. In keeping with last night’s theme, Jon, I chose to change facts, reality, and the meaning of words in order to make a much larger point.”

Stewart: “But you can’t do that. You can’t just ignore the truth when it doesn’t support your purpose.”

Oliver: “Hold on. You can when you’re trying to save your country from a socialist tyrant.”

Stewart: “Who’s that?”

Oliver: “Barack Obama.”

Stewart: “But he’s not.”

Oliver: “Yeah, I know, Jon, and that is why the Republicans changed that.”⁸⁸

⁸⁸ *The Daily Show*, episode dated August 29, 2012.

The two segments with correspondents Samantha Bee and John Oliver were classic examples of how *The Daily Show* can find itself taking on the role of the fifth estate, keeping the governing powers in check by demonstrating “misuses of reason in political life” and encouraging critical thinking, as Dr. Liam P. Dempsey put it.⁸⁹ Show segments like these uphold the idea of Jon Stewart and his correspondents as public intellectuals who can help their audiences find their way to enlightenment through showing them where the system is failing. Although you can assume from these segments that none of the correspondents are Republicans, they do not declare what their political leanings are, and in this case, they do not spare the Democratic Party when they are guilty of “misuses of reason,” which they according to *The Daily Show* are quite often. The coverage from the Democratic National Convention in Charlotte, North Carolina, was also full of critique and demonstrations of double standards, although in a very different way.

The opening credits for the coverage of the Democratic National Convention were nowhere near as harsh and direct as the ones from the Republican Convention, but with a dash of sarcasm, *The Daily Show* offered their opinion on the Obama campaign. “Four years ago he made us hope again. Now he wants to make us hope again, again! From Charlotte, North Carolina, this is the Democratic National Convention Hope and Change 2: Sometimes the Sequel is Even Better,” the announcer called. Where the show had found a place to call the Republican party liars and Mitt Romney a tax evader during their convention, they now simply accused Obama and the Democrats of not really bringing anything new to the table.⁹⁰ To start the coverage, Stewart presented a comparison of the Republican idea versus the Democratic idea of what the election should be about, showing a large discrepancy between the two. Although this presentation was infused with humor, the information given was to the point and fairly accurate, showing Stewart as the nearly real news anchor he sometimes can be.

The presentation showed that at the Republican National Convention the question had been whether the American people were better off now than they were four years ago, with a resounding no as their answer. When Governor Martin O’Malley was asked the same question ahead of his party’s convention he also answered no, but quickly followed up saying that this was “not the question of this election,” and several members of the party seemed to agree in various interviews. Stewart reacted to this with dismay, saying that their answer “no, but...,”

⁸⁹ Dempsey, “The Daily Show’s Exposé of Political Rhetoric,” *The Daily Show and Philosophy*, p. 121

⁹⁰ *The Daily Show*, episodes dated September 4-7, 2012.

with added nuances beyond regular audiences' attention span, should be left alone for their own party's good, and that they should have been better prepared to answer that particular question in a simpler way, as it had been a question asked during most election cycles since Reagan had first brought it up in 1980.⁹¹

The lack of a new "hope and change" rhetoric that was echoed in the introduction to the show was also evident in a report filed from the streets of Charlotte. *The Daily Show* sent out two of its correspondents, John Oliver and Jason Jones, to talk to Democrats in Charlotte about their excitement for Obama, and to try to come up with a new slogan for this time around, to take the place of 2008's "Yes, We Can." But the excitement was not really present, at least not in any visible way, and the suggestions for slogan were rather sad, like for instance "He's doing the best he can," "let us do it," and "yes, we can but..." The latter was what Jones decided to use, and the two correspondents, along with Al Madrigal made a video similar to what rapper Will.i.am had created out of "Yes, We Can" from the previous election campaign.⁹²

Themes presented on the first day of the convention were family values, religion, supporting the military and American exceptionalism, themes normally attributed to Republicans. This was quite fitting, according to Stewart, since the Republican had spent so much time at their convention showing off their diversity, which is typically a Democratic attribute, showing that both parties used their nationally televised platforms to show everyone that they both shared the positive sides of the other party. In addition to this, the convention's first night painted a picture of Obama as a great man and president, perhaps going a little too far with some of the personal stories about a wonderful husband, father, friend, and human. The picture painted was in stark contrast with what had been said about the same man a week before, and to illustrate how fantastical these stories were, correspondent John Oliver, in the role of the exaggerated political pundit, again sat down with Stewart, as the anchor, to tell his own story about Obama, and like his story about the candle emporium from August 30, it mirrored what had been said in speeches at the convention:

⁹¹ *The Daily Show*, episode dated September 4, 2012.

⁹² *The Daily Show*, episode dated September 4, 2012.

“Jon, last year, while covering a White House Press Briefing, I choked on a hotdog. As I felt my life slipping from me suddenly there was President Barack Obama leaping over the rose bushes to catch me before I hit the ground, cradling my head gently upon his lap (...) he yanked the obstruction clear and then, as sweet oxygen filled my lungs once again he said the words that I will never forget; ‘Can we get this man another hotdog?’”

In the continuation of the story, Obama fed the hotdog to Oliver like a bird, so he would not choke again, and then helped him start his own small business. When Stewart confronts Oliver with the plausibility of his story, saying it is all “a bit much,” Oliver says that while this is true, the Democrats were forced to create an invisible Obama to counter the Obama created at the Republican convention, and that their invisible Obama had to be placed on a different type of chair: a throne.⁹³ Oliver’s story was so outrageous, yet not much more outrageous than some of the stories told by Democrats at the convention in Charlotte. Again Stewart and Oliver were able to use their comedy to illustrate how the political rhetoric used about Obama was far beyond reason and how highly unlikely it was that it was a true representation of any human being. This also kept in line with the theme brought up in the daily opening of the show, that Obama and the Democrats had a plan to make America hope again, and to do so they would have to create an even more exciting candidate than he had been four years earlier.

In a similar manner to when Samantha Bee talked to delegates about the right to choose, correspondents from *The Daily Show* went out among Democratic delegates and talked about diversity and inclusion, and again the audience was presented with double standards and self-contradictory opinions from those interviewed. Most of the delegates shown in the segment first said that the party was for everyone, but with a little added on question from the correspondents about who they would exclude, the list grew long and the delegates revealed quite a bit of prejudice about people whom they thought were less open-minded than themselves, one white male even went as far as saying that white males were not welcome, calling them “a bunch of gun toting, hillbilly Tea Partiers.”⁹⁴ What the consensus was among these delegates was that Republicans would not be welcome in the Democratic Party, which would make some sense, but their ideas of who Republicans were showed a low

⁹³ *The Daily Show*, episode dated September 5, 2012.

⁹⁴ *The Daily Show*, episode dated September 5, 2012.

level of open-mindedness. The listed elements of the Republican wing included convention goers who were “beer toting fakers down in Florida,” “wack-job, evangelical gun nuts,” people who do not “have a clue about science” and cannot be taught anything. One delegate said that the Democratic Party was a party for everyone except those who carry guns, which correspondent Jason Jones pointed out was 146 million Americans and “who needs those?” Another delegate said that they were so inclusive they even invited “the redneck freaks in,”⁹⁵ which can be argued as a contradiction. It is hard to find inclusion and open-mindedness in such name-calling. The segment was in general a very bad advertisement for Democratic open-mindedness, proving that double standards have a home on both sides of the political aisle.

The third night of the convention included one of the more shocking moments of the week, when voter fraud happened right under everyone’s noses, which gave *The Daily Show* a perfect opportunity to just report the news, without the use of much satire. The issues up for vote were 1) Should God be mentioned in the Democrats’ Party Platform, and 2) should there be language stating that Jerusalem is the capital of Israel in the same document? The reason for this was, according to Stewart, complaints voiced on Fox News about the two being left out. The voting was a simple ‘aye’ or ‘no’ voiced by the crowd, with a 2/3 majority needed, and was led by the Mayor of Los Angeles. When the crowd voted it was hard to determine which side was the loudest, it would even seem that the ‘no’-crowd had it, so they repeated the call three times. After the second try, there was a lot of confusion on the stage and a woman walked up to the Mayor and said that he had to “let them do what they’re gonna do.” After repeating the vote a third time with the same ambiguous result, he decided that 2/3 had voted “in the affirmative” and the new text about God and Jerusalem as Israel’s capital was added to the party platform.⁹⁶ What Stewart then showed was that the vote had been pre-scripted and was being read from a teleprompter, which meant that the delegates’ votes were meaningless, and that the confusion on stage was merely caused by a surprising amount of ‘no’ votes from the floor. Stewart called this the Democrats’ voter fraud the Republicans had been complaining about for so long, which brought about a laugh from his audience. Apart from that last joke, there was little need for Stewart to be funny. The events of the voting were ridiculous in their own right, and the tragicomedy happened all by itself. Much of the show that night was able to just tell it like it was, and needed very little “fakeness” to its news.

⁹⁵ *The Daily Show*, episode dated September 5, 2012.

⁹⁶ *The Daily Show*, episode dated September 6, 2012.

Although it was handled in a different manner, and was a more positive aspect of the convention events, Bill Clinton's convention speech was also presented by Stewart in a news-worthy fashion, even if through a more satirical frame than the coverage of the voting issue. Stewart praised Clinton's speech for including something new: math. According to Stewart, Clinton brought out more "specific numbers in one speech than the Republican leadership did in an entire week in Tampa," and the specifics Clinton brought were not just about the numbers of the Democratic plan, but also the Republican plan.⁹⁷ Stewart compared Clinton's speech to the promises Paul Ryan had made a week earlier, and concluded that Ryan had given no specifics on how he and Romney would follow through on the promises they made, and he then showed what Clinton said about the Republican plan, which according to him would lead to middle class families seeing an average tax increase of \$2000. Stewart indicated that the use of math was quite a shock, as it had been lost from the campaign trail, and from the media's focus, for quite some time.⁹⁸

Jon Stewart, the newsman, came back in the coverage of the presidential debates. The first debate created a consensus across the board in American media, that Obama surprised the country in how badly he performed. Besides Obama's performance, the most talked about item of the debate was when Mitt Romney told the moderator, Jim Lehrer of PBS' *News Hour*, that he would cut funding to PBS even if he liked the network and the famous *Sesame Street* character Big Bird. The Big Bird comment did not only make the headlines in the mainstream media, but also made appearances on several comedy shows, including long-lived sketch-comedy show *Saturday Night Live*. The fact that this amusing comment made by Romney took up most of the coverage in the regular news shows created an opportunity for Stewart to discuss what had been said in the debate that actually mattered. Stewart was very disappointed in Obama's weak performance, noting that Obama was so absent during the debate that Romney would have won with the sound off, but quickly moved on to point out that several of Romney's statements had been less than truthful. Among these was a point about Obama having promised to cut the deficit in half, but instead doubling it, when the truth at the time was that the deficit was down from \$1.2 trillion when Obama took office to \$1.1 trillion at the time of the debate. According to Stewart, Romney got away with that statement both during and after the debate. Obama did not correct him in a rebuttal, and the news media seemed too preoccupied with Big Bird after the fact to spend much time on fact-checking. For

⁹⁷ *The Daily Show*, episode dated September 6, 2012.

⁹⁸ *The Daily Show*, episode dated September 6, 2012.

the sake of comedy, Stewart also had a problem with moderator Lehrer as he seemed to be spending the debate trying to figure out which candidate was which, underlining the point by showing the multiple times Lehrer started a question with “do you see a major difference between the two of you” or something like it. Stewart ended the first segment of the show by talking directly to the President, voicing his disappointment with what he displayed at the debate in relation to what the Obama campaign had asked of their supporters through e-mails and fundraising throughout the entire campaign.⁹⁹

The second segment that same night was based on the post-debate media coverage, and the political spin viewers witnessed from Obama supporters who had to, in Stewart’s words, “polish that turd.” This drew a laugh from the crowd in the studio and indicated that it would be a tough job to make Obama look good. The first piece of spin came from Maryland Governor Martin O’Malley, a democrat, saying to MSNBC that the President showed a form of “dignified reserve” in a way people were used to seeing him.¹⁰⁰ Others gave the President praise for not speaking to the room or to his peers, but to the people at home. The clips shown proved that the polishing of this “turd” had been a tall order. Some, including former Vice President Al Gore, blamed Obama’s performance on the altitude issues of having the debate in Denver. Although a nice try, Stewart did not buy that excuse. His response consisted of a clip from Obama’s famous and fiery speech from the 2008 Democratic National Convention, also in Denver, calling the altitude difference between DC and Denver a poor excuse.¹⁰¹

The second debate for the presidential candidates took place two weeks later and had a different format: a town hall debate. Stewart’s coverage of the debate came the following night and started with a clip of Romney twisting the truth again, when he said that Obama did exactly what Romney had recommended when dealing with the auto industry. Stewart then pointed to the facts of what Romney had one time suggested, saying: “In fact, Obama’s publically financed Detroit auto industry managed bankruptcy is not precisely what Romney recommended. Romney *precisely* recommended private credit, which at the time was, to be precise, non-existent, meaning under his plan the Detroit bankruptcy would be *un*managed and quite permanent.” Stewart then asked himself which version of Obama Romney would be facing in this debate, alluding to the performance given by the president in the previous debate. The screen then cut to the debate showing Obama, with a smile on his face, as he

⁹⁹ *The Daily Show*, episodes dated October 4, 2012.

¹⁰⁰ *The Daily Show*, episodes dated October 4, 2012.

¹⁰¹ *The Daily Show*, episode dated October 4, 2012.

stated that “what Governor Romney said just isn’t true,” before it cut back to Stewart being quite pleased with seeing the President actually attending the debate this time.¹⁰² The coverage went on with the title “The Second debate – Now Including the President” and showed both candidates being to the point and serving up some blows against each other. The coverage on *The Daily Show* clearly gave the upper hand and the win to Obama due to two separate issues discussed by Romney. These two issues were also the ones mostly discussed in the regular news media in the aftermath of the debate. The first issue became a well-known gaffe in the media and revolved around how Romney referred to efforts to hire more women in cabinet positions while serving as governor in Massachusetts. His words were that he “went to a number of women’s groups” to ask for help “and they brought whole binders full of women.” The language used to describe what Romney had been presented with was reported by Stewart as being a little sexist, and he also argued the fact that Romney did not approach the women’s group, but that they had approached him.

The second issue was that Romney made an attempt to put Obama in an unfavorable position by bringing up the confusion about the September 11, 2012 attacks on the American Consulate in Benghazi. He asked why the administration had either tried to mislead the public about it, or if they simply did not know, since it took them so long to say that it had indeed been a terrorist attack. Obama answered that he had called it an act of terror when speaking to the American people on the day after it had happened. Romney tried to discredit that statement, but moderator Candy Crowley of CNN confirmed that Obama was telling the truth in that regard. This debate coverage was again followed by the political spin that came after it, but this time the “polishing” came from the conservatives and Fox News, saying that the moderator had been on Obama’s side, that Obama had been given three extra minutes, and that the questions for clearly pro-Obama. Stewart simply ended that segment saying that we should just “let them cry themselves to sleep,” because it is” the only way they will learn.”¹⁰³

The third and final presidential debate made Stewart look like a news anchor again, as he took it upon himself to expose how Romney had changed his views on several issues regarding foreign policy, which was the topic of the debate. Before the debate took place, several Republicans, including candidate Romney, spoke out about President Obama’s lack of strength in foreign policy questions. They all indicated that this would be an easy win for Romney, and some even said Obama was the worst president ever in the context of foreign

¹⁰² *The Daily Show*, episode dated October 17, 2012.

¹⁰³ *The Daily Show*, episode dated October 17, 2012.

policy. Stewart showed clips of many of these statements before showing clips from the debate itself, where Romney seemed to agree with the President on almost every point, and even bringing up plans the president had previously had as if they were his own. One specific example Stewart used was the time in the debate when Romney said he wanted all troops out of Afghanistan within 2014. “That’s Barack Obama’s plan,” Stewart remarked, “the weird part is it never used to be Romney’s,” and a clip proved that Romney said the opposite the previous year.¹⁰⁴ *The Daily Show* went on to give more examples of political issues Romney had changed his view on by the time he entered the auditorium to attend the final debate, issues where he now seemed to be in agreement with his opponent. The general opinion from *The Daily Show* writers and Jon Stewart was that the tables had turned and that Romney was the one that did not quite show up to the debate this time, showing examples of blow after blow at Romney from Obama, where Romney gave no real rebuttal.¹⁰⁵ Stewart showed himself as a news anchor, of course with some obligatory comedy infused, for the most part simply reporting what had happened and questioning some of the facts brought up by the candidates.

In addition to the three debates between the presidential candidates, their respective running-mates, Joe Biden and Paul Ryan, had a debate of their own moderated by Martha Raddatz, chief foreign correspondent at ABC News. The debate was covered on *The Daily Show* as a somewhat insignificant happening, which was illustrated by the title of the segment: “V.P. Debate – Battle for the Historical Footnote.”¹⁰⁶ This debate took place between the first and second presidential debate, and Stewart insinuated worry about Joe Biden having to do damage control after Obama’s performance in the first debate. Biden, known as a gaffe master, surprised Stewart by being calm, assertive and by constantly refuting almost every statement from opponent Paul Ryan with actual facts to back it up. In the spin zone, following this debate, the Republican wing worked hard to save face, and here too, as in the case with Candy Crowley, the moderator was accused of playing for the opponent’s team. Biden was called rude, condescending and mean, and when Sarah Palin was asked to make a comment she compared Biden to “a musk ox running across the tundra with Martha Raddatz under its hoof.” Other conservative women decided to approach the criticism of Biden in a manner more people could relate to, calling him disrespectful to women, because he was disrespectful to the female moderator, and because he was, according to Ann

¹⁰⁴ *The Daily Show*, episode dated October 23, 2012

¹⁰⁵ *The Daily Show*, episode dated October 23, 2012.

¹⁰⁶ *The Daily Show*, episode dated October 15, 2012.

Coulter when speaking on a Fox News show, “a huge turnoff.” Dr. Keith Ablow, also a contributor to Fox News, indicated that Joe Biden could have acted disrespectful because of possible dementia. The absurdity in this criticism brought out the comedian in Jon Stewart, and he questioned this “rare form of dementia where you remember too much” and then he summed up Fox’s post-debate coverage with: “Joe Biden was an angry, demented, abusive, drunk, old, crazy person who mopped the floor with our guy.”¹⁰⁷

One segment in *The Daily Show*’s debate coverage stands out. The insignificance of the debate allowed Stewart to mostly just have fun with the aftermath of it, but it also brought out the media critic in him. The segment in question was about the moderator of the debate, Martha Raddatz, and the performance she gave. After a series of clips showing some of her questions and comments to the candidates, Stewart acts, with the help of his graphic team, as if he is seeing a very bright light; as if an angel has appeared. In a soft voice he says: “I don’t know what it was, but it was amazing! The lost language of journalism being spoken on modern television! I couldn’t believe it. Martha Raddatz...,” he blows her a kiss. According to Stewart, her performance must have scared both campaigns into making sure that the moderators in the last two presidential debates would not be as involved. Politicians are not used to having to answer actual journalistic questions, as most news shows only talk about insignificant aspects, such as whether Joe Biden was rude or not, or that Paul Ryan came off as robotic, instead of the actual issues they discussed and who would be more fitted to govern the country.¹⁰⁸ When Raddatz later appeared on *The Daily Show*, Stewart congratulated her on her performance as moderator saying that she did not “pretend that the role of a journalist is to be a lump of malleable clay” to get out of being accused of a liberal bias.¹⁰⁹ Stewart’s reaction to someone doing their job as a journalist speaks to how he feels about the current state in media, something we will get back to in chapter 4. This reaction also said something about why Stewart and his show can be successful as a news source, because those who create the show have seen a need to step in and ask the questions no one else are asking, even if they will not admit that this is the case.

Although there is a lot of evidence behind claims of *The Daily Show* functioning as a news source, Stewart is rarely, if ever, willing to admit that they are. As Judith Barad stated, the show and its host, like Socrates, do not claim to be experts. In his altercation with the

¹⁰⁷ *The Daily Show*, episode dated October 15, 2012.

¹⁰⁸ *The Daily Show*, episode dated October 15, 2012.

¹⁰⁹ *The Daily Show*, episode dated November 5, 2012.

hosts of *Crossfire* in 2004, he stated that he was not responsible for delivering news as he was the host of a comedy show that, at the time, followed a show about puppets making prank phone calls (*Crank Yankers*).¹¹⁰ In an interview with Bill O'Reilly in 2010, while discussing Stewart's position on Obama, he stated that all they do on the show is to poke fun at the absurdities in American politics. O'Reilly and Stewart discussed President Obama and the fact that *The Daily Show* had mocked the President on his show. This mockery had surprised some journalists, prompting Howard Kurtz to write an article in *The Washington Post* about it, which O'Reilly pulled out during the interview. O'Reilly had several concerns, one of which was that Stewart could have his audience turn against him, as they were "stoned slackers who love Obama."¹¹¹ Stewart addressed this by saying that the show would put out anything that had "a valid piece of absurdity," what they themselves found funny, and did not worry about how it would be received by viewers. Another concern O'Reilly had was that the Kurtz article had a quote from Robert Lichter, director of the Center for Media and Public Affairs, who said: "He's clearly become an important cultural arbiter. He's pulled off the trick of being taken seriously when he wants to be and taken frivolously when he wants to be."¹¹² This comment was something Stewart managed to sneak out of commenting on, perhaps feeling slightly uncomfortable with the idea of being of cultural importance.

Whether he will admit to it or not, it is evident that Stewart and *The Daily Show* still act as a news source for their audience. The show is centered on looking and feeling like a news show, and even if it calls itself "fake news," it is still discussing current issues. The show is, like Amber Day called it, mimetic of a news show¹¹³, and reports on actual news items, even if it has a comedic twist to it. In this mix of news and entertainment, *The Daily Show* acts as the fifth estate by showing the fourth estate how to do their job, at the same time as doing it for them. In the increasingly polarized political discourse in America today, those individuals who are tired of the liberal vs. conservative political views presented in the 24-hour news media today, *The Daily Show* can be an alternative for the latest in political news. However, due to the limited time the show has to devote to each topic, it should perhaps not be the *only* source of news for anyone. In studying *The Daily Show* as a news source, one finds a tendency towards media criticism in what Stewart presents, for instance in how he talked about Martha Raddatz as moderator in the vice presidential debate. Her journalistic

¹¹⁰ *Crossfire*, episode dated October 15, 2004.

¹¹¹ *The O'Reilly Factor*, episode dated February 3, 2010.

¹¹² Howard Kurtz. "Jon Stewart, Mocking Both Sides," *WashingtonPost.com*

¹¹³ Day. "And Now... the News? Mimesis and the Real in *The Daily Show*", *Satire TV*, p. 100

integrity, that was present throughout the debate, surprised Stewart, because to him it was such a rare occurrence. And if that is how he sees the contemporary general news media, it becomes understandable that he has his show take over the job their job. There will be a further discussion of *The Daily Show* and Jon Stewart as media critics in chapter 4.

Chapter 3

Satire as News – The Colbert Report

Like *The Daily Show* has the look of a regular news show, *The Colbert Report* looks a lot like a common news channel talk show. *The Report*, as it is often called, follows the daily Show timeslot on Comedy Central, and is specifically modeled after talk shows on the Fox News channel, with the same patriotic tone as some of the Fox news shows, and the same color scheme of red, white and blue. The opening credits to *The Report* has its host Stephen Colbert grabbing a flag and flying through the air down a spiral of buzz-words before landing steadily, planting the flag, and ends with a bald eagle, also red, white and blue, flying at the camera enveloping the entire screen shot before it cuts to the studio and pans from above down towards the main desk where Colbert spends the first half of the show discussing issues of the day. Like Stewart, Colbert is sharply dressed in a suit and made up to look like a regular newsman, but when Colbert starts to speak he is completely in character as Stephen Colbert, a conservative pundit who does not care for facts that discredit what he feels to be true.

The character is a satirical version of some of the more famous talk show hosts on Fox News, particularly Bill O'Reilly of *The O'Reilly Factor*, as Colbert himself admits when frequently calling O'Reilly his mentor and referring to him as "Papa Bear."¹¹⁴ The character, or persona¹¹⁵, Colbert plays on his show is a further development of the character he used to

¹¹⁴ *The Colbert Report*, episode dated January 25, 2006.

¹¹⁵ Weisgerber. "Satire and Irony as Means of Communication," p. 162

play as a correspondent on *The Daily Show*, and we will see that he uses a lot of the same satirical techniques as the correspondents do. Colbert mainly uses the art of satire by disguising his views in saying the opposite of what he really thinks, and ridiculing the people he models himself after just by acting like them in an exaggerated way. His ridiculing ways have had him get into trouble with politicians on several occasions, most famously with former Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi, who cautioned all other Democratic Representatives about going on *The Colbert Report*'s recurring segment "Better Know a District."¹¹⁶ In addition to covering how the real news covered the presidential election of 2012, *The Colbert Report* took a hands-on approach when Colbert started his own Political Action Committee, which developed into a Super-PAC, as well as attempting to run for office. The following will analyze how *The Colbert Report* covered the 2012 presidential election's candidates, major party conventions, the presidential and vice-presidential debates, and the current campaign finance laws in place.

Colbert has several recurring segments on his show that use different methods to nail down a point. In what can be described as a call-back to Greek theater, he has a segment called "The Word," that emulates the effect of a chorus in ancient Greek comedies. While Colbert is on a rant about a specific topic, there are statements on the screen that usually say something that is closer to how the audience thinks than Colbert's persona. Colbert does not acknowledge these statements, as if they are only between the invisible chorus and the audience, much like in Greek theater. Colbert used this segment to say a few words about Mitt Romney's specific policies, or the lack thereof, on September 19, 2012.

The lead-in to the segment was based on Obama's current lead in swing states like Ohio, Florida and Pennsylvania, and that some people were saying this was related to Romney's lack of specific plans for his presidency. The word of the day was "Ask Not," because Colbert did not feel like there was a need to ask about Romney's plans, as we already knew what he planned *not* to do, which was anything Obama had done. The screen added commentary by reading: "Just got Bin Laden's vote!" as a reference to Obama being credited with the killing of the terrorist leader. Colbert claimed that certain people were "clambering for how he will reduce the deficit, what tax loopholes would he close, what's his policy in Afghanistan?" and as he finished that thought, the screen read: "Tax cuts!" Colbert just continued with his speech, saying he did not want any spoilers, and that the people would find

¹¹⁶ *The Colbert Report*, episode dated November 7, 2006.

out what his policies were when Romney was elected. The screen then read: “Don’t tell me how birth control ends.” Both statements from the screen (chorus) were in reference to issues often discussed by the Republican Party, and that were hot-button issues of the election. Colbert wrapped up the segment saying that Romney’s strategy was to say he would not do what no one else had said they wanted to do, referring to Romney stating that he would not take God out of the RNC platform, off of US currency, or out of his own heart. The thing no one had said they wanted to do that the screen referred to, was to vote for Romney. This reference to a lack of support for Romney, even within party ranks, was used several times in Colbert’s election coverage.

The Colbert Report’s coverage of the conventions was not as extensive as that of *The Daily Show*, but *The Report* had also made a new intro in honor of the Republican national Convention, and this one was in the style of the *Star Wars* movie intros, and equated Obama to the dark side and Mitt Romney to the rebel alliance in the title screen, but then mixing it up by having Obama’s face replace Luke Skywalker of the Rebel Alliance and Romney’s face replace Darth Vader’s, perhaps creating ambiguity around which is good and which is evil. Unlike *The Daily Show*, Colbert and his crew did not travel to Tampa to follow the convention up close, according to Colbert because he was hosting the first annual Colbert Super PAC Convention, a topic he did not further discuss.¹¹⁷ Because of tropical Storm Isaac leading to cancellations of events, Colbert had no convention to cover on his first night, but he started the coverage of the second night of the convention like this: “Last night’s theme was ‘We Built It.’ It being, I assume, Mitt Romney. I always wondered who assembled him, because that is quality work.”¹¹⁸ The joke of Mitt Romney not being human was a recurring joke on *The Colbert Report* during the entire election cycle. In fact, when critiquing Romney, Colbert did not disguise his views very often, but rather took on the role of a somewhat unimpressed conservative who just had to live with Romney being the Republican candidate.

Beyond a few comments on the speeches by Ann Romney and Chris Christie, the coverage of the convention was minimal on the second night of Colbert’s convention week; instead he focused on talking about the candidates and their political role models. First he talked about a comment made by Romney’s campaign manager saying that Romney would model his presidency on former president James K. Polk, who was, according to Colbert, “one of America’s 44 best-known presidents,” which clearly suggested that Polk was among the

¹¹⁷ *The Colbert Report*, episode dated August 28, 2012.

¹¹⁸ *The Colbert Report*, episode dated August 29, 2012.

lesser known of the 44. When Karl Rove was asked about this in an interview, he agreed that Romney could be like Polk because Polk had had a simple message of what he wanted to do as president, and he had followed through on his promises. Colbert agreed with Rove, but credited that to the fact that Romney had not really promised anything of substance so far. Colbert also said the comparison between Romney and Polk was good due to their equal popularity among Hispanics, since Polk had invaded Mexico to annex Texas; the only problem being that Polk “was president in the 1840s, and Romney and Ryan’s positions [were] a little bit older than that.”¹¹⁹ Colbert then went on to talk about Paul Ryan and his political philosophy hero Ayn Rand, whose books had seen a boost in sales after Ryan was added to the Republican ticket. Ryan had been talking about Rand’s books as an inspiration for him and the reason for his interest in economics during the earlier stages of the campaign, and recently he had to come out against her philosophy of objectivism, seeing as this was an atheistic philosophy, something that was not compatible with Ryan’s deep Catholic beliefs. This Ryan and Rand segment showed Colbert as a newsman, reporting on the recently changed views of the vice-presidential candidate.

On the third night of coverage, Colbert focused on the issue of racial and ethnic diversity in the Republican Party, or rather the lack thereof. The news Colbert reported in his first segment was really how the Republican Party has a lack of diversity, but they work hard to make it look like the opposite. The night before, the convention had been filled with speakers of a variety of minority backgrounds, yet the crowd on the floor of the convention did not reflect the diversity on stage. “No surprise that the audience last night was mostly white,” Colbert said. “In fact on crowd shots I had to turn down the brightness ‘cause it was burning out my TV screen.”¹²⁰ Despite the majority of the crowd being white, Fox News, as Colbert pointed out, had no trouble finding the minorities, suggesting that the cameras worked tirelessly to show African-Americans in the audience, ending up showing the same man several times. Colbert first showed the recurring screenshots of that same man from Fox news and then illustrated it in his own studio by talking to three African-American audience members of his own, all played by the same person; first dressed normally, then with a glue-on mustache, and at last dressed as a woman. This was more for the comedy than for the news and drew laughs from the studio audience, but exaggerated the point of what Fox News had done with their coverage. The second segment that night was dedicated to covering Paul

¹¹⁹ *The Colbert Report*, episode dated August 29, 2012.

¹²⁰ *The Colbert Report*, episode dated August 30, 2012.

Ryan's speech at the convention. Colbert's angle was much the same as Stewart's, covering the lack of facts in Ryan's speech. Colbert quoted what he called a liberal website that had said that the "speech was an attempt to set the world record for the greatest number of blatant lies and misrepresentations slipped into a single political speech."¹²¹ This *liberal* website was FoxNews.com. This was an indication that Fox news may not always be completely biased, and brought out a little media criticism from Colbert, particularly since the response from news outlets on television was somewhat different, with several CNN correspondents and anchors arguing that although the speech had some factual problems it was motivational and was really about larger issues.

On the final night of convention coverage, Colbert started off with covering Romney's speech from the night before, saying that his speech was as heartfelt as a Hallmark greeting card. One moment of the speech that Colbert was particularly interested in was when Romney talked about Obama's promises to help America become more environmentally friendly and start to "heal the planet," and that Romney had a much simpler promise, to help American families have better lives. To drive home the point of that statement, Colbert exclaimed "f**k the planet! Quick show of hands, how many of your families live on the planet?"¹²² The focus among the media after the speech was a little different, where most analyzed the speech to have presented Romney as a "plausible president." However, as in many news outlets that night, Romney's speech was upstaged on *The Colbert Report* by Clint Eastwood's performance earlier in the evening. The speech, or rather the one-way conversation he had with a chair representing Barack Obama, had left political pundits everywhere baffled about what to say about it. Colbert honored, and mocked, the story by bringing the chair on his show and interviewing it. The chair wrapped up the Republican National Convention coverage by giving a very convincing speech, that we could only hear through Colbert's responses, having him shouting "Yes We Can" and wishing for the chair to be the nominee for president rather than Romney, which was perhaps another joke about Romney's humanity.

The following week, Colbert was back with coverage of the Democratic National Convention in Charlotte, North Carolina. The introduction sequence to the convention coverage on *The Colbert Report* had the theme of a socialist, or even communist, party with images of Barack Obama as Mao, Fidel Castro, and Bane, the villain from the Batman movie *The Dark Knight Rises*, where the latter was an indication of evil. The title page for the

¹²¹ *The Colbert Report*, episode dated August 30, 2012.

¹²² *The Colbert Report*, episode dated August 31, 2012.

sequence read: “The 2012 People’s Party Congress of Charlotte.”¹²³ The theme alluded to a commonly used argument among right-wing Republicans, that Obama is a socialist president, an argument that Colbert’s persona had use many times before. Colbert started his coverage of the convention calling the first night of events a disaster, one problem being technical issues with their audio. Colbert explained these difficulties, saying that a roaring sound had been a disturbance throughout the evening, and this had not been a problem at the Republican convention. While Colbert acted ignorant to what the sound was, the audience was shown footage explaining that the sound he was referring to was the crowd cheering. Colbert continued the coverage by showing what Fox News reporters had said about the cheers. Reporter and anchor Brit Hume, trying to spin this in the Republicans’ favor, argued that the sound system was cranked up to magnify the cheering, that the convention hall was smaller than that in Tampa, and that they did not “have their act together.” Colbert agreed with Hume, adding in pretend outrage that it was a “cacophony of unbridled enthusiasm,” that “they seemed unable to mute their joy,” and that the volume was unprofessional, all in a tone of voice that suggested that there was more to it.¹²⁴

What the segment really said was that the crowd in Charlotte had been more energetic and excited about the convention than the crowd in Tampa had been, and the conservative media tried to spin that into something negative, in order to come out on top. In Colbert’s view, they did not succeed on doing so, perhaps mainly because they were caught in the act by him. Besides the cheerful crowd, the big news story of the first evening was the speech given by Michelle Obama, who was praised by most news outlets, including Fox News, for the delivery of her speech, some even calling it *the* speech of the conventions. However, this speech did not get away free of political spin, and even though Charles Krauthammer of Fox News agreed that the speech was wonderfully given, he did not “buy a line of it,” as he himself put it. Colbert then served his audience “a line” of the speech where Mrs. Obama talked about her husband’s commitment to the country and her own commitment to her family, saying that her most important title was still “mom in chief,” which brought Colbert to (theatrical) tears while saying that in his heart he could tell that all Mrs. Obama had said was “bullshit.”¹²⁵

¹²³ *The Colbert Report*, episode dated September 4, 2012.

¹²⁴ *The Colbert Report*, episode dated September 5, 2012.

¹²⁵ *The Colbert Report*, episode dated September 5, 2012.

The next night's *Report* was more a re-reporting of news, and a critique of some news outlets, than just a fake news show. Colbert dealt with how some other newsmen had reported on the preparations of Obama's convention speech, and how one conservative pundit viewed the president's powers. Like so many of his colleagues in the real news sector would do, Colbert was covering Obama's speech as a failure before it had actually taken place. During the build-up to his speech, there was a lot of talk in the media about the location of said speech. It was originally meant to be held at a large outdoor football stadium, but days before the event they had to move it indoors to the convention hall because of possible storms hitting the area. Colbert again used Charles Krauthammer to indicate one side's analysis of the relocation of the speech, which was that this was an excuse used when the Democrats realized they could not fill a stadium: "It wasn't the weather, they knew what the weather was going to be months ago," something most people would recognize to be stretching the truth quite a bit, as most weather predictions only give a 10-day forecast, and even then they can change from one day to the next. Colbert mocked this statement by showing a 100-day forecast and noting that he would need a windbreaker on December 15th, more than two months into the future.¹²⁶

While Colbert was on the topics of weather and President Obama, he let his audience in on another convention weather scandal that conservative radio host Rush Limbaugh had uncovered when Hurricane Isaac was threatening the RNC: "You've got a hurricane coming, the National Hurricane Center, which is a government agency (...) The National Hurricane Center is Obama. The National Weather Service is a part of the Commerce Department, that's Obama." What Colbert could read from this was that Obama either could make or he is a hurricane and that he could predict the weather months in advance, either way "he controls the weather."¹²⁷ What the audience is left with is the notion that conservative pundits like Limbaugh had no limits on what they would blame Obama for. In this case, Colbert did not have to exaggerate anything, as the views expressed did the job on their own.

In his coverage of Bill Clinton's speech, Colbert focused again on how other media outlets had reported on it. He compared the liberal pundits from MSNBC with a clip of a woman being overcome by the Lord at a televised mega-church service, saying that Clinton "did his whole Clinton thing, and the mainstream Bubba-lovers swooned in ecstasy." After showing a clip of a CNN pundit saying the Clinton speech may have been the moment that reelected Barack Obama, Colbert again turned to Charles Krauthammer in hopes that

¹²⁶ *The Colbert Report*, episode dated September 6, 2012.

¹²⁷ *The Colbert Report*, episode dated September 6, 2012.

someone out there would have a negative word to say about it. Krauthammer did not disappoint: “I think it was a giant swing and a miss (...) and truly self-indulgent.” Krauthammer also stated that Clinton going over his scheduled time was probably his revenge for 2008, when Obama stole the spotlight from Mrs. Clinton. Colbert pointed out that showering Obama with compliments and helping reelect him was a strange form of revenge.¹²⁸ Colbert then moved on to a question posed by Clinton in his speech, and by others around the media: “Are we better off now than we were four years ago?” A poll used by Fox News said that 31 % felt they were better off, 52 % were worse off, 15 % had it about the same as four years ago, and 2 % were not sure.¹²⁹ To illustrate that this poll may have been based on biased opinions, Colbert then took us back four years, to September 6, 2008, and told the story of how much better off people actually were then. “We were still riding high,” he said, “the emergency bailout of Fanny and Freddie was way in the future: September 7th. (...) and it was over a week before the collapse of Lehman Brothers.” His point was that it was a silly question to ask, since exactly four years ago would mean during the election cycle of 2008, before Obama even took office, and before the economic meltdown he had to deal with had become a crisis. He ended the segment by throwing a punch at Mitt Romney by saying that he should keep asking if Americans were better off, but that he should not answer that question about himself, as that would mean releasing more than two years of tax returns, something he refused to do during the campaign run.¹³⁰

The events surrounding the vote on whether to put God and Jerusalem as the capital of Israel back in the Democratic Party Platform were thoroughly covered by *The Colbert Report*, and like many other convention stories he covered, Colbert started with media reactions; first of all the reactions that the word “god” was nowhere to be found in the platform when the convention started. Most of these reactions were found on Fox News. Colbert mockingly cut in to emphasize how important this issue was, as Democrats should not offend God because he “googles” himself daily and would find out, and as if offending God was not enough, they also took it out on God’s “hometown” of Jerusalem by cutting out language from their previous platform about that city being the capital of Jerusalem. Again we were served clips of Fox News reporters outraged at the removal of this statement. Colbert, however, was happy to compliment the Democrats on doing the right thing about the matter by “humiliating themselves on national television,” as illustrated by what happened

¹²⁸ *The Colbert Report*, episode dated September 6, 2012.

¹²⁹ *The Colbert Report*, episode dated September 6, 2012.

¹³⁰ *The Colbert Report*, episode dated September 6, 2012.

during the vote on the floor, where the vote had been pre-scripted and the voters on the floor went “off script,” so to speak.¹³¹ Unlike Stewart, Colbert’s reaction to the vote was not so much related to the fact that it was a sham, but to the nonchalance in dealing with the question of Israel, saying sarcastically that “a basketball arena full of angry people screaming at the top of their lungs is really the best way to make difficult calls on the status of Israel.”¹³²

On the last night of coverage, Colbert was finally able to talk about Obama’s speech after it had actually been held. To place himself with some of the more conservative conservatives, Colbert started his segment on the speech by equating the president to the communist leadership in North Korea: “Everybody who’s anybody had to be there in Charlotte last night for night three of the ‘Obamathon’, when the Dear Leader finally came out to give his big speech.” Colbert then indicated that he had some mixed feelings about the speech, saying among other things that it was “the most inspiring unimpressive speech” he had heard, and that it had made him cry. This was again a stab at the conservative pundits who had to admit that Obama had his speaking skills in order, but still had to make it sound like he failed. Furthermore, Colbert took some offense to Obama saying in his speech that he was the president, as this was a claim that Republicans had been “working to disprove for years.” He continued this by saying “I bet you’ll never hear Mitt Romney say those words,” to ecstatic cheers from the audience. Colbert supposedly said here that Romney would never make such an offensive claim, but he really said that there was a slim chance of Romney getting elected. Continuing with clips from the Obama speech, Colbert, in true pundit fashion, reported that it was the same progressive spew as always and that he was blaming others for his failed policies, showing clips of Obama saying that “you,” his voters, had made life better for their less fortunate fellow Americans and that they had helped get rid of Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell, using more personal terms to illustrate the victories. “You did that!” Obama exclaimed, and Colbert asked in confusion: “When did I do that?” not keen on taking the blame for a liberal win.¹³³

To end the convention coverage, Colbert had a segment on what we had learned over the two weeks of conventions, and one important lesson in particular was that “to political parties, Hispanics are worth their weight in gold.” The most important thing the voters had learned, however, was that the two candidates were as different as they could possibly be, and

¹³¹ *The Colbert Report*, episode dated September 6, 2012.

¹³² *The Colbert Report*, episode dated September 6, 2012.

¹³³ *The Colbert Report*, episode dated September 7, 2012.

that both parties were well-aware of this and using it as an argument, which was illustrated by clips of Paul Ryan and Barack Obama both saying that voters would have “the clearest choice of a generation” when going into the voting booths. Despite this clear choice, Colbert found many similarities between the candidates, and disputed their claims of major differences by showing clips of them talking about what they wanted for America: a better future and more jobs, among other things. In Colbert’s view, the difference between the two was found in how they wanted to get there and what had been right to do in the previous four years. As Colbert put it, this was not just “the most important election of our lifetimes” but really also “the most important inflection of our lifetime,” sighting that the basic message from the GOP was “our country needed help, and look what Obama did” said in an angry, teeth-clenching manner, and the basic message from the other side was the exact same words in a happy and hopeful manner.¹³⁴

A month after the conventions, Colbert covered the first of four election debates, and he did so in celebration. Obama’s performance during the debate had been unexpectedly bad, and Colbert celebrated by dancing merrily around his desk to the tune of “Ain’t No Stopping Us Now.” After his little dance, Colbert praised Romney’s aggressive approach and his promise to the PBS employed moderator, Jim Lehrer, that he would soon be out of a job during the Romney presidency. The reaction mimicked the reactions of other conservative television pundits, with the obligatory exaggeration. Colbert underlined this exaggeration when he showed the despair found in liberal pundits like MSNBC’s Chris Matthews having an intoxicating effect on him.¹³⁵

After a while, Colbert set aside his celebration and took a closer look at a gaffe made by Romney’s senior advisor, Erik Fehrstrom. When the Romney campaign shifted its focus from the primary season to the general election in March 2012, Fehrstrom had said that they were now starting over. He compared this restart to an Etch-a-Sketch, which meant that they could just erase everything they had said during the primaries and start from scratch.¹³⁶ This comment gave fuel to the fire to those accusing Romney of constantly changing his tune. After the debate, Colbert tested this Etch-a-Sketch theory by giving examples of issues where Romney had changed his beliefs or policies. One example was that for the past two years, Romney had been promising tax cuts for the wealthy, and Colbert wanted to find out what his

¹³⁴ *The Colbert Report*, episode dated September 7, 2012.

¹³⁵ *The Colbert Report*, episode dated October 4, 2012.

¹³⁶ Gregory Wallace. “[Etch A Sketch comment no child's play.](#)” *CNN.com*

plan was now. To show his audience how one could find this out, he took a can of paint, and put it in a shaker, like one would when buying paint at a hardware store, and when the paint can was thoroughly shaken he took it over to his desk to open it so we could see the new tax plans. Before doing so, he went behind his desk to pick up a tool, and secretly switched out the can with an identical can, opened it, and pulled out a white rabbit. Acting as a magician, Colbert said: “Now you see Romney’s policies, now you don’t,” implying that Romney’s policies are similar to illusions.¹³⁷ What Romney did say in the debate about tax cuts for the wealthy was that he had no intention of implementing them.¹³⁸

After the second presidential debate, Colbert opened the show almost as happy as after the previous one, saying that Romney won this as well, despite the fact that people would have been expecting more from Romney than Obama this time because of the first round. According to a CNN report shown as a clip by Colbert, the Romney campaign was preparing for everything because of these expectations, including how Romney would sit on the assigned seating for the debate; a bar stool. Colbert concluded that the reason for such preparations would have to be due to Romney’s lack of experience with bar stools, as he does not drink alcohol in accordance with his religion.

Like *The Daily Show*, Colbert made the most out of the attempt from Romney to topple Obama with the issue of the September 11th Benghazi attacks. Colbert also let this be part of his criticism of media outlets that tend to favor one political side. When introducing the clip, Colbert showed a picture of Romney “and his running mate,” actually showing a picture of Romney and the Fox News logo. Colbert then proceeded to show Fox News’ Megyn Kelly questioning the issues that had been brought up during the town hall debate. In the town hall, regular people were allowed to ask questions, and Kelly claimed that several of the issues brought up had been new to the election cycle, and that the several questions relating to women’s issues was “pandering to women.” Colbert agreed with Kelly that the issues were a little off topic because it was what the “stupid voters” were interested in. This comment was an obvious criticism of Kelly’s ideas of relevant topics not coinciding with what the actual voters found relevant. As a last stab to Fox News, Colbert referenced an article on the Fox News website about the pre-debate coin toss, where “Romney smoked Obama” winning three out of four tosses. And as a last stab to Romney, Colbert said that he won the coin tosses the same way he was winning the election, “by calling heads over and

¹³⁷ *The Colbert Report*, episode dated October 4, 2012.

¹³⁸ *The First Presidential Debate*. October 3, 2012.

over again, then calling tails, like he always has,” which supported the critics who found Romney to be a flip-flopper. Colbert then asked undecided voters to “just flip a coin already” to help them make a choice.¹³⁹

The third presidential debate had Colbert celebrating a lot less than the previous two had, and he even admitted that the second debate may not have resulted favorably for the conservatives. This debate was about foreign policy, and Colbert critiqued the issues that had been given the most attention. His first clip showed how many times Israel was mentioned in the foreign policy debate, which were quite a few. “This wasn’t just about Israel, it was also about countries that pose a threat to Israel,” Colbert said, with indication of it really being mostly about Israel and her enemies, moving the clips on to Romney saying that Iran was “4 years closer to a nuclear bomb.” Colbert agreed with this statement, saying that when you think about it “everyone is,” implying that trying to blame Obama for Iran being closer to nuclear weapons with those exact words made little sense.¹⁴⁰ The rest of the coverage of the debate covered the discussion on Fox News about what Romney had to communicate to viewers and voters through this debate. This was that he was a “plausible” commander in chief, and the consensus on the network was that he had done that. Colbert mockingly agreed, saying that “millions of Americans looked at him last night and said he looks like he could sit in an oval room.”

The Colbert Report had little coverage of the Vice-presidential debate in the days following it, mostly because Colbert’s persona would not be too interested in such a menial event. In fact, Colbert claimed that he was not going to see the debate, because it was not important enough. But he still had some opinions both in advance and after the fact. He was pretty sure Biden would win, as he had been lowering expectations of his speaking skills for four years. In the run-up to the debate, Colbert did make a point to cover some concerns raised by media outlets about Obama’s relationship to moderator Martha Raddatz. In 1991, when Raddatz married her now ex-husband, Obama was present had her wedding. Colbert shared the concern saying that Obama had probably planned the whole thing, knowing that the panini maker he got the pair would “pay off some day,” and that Raddatz probably thought about the debt she owed Obama every time she made a panini.¹⁴¹ Beyond this there was little coverage of the Vice-presidential debate on *The Colbert Report*.

¹³⁹ *The Colbert Report*, episode dated October 17, 2012.

¹⁴⁰ *The Colbert Report*, episode dated October 23, 2012.

¹⁴¹ *The Colbert Report*, episode dated October 11, 2012.

The greatest example of Stephen Colbert taking on the role of a real news anchor is found in his coverage of the intricate system of campaign finance as the laws allowed during the 2012 election. The biggest change from previous presidential elections had come with a Supreme Court decision handed down in 2010 *Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission*, commonly referred to as *Citizens United*. There had previously been limits on what corporations could donate to campaign, but this decision stated that corporations were to be treated as citizens, a monetary donation was to be considered a form of communicating opinions, and thus under the 1st Amendment to the United States Constitution, corporations had the right to free speech and the right to donate as much of that speech as they wished.¹⁴² The Colbert Report took the reporting of this story a step or two further than most news outlets, by actively using the new laws and regulations to show exactly what this could mean for campaigns now and in the future.

In March of 2011, Stephen Colbert announced that he would form a Political Action Committee (PAC) with the legal advice from lawyer and former chairman of the Federal Election Commission (FEC) Trevor Potter. This was however stomped by Viacom, the company who owns Comedy Central and its shows, including *The Colbert Report*. Viacom decided that the idea of a PAC was a little too risky for them to stand behind because of federal laws limiting corporations' rights to donate to PACs. The donation, in this case, would be the air-time spent on the PAC through Colbert's show and the money spent on paying staff members who prepared the shows. It is not known if this was all part of the plot, although it is fair to assume that the issue had been discussed with their legal department in advance of the announcement. The fact that Viacom stopped the PAC was in any case a great opportunity for Colbert to further delve into the issue of campaign finance.

In April the same year, Colbert again met with Trevor Potter to discuss what to do. Potter came well prepared with a suggestion to start a so-called Super PAC instead, which would give a different type of opportunity for Colbert to run a PAC without creating any risk for Viacom. Colbert was intrigued.¹⁴³ Super PACs had emerged out of the 2010 Supreme Court decision commonly referred to as *Citizens United*, where the US Supreme Court decided that money equals speech and that corporations equal people, essentially allowing corporations donate freely in federal elections under the protection of the First Amendment. These Super PACs, officially named *Independent Expenditure-Only Committees*, were a way

¹⁴² Adam Liptak, "Justices, 5-4, Reject Corporate Spending Limit," *NYTimes.com*.

¹⁴³ *The Colbert Report*, episode dated April 14, 2011.

for corporations to pool their money together and donate to a common cause, in most cases a particular candidate. The 2012 presidential election was the first presidential election since this Supreme Court decision changed the rules of campaign finance, and this became an important aspect of covering the election in the media. For *The Colbert Report*, the Colbert Super PAC became a tool in informing the public of the current state of the American political process. And they showed just how easy it could be to go from very limited to unlimited donations.

When Colbert first learned of the loophole a Super PAC would be for him, Potter explained how he could turn his regular PAC into a Super one. The sketch they played out was a very simplified conversation, almost having Potter explain the process to a child. The simple truth was in tune with Colbert's persona, a man not too concerned with facts, and a very effective way of conveying to the audience the grasp corporate power could have on politics and how easy it now was to circumvent the legalities of corporate donations to a PAC. As Potter explained, the FEC had not yet created separate forms for the two different types of PACs, and all Colbert needed to do to make his original PAC registration now be a Super PAC registration was to add a cover-letter saying this form is meant to be the latter.¹⁴⁴ A few explanatory sentences made the difference for unlimited corporate donations being given legally or not. The proper paperwork was filed and 60 days later, in June 2011, the FEC voted on a request from Colbert regarding permission to talk about his Super PAC on the air. On June 30, Colbert revealed that the FEC had ruled 5-1 in favor of giving him a limited media exemption. This was the final stage in creating the Colbert Super PAC, officially named "Americans for a Better Tomorrow, Tomorrow."¹⁴⁵

The only problem with a Super PAC was that the donations given to it would have to be disclosed, which could mean that certain corporations would avoid donating in order to not lose business due to their political affiliation. On September 29, Trevor Potter came back to show Colbert how to go around that very issue. Colbert and his lawyer took the audience through the simple process of a new loophole in the laws. This particular loophole included filling out a form, known as 501(c) (4), to create a shell corporation. Colbert named his shell corporation Colbert Super PAC SHH, alluding to the fact that this would make his campaign operations "hush-hush." The approval of this form would allow the shell corporation to take secret donations from anyone in the world and then re-donate it all to the Super PAC, and no

¹⁴⁴ *The Colbert Report*, episodes dated April 14 and April 28, 2011.

¹⁴⁵ *The Colbert Report*, episode dated June 30, 2011

one would ever have to know where the money came from. Colbert asked his lawyer: “What is the difference between that and money laundering?” whereupon Potter responded: “It’s hard to say.”¹⁴⁶

The segments covering the Colbert Super PAC were essential in illustrating the way Colbert used satire and humor to show the public exactly what was going on in the political process. This particular issue had the need to define some bureaucratic processes to explain the simplistic manner in which one can exploit the system. A regular investigative news report could perhaps convey the same message, but this would normally not be seen as “sexy” enough to sell as a news story. The fact that it may not have been a top selling story did not hide the fact that it was important information to convey to the public, but the repeated message in the media was simply that “corporations are people.” Colbert’s advantage was the use of comedy, and the fact that the process necessary was ridiculous only strengthened the story. It is arguably somewhat funny how simple it can be to influence politics if you have one or two contacts with money. This story was a recurring segment on *The Report*, and with the program’s entertainment value it brought in faithful viewers night after night, likely giving many of them a deep understanding of what the effects of Citizens united actually are: not just that corporations are people, but that they are secret people with bottomless pocketbooks. With the Colbert Super PAC, Colbert could take the viewers through the story in a detailed way, outlining absurdities and perhaps shocking his audience with the banality of it all, creating an inside scoop situation for them, while at the same time making viewers interested in donating money to his PAC. And his audience donated money to it in droves.

To further illustrate what a Super PAC is capable of, Colbert spent some of his PAC money to produce a political ad and have it air on television in Iowa before the influential starting point of the primary season; the Iowa Caucus and straw poll. Colbert used his ad as an experiment, to see just how much influence an ad and/or endorsement could have on election results. Colbert’s ad featured an endorsement of Rick Parry, which was a deliberate misspelling of actual candidate Rick Perry’s name. Colbert specified that it was Parry with an A, and that this had to be a write-in candidate. Perry with an E was already a write-in candidate himself, because he had not entered the race too late to be on the ballots, he ended up being the only write-in candidate to make the top 10 in the Iowa straw poll.¹⁴⁷ Unfortunately for the Colbert Super PAC, its influence was never proven to exist in this

¹⁴⁶ *The Colbert Report*, episode dated September 29, 2011.

¹⁴⁷ *The Colbert Report*, episode dated August 11, 2011.

particular case because the Republican party refused to release the results of how many were written in as Rick Parry, prompting Stephen Colbert to celebrate that he and his Colbert Nation “may have did it!”¹⁴⁸ The ad experiment did not end up being fruitful in showing how influential a PAC could be, but it did show that a political ad does not have to be of a serious character, or even truthful, to be put on television, as long as it is paid for. In Colbert’s uncovering of what powers a Super PAC can have, there were more experiments to try out; one was to put himself on the ballot for President.

Stephen Colbert had taken a stab at running for president before when he did so in 2008. It was all done as a comedic bit then, and it was no different in 2012, although the agenda was somewhat different. This time, Colbert showed his viewers how a candidate’s relationship with a Super PAC works in legal and practical terms. On January 12, 2012, Colbert decided to get his name on the ballot for “President of the United States of South Carolina,”¹⁴⁹ which meant that he would try to get on the ballot in his home state of South Carolina. According to himself, his decision was based on reports that he was ahead of Republican primary candidate Jon Huntsman in polls in that state. But if Colbert was to be put on the ballot in any state, he would, for legal reasons, have to give up his Super PAC because of FEC rules stating that candidates are in no way allowed to coordinate with Super PACs. Colbert brought back Trevor Potter to help him with the legal side of turning the control of the Colbert Super PAC over to someone else. The choice was to surrender the PAC to Stephen’s friend and producer of his show, Jon Stewart, who he swore not to coordinate with. In the process, the two of them illustrated how easy it can be to find loopholes regarding that rule as well.

By picking Jon Stewart as the new leader of his Super PAC, someone with whom his audience is well aware he can easily coordinate with, Colbert again illustrated a point he had made about several Republican candidates, simply by doing the same thing as them. “Super PACs are often run by people close to the candidate,” Colbert stated earlier in this segment, and continued with several examples: a pro-Romney Super PAC formed by Romney’s lawyer, a Newt Gingrich Super PAC run by a former staff member of the congressman, “and the Rick Perry Super PAC, Make Us Great Again, [which] was started by Mike Toomey who was Perry’s Chief of Staff and co-owns and island with Dave Carney, Perry’s chief

¹⁴⁸ *The Colbert Report*, episode dated August 18, 2011.

¹⁴⁹ *The Colbert Report*, episode dated January 12, 2012.

strategist.”¹⁵⁰ Following these examples, Trevor Potter advised Colbert on what to do with his Super PAC while being a candidate, resulting in Jon Stewart being brought in to take over. Colbert and Stewart first asked Potter whether the two of them being business partners would be a legal problem, with the answer: “being business partners does not count as coordination, *legally*.”¹⁵¹ To make the transfer of power, only one simple document had to be signed. When the Super PAC was no longer legally tied to Colbert, they renamed it “The Definitely not Coordinating with Stephen Colbert Super PAC”. The sketch following the transfer of power again illustrated perfectly what loopholes exist with this non-coordination law. When Stewart was told that he could create attack-ads against Colbert’s opponents as long as there is no coordination, this conversation follows:¹⁵²

Stewart: “Red flag! I’m busy...”

Colbert: “Of course, you have a show.”

Stewart: “Can I legally hire Stephen’s current Super PAC staff to produce these ads that will be in no way coordinated with Stephen?”

Potter: “Yes, as long as they have no knowledge of Stephen’s plans.”

Colbert: “Well, that’s easy. I don’t know what the hell I’m doing. (...) From now on Jon, I will just have to talk about my plans on my television show and just take the risk that you might watch it.”

Stewart: “I don’t even know when it’s on... 11.30 Monday through Thursday.”

With just a few sentences, the three of them were able to show the audience how ridiculous the legal framework of Super PACS can be, and how avoidable the non-coordination rule really is.

Following his announcement about his run for president, Colbert learned that it was too late to get his name on the South Carolina ballot, and he decided to make Herman Cain his proxy. Cain had recently withdrawn from the race, but his name was still on the South Carolina ballot. The following ad from The Definitely not Coordinating with Stephen Colbert Super PAC therefore featured an attack against Stephen and the Super PAC itself and

¹⁵⁰ *The Colbert Report*, episode dated January 12, 2012.

¹⁵¹ *The Colbert Report*, episode dated January 12, 2012.

¹⁵² *The Colbert Report*, episode dated January 12, 2012.

endorsed Herman Cain for president.¹⁵³ On January 25, 2012, Colbert aired clips from his January 21st rally in Charleston, SC, called “Rock Me Like a Herman Cain South Cain-olina Primary Rally” which included Cain himself as a guest. This took place a day before the primary election, and it was said to have had over 5,000 people in attendance. Herman Cain, who had actually suspended his campaign a month before the South Carolina primaries, and was therefore no longer a candidate, ended up with 6,000 votes.¹⁵⁴ This stunt from the Super PAC was thus more successful than the Rick Parry with an A stunt, as the results of the former were visible. The Super PAC and Colbert’s endorsement had in fact been influential. When Colbert’s run for President was officially over, he reclaimed control of his Super PAC, which included the same process as when he shifted power over to Jon Stewart, although Stewart tried to run away with the money in an elaborate segment.¹⁵⁵ The Super PAC project on *The Colbert Report* was for the most part an elaborate comedic bit, with many silly components, but the simple methods used would leave most of Colbert’s viewers well informed about the impact *Citizens United* had on campaign finance, and particularly how rich donors and PACs can influence an election.

After the 2012 election was over, there was no longer a need for the Colbert Super PAC, which was also the case for many other Super PACs. Stephen Colbert firmly believed that Super PACs would decide the election when he first set out to create one, but in the November 12, 2012 episode of his show, he admitted that he may have been wrong, due to the amount of money that was spent through Super PACs on unsuccessfully defeating President Obama in the election. For instance, one report from MSNBC, shown on *The Colbert Report* said that 1.29 percent of Karl Rove’s Super PAC money, which amounted to more than \$100 million, was spent on winning candidates.¹⁵⁶ The fact that Colbert’s Super PAC money was also wasted on unsuccessful candidates, or even non-existing candidates like Rick Parry, made Stephen Colbert decide that it would be best to kill the Super PAC altogether and give his donors “a head on a platter” as a scapegoat, in this case a piece of ham with glasses on it named Ham Rove, Colbert’s parody on Karl Rove.

In the same episode, *The Colbert Report* took the audience through what happens when a Super PAC is dissolved and where the leftover money goes, and Colbert showed an equally disturbing set of loopholes behind the dissolving of such a PAC as he did with the

¹⁵³ *The Colbert Report*, episode dated January 17, 2012.

¹⁵⁴ Padmananda Rama. “Herman Cain Gets ‘A Colbert Bump’ In South Carolina.” *NPR.org*.

¹⁵⁵ *The Colbert Report*, episode dated January 30, 2012.

¹⁵⁶ *The Colbert Report*, episode dated November 12, 2012

running of it. In doing so, he brought back his lawyer Trevor Potter, who told him that he could actually write himself a check of the whole amount left over in the Super PAC. However, this would have to happen openly, with the FEC knowing and having it in its records, but there would be a way to create another so-called 501 (c)(4) run by himself, shift the money into that new 501 (c)(4), and then it would be untraceable and could be used for whatever he wanted. Colbert's favorite part of the entire process may have been that the IRS would have no knowledge of the money, and it would be completely legal.¹⁵⁷ According to Colbert himself, the Super PAC had over \$700,000 left when it was dissolved, which was given to charity.¹⁵⁸

The Colbert Report's coverage of the 2012 election was very much colored by the way they handled the Super PAC issue. This was satire's equivalent to investigative journalism, and it was very informative to those who followed it. Colbert and his team managed to share political news and media critique through the eyes of the satirical persona of Stephen Colbert in a way that shows that the significance the show had during the Bush years has not gone away. Like *The Daily Show's* coverage, this coverage had a thinly veiled bias toward the left throughout, as Colbert ridiculed conservative pundits through his character, and mostly gave Republican candidate Mitt Romney a harder time than he did the President. The way he treated Romney in his coverage was further illustrated when Colbert referred to Romney a few months after the election was over. In a segment about what had gone wrong for the Republicans in the election, Colbert indicated that the party had not been very excited about their own candidate when he could not remember his name. "I thought Hispanics came here to do the jobs Americans don't want to do, like voting for this guy! What is your name? [A picture of Romney appears on screen] It's going to come to me, hold on, I'll remember his name, it's going to come to me. Chip Rancho!"¹⁵⁹

The Colbert Super PAC segments were very valuable news reports, but with the exception of the coverage of the Super PAC, and Colbert's immersion into what he covers, *The Colbert Report* is not a news source in the same way as *The Daily Show* is. This has to do with the way he portrays a character that is not concerned with sharing what is a fact, but what feels right for his conservative agenda. That is what truthiness is all about, feeling what is true in your gut and heart, and not what your brain tells you. For a satirical media critic, and

¹⁵⁷ *The Colbert Report*, episode dated November 12, 2012.

¹⁵⁸ *The Colbert Report*, episode dated November 13, 2012.

¹⁵⁹ *The Colbert Report*, episode dated February 4, 2013.

a critic of certain ideological politicians, this method is ideal. Colbert is perhaps closer to being “fake news,” because of the leaning toward inaccuracy. But the satire is often so sharp, that the audience can catch what is really being said. The show is mimetic of opinion shows, not news shows, so the news items are a little different at times. Colbert’s version of reporting the news was for instance to call out the Romney campaign’s lack of specific plans, and to illustrate some of the ridiculous arguments that came from both sides of the aisle during the election, all of which are based more on opinions than facts.

Chapter 4

Satire as Media Critique

“What the mainstream media can learn from Jon Stewart. No, not to be funny, but to be bold, and to do a better job of cutting through the fog.”¹⁶⁰

The Daily Show with Jon Stewart takes on the role of the fifth estate, or the fifth branch of government, not only by taking on the role of a news show, which would normally be the fourth estate, but also by critiquing the real news shows that are out there covering current events. Had these shows been doing their job, there would be no need for a comedy shows to take over for them. Both Jon Stewart and Stephen Colbert take on the role of media critic, but Stewart does it in a more direct way than Colbert, because he has no persona to keep in character. The previous two chapters have touched upon some of the media critique from these two shows, in how they deal with pundits and the spin zone, and how they imitate the news sources they criticize. Colbert and *The Daily Show*'s correspondents are indirectly critiquing the media by being like so many of the media's important characters and ridiculing them through imitation. Stewart paved his own way as media critic when he in 2004 went on CNN's *Crossfire* and told the hosts to “stop hurting America.”¹⁶¹ This was not the first time that Stewart had raised his voice about what he found to be journalistic incompetence, but it had a greater impact when he actually went into their territory, their studio, gave his opinion, and started turning the wheels that had the show canceled a few months later. In 2004, the hosts of the current events program did not know how to deal with this comedian being so

¹⁶⁰ Smolkin. “What the Mainstream Media Can Learn From Jon Stewart,” *American Journalism Review*, June/July (2007).

¹⁶¹ *Crossfire*, episode dated October 15, 2004.

serious about their lack of competence, but since then, Stewart has shown himself to be an active participant in several debates about public discourse in America, in particular the discourse that comes through the 24-hour news networks. Although he has had harsh words for most of the networks, his arch nemesis has to be Fox News, which he, in part, renamed “Bullshit Mountain” during the 2012 election coverage. In 2011, Stewart claimed, while being interviewed on Fox News, that Fox News viewers were “the most consistently misinformed” news audience in the country.¹⁶²

It is perhaps here we see the most reasons for why *The Daily Show* is still needed in a post-Bush America. Fox News, generally seen as a conservative stronghold in American news media, needs a watchdog to keep an eye on, and expose, what they say about the current administration. The shift we see in whom or what Stewart targets can be attributed to his own political ideology, and that of his writers and producers. Stewart has admitted to his comedy being informed by his political standing, and he also admitted to voting for a Democrat for president more often than not.¹⁶³ While George W. Bush was president, *The Daily Show* often hit him and his administration, as well as Fox News’ support of the government at the time. When Obama took office, much of Stewart’s attention went from the White House to Fox News, with some exceptions. The evidence shows that *The Daily Show* is often harder on politicians and journalists who come from or favor the right than those from the left. And this has to be a factor in understanding the significance of *The Daily Show* as media criticism.

In the past few years, Obama has been the topic of many of Stewart’s media critical segments. For instance, in 2010, a *New York Times* article stated that George W. Bush and Dick Cheney were “long gone” and that Fox News was Stewart’s new “enemy No. 1.”¹⁶⁴ Which could be true considering Stewart’s own words about Fox news: “I visit Fox News every now and again, and it’s nice, because the Eye of Mordor¹⁶⁵ is above the building.”¹⁶⁶ The *Times* article based itself on a segment from *The Daily Show* where Stewart went after *Fox & Friends* when they asked themselves about the shape of a logo for a nuclear security summit. The logo in question was in the shape of a crescent, and that seemed to the *Fox & Friends* team as a deliberate tool for Muslim outreach by President Obama. While *Fox & Friends* left this question up in the air, Stewart had his crew call the White House and simply

¹⁶² *Fox News Sunday*, episode dated June 19, 2011.

¹⁶³ *Fox News Sunday*, episode dated June 19, 2011.

¹⁶⁴ Brian Stelter, “Jon Stewart’s Punching Bag, Fox News,” *NYTimes.com*.

¹⁶⁵ This is a reference to JRR Tolkien’s *Lord of the Rings*, where the Eye of Mordor is the last physical remnant of the evil Sauron, constantly looking for the Ring of Power.

¹⁶⁶ *The Rumble in the Air-Conditioned Auditorium*, October 6, 2012.

ask them, and it turned out the logo was based on The Bohr model of the atom, which had a scientific connection to the topic of this summit.¹⁶⁷ Stewart's problem with the issue was that it was the most important thing they found to cover in regards to the summit, and that they did not bother to check facts, but rather left a question hanging, leaving the viewers at home to decide for themselves what they thought was the right answer. The segment ended on a humorous note with Stewart comparing the Fox News logo to a Third Reich propaganda poster and the flag of Imperial Japan, handing the conclusion over to the audience to figure out if Fox News were comparable to these former enemies of the US.

On Fox News, Stewart's favorite sparring partner looks to be Bill O'Reilly of *The O'Reilly Factor*. The two have appeared on each other's shows several times, and in the midst of all the presidential debates of 2012 the two had a debate between them. Stewart visited O'Reilly's studio in February 2010 for an interview that was aired in two parts on February 3 and 4. This was the first time Stewart had been on *The O'Reilly Factor* since 2004. One of many topics of the interview was how Stewart felt about Fox News in general and Bill O'Reilly in particular. O'Reilly was already well aware of the fact that Stewart was skeptical of the network's credibility, and he asked if the recent Democratic poll results, where Fox News came out as "the most trusted news operation" in America, with 49 percent, were shocking to him. Stewart said he was not shocked, but dismissed the poll by adding that he himself had been voted among the most trusted newscasters in a different online poll. Stewart's problem with Fox news was not how many people trusted their news, but how Fox News mislabeled their non-news products as news. O'Reilly disagreed, saying that their viewers would know which programs were actually news and which were purely opinion programs.

O'Reilly: "It's kind of like a newspaper. You've got news pages, (...) and then you open another page, and there is the opinion page. Clearly labeled, opinion page."

Stewart: "First of all, newspapers are a passive piece of paper that you go to, and you know where the opinion thing is. Television doesn't function that way, and you know it."

¹⁶⁷ *The Daily Show*, episode dated April 14, 2010.

O'Reilly: "You don't think people know *The Factor* is an opinion show?"

Stewart: "It's not – certainly not clearly labeled. I've looked at your promos. You're a part of the fair and balanced part. You're part of the most trusted name in news. (...) Here's the brilliance of Fox News. What you have been able to do, you and Dr. Ailes¹⁶⁸ have been able to mainstream conservative talk radio."¹⁶⁹

As far as how Stewart felt about O'Reilly in particular, he was a little more vague, saying that O'Reilly was the voice of reason on the network now, adding "which quite frankly..." and leaving it at that. In this interview, Stewart may have been vague about his criticism of Bill O'Reilly, but that has not always been the case. In 2012, for example, Stewart named O'Reilly the mayor of Bullshit Mountain.¹⁷⁰ This was not the first, not the last, time Stewart went head to head with a Fox News pundit.

In June 2011, Stewart was a guest on *Fox News Sunday* with Chris Wallace. The big issues they discussed were media bias and where Stewart fits into the media context. In this interview, Stewart left most of his usage of both satire and the Socratic Method behind, and focused on being frank and upfront about his opinions about the media. Although Wallace and Stewart disagreed on many things, the two had a good conversation about the problems in the media today. Wallace started off by confronting Stewart with his own quote about the Fox News Organization: "A biased organization, relentlessly promoting an ideological agenda under the rubric of being a news organization, (...) a relentless agenda-driven 24-hour news opinion propaganda delivery system." Stewart immediately confirmed that this was how he felt. Wallace wanted to know if this could be said about any of the other news organizations out there, and Stewart said it could not, but that MSNBC may be attempting to become that: "They've looked at your [Fox News'] business model and they have seen the success of it. And I think they're attempting to be a more activist organization."¹⁷¹

Stewart's opinion on the rest of the media, and partly also including Fox News, was that the bias found in most of it today leans toward "sensationalism and laziness," rather than a liberal bias, which was what Wallace was getting at. Wallace's opinion was that the vast

¹⁶⁸ Stewart is referring to Roger Ailes, President of Fox News.

¹⁶⁹ *The O'Reilly Factor*, episode dated February 3, 2010.

¹⁷⁰ Jon Stewart, *The Rumble*, October 6th, 2012.

¹⁷¹ *Fox News Sunday*, episode dated June 19, 2011.

majority of the media has a liberal agenda, and that Fox News tells the story from the other side, which was still admitting that Fox News has a bias, just on the opposite side of the liberal agenda. Stewart's take on this bias was slightly different, attributing Chris Wallace the role of balance maker in the Fox News organization, saying that Wallace was likely there as to balance out the more conservative part of the organization, using examples like Sean Hannity and Glenn Beck, who both had opinion shows on Fox News at the time (Beck has since left the network) "otherwise, it's just pure talk radio." In Stewart's opinion, "talk radio" in this context is not news, but has only opinionated rhetoric, like for instance what Rush Limbaugh has in his program. "I think that you are here in some respects to bring a credibility and an integrity to an organization that might not otherwise have it, without your presence," Stewart said about Wallace, again not veiling his feelings for the Fox News Channel.

Wallace was also focused on Stewart's bias and agenda in his reporting, where Stewart came out strongly against that having any significance. Stewart claimed to be a comedian first, and whatever else came second. "Am I an activist in your mind?" Stewart asked Wallace, and Wallace answered in the affirmative. Stewart added that his comedy was "informed by an ideological background." Wallace used a TV Critic from the *Baltimore Sun*, David Zurawik, as a counterweight to this. According to Wallace, Zurawik claimed that the comedian defense was how Stewart dodged any accountability in his media criticism and that when Stewart "is wrong, he goes on a tap dance of saying he's only a comedian and shouldn't be taken seriously."¹⁷² The fact that this is seen as a problem by both a TV critic and a political TV host, and many others, says that Stewart's media criticism has a place in the media world, even if they do not agree with what he says. Stewart agreed to some extent that he had some accountability, adding that although he was a comedian first, it was not all he was, and that a lot of his comedy had political under- and overtones. Wallace took it a bit further to describe Stewart as a "political commentator." This has many times been at the essence of the argument for or against naming Stewart as an important figure in political and public discourse. Is he what he himself says he is, or what everyone else says he is? The answer to that is a little difficult to pinpoint, but is perhaps found somewhere in between. Stewart even agrees that he has some credibility in this realm, but is under the impression that it should not be that way. "The embarrassment," he argued with Wallace, "is that I'm given credibility in this world because of the disappointment that the public has in what the news media does." This is where scholars and Stewart both agree and disagree. They agree about

¹⁷² *Fox News Sunday*, episode dated June 19, 2011.

the problems in the media that have opened a path for satire to be seen as credible, but they do not necessarily agree that this is a bad thing altogether. The scholars of satire presented in Chapter 1, seem intrigued by the significance of these satire programs, perhaps because that is exactly what they study. Then again, political satire is not a new thing, and Stewart made a point of that as well. In Stewart's opinion, Wallace was acting as if *The Daily Show* is something new, and Stewart did not see it that way: "I've existed in this country forever. There have been people like me who satirize the political process and who have satirized – what was it that Will Rogers said? You know, how crazy is it when politicians are a joke and comedians are taken seriously?"¹⁷³ Wallace dismissed this comment to an extent, and the two continued talking about the biases found in the media today. They returned to the liberal agenda and its attack on the conservative movement, and Stewart seemed to meet Wallace in the middle agreeing that there are liberal viewpoints in the media that have sometimes lead to people on the right being racist and homophobic, for instance, "with an ease" that Stewart was not comfortable with, although he admitted to being guilty of doing the same thing.¹⁷⁴ It did not look as though the two found much to agree upon, and Wallace admitted that he was still trying to "get" Stewart, which he did not achieve through this interview. The feelings were probably mutual. The conversation was a good example of Stewart's media criticism, telling it straight to those in question what he finds to be a problem, even if it does not change anything. Stewart has visited Bullshit Mountain many times, without having his views of it changed.

Stewart first renamed Fox News, along with a number of conservative pundits, politicians, and their followers and audience denizens of Bullshit Mountain, when the story about Mitt Romney's infamous 47 percent comment broke in September 2012. The story came when a video surfaced and was published online by *Mother Jones*, a left-wing political magazine, showing Romney talk at a private fundraiser in May of the same year. Romney was filmed in secret and thought he was speaking off the record. Some comments he made became infamous and were widely discussed on both sides of the political aisle. Romney told his listeners that about 47 percent of the country did not pay income tax, and that it was not his job to worry about these people as they would not vote for him anyway, continuing to say that he would "never convince them they should take personal responsibility and care for their

¹⁷³ *Fox News Sunday*, episode dated June 19, 2011.

¹⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

lives.”¹⁷⁵ Stewart, in his news anchor role, reported on the video itself as a video of Romney “talking to rich people about poorer people in a manner you would imagine cartoon rich people talk about cartoon poorer people”, and followed up his comment with a side-by-side portrait of Romney and cartoon character C. Montgomery Burns, the very wealthy plant owner from *The Simpsons*.¹⁷⁶ He quickly set aside his comedy, though, and got down to the actual numbers of what Romney was talking about. Of the 47 percent, he claimed, “nearly two thirds of those do pay payroll taxes, meaning: they workin’, they just ain’t workin’ hard enough.” An example of someone in that situation would be a family of five making \$50,000 a year. The rest of the 47 percent were made up by people who worked, but made less than \$20,000 a year, the elderly, and those on welfare, including veterans. This was an example of Stewart reporting the news in a not so fake way, what followed showed him as a critic of how those who claim to be real news reported on the same story.

Although the secretly filmed speech from the May fundraiser included many aspects of Romney’s policies and his relationship to the American people, nothing he said in it got as much attention as his comment about the 47 percent. Stewart followed up on the way parts of the media handled the comment on his show on September 19th. The segment revolved around the way the video was talked about on Fox News, or “Romney Campaign Headquarters,” as Stewart referred to the network in this particular context. The segment was titled “Chaos on Bullshit Mountain,” and showed several clips from different Fox News shows, including *The O’Reilly Factor*, *Hannity* and *Fox & Friends*, seemingly trying to spin the comments made by Romney into something other than him saying that nearly half the country consisted of, as Stewart put it, moochers.¹⁷⁷ *The Daily Show* created several rounds of clips to show the audience what the collective response from Fox News seemed to be, serving up three different messages from the Fox News staff in addition to a contradiction: The first few clips show Fox News profiles talking about the credibility of the source, telling viewers to remember that *Mother Goose* is a leftist magazine, in *Fox & Friends*’ Brian Kilmeade’s words one that “no one reads,”¹⁷⁸ and that the grandson of former Democratic President Jimmy Carter played an important part in getting this video into the public eye. In other words, this was an attack from the left, and should not be allowed to waste people’s time. The next few clips also acknowledged that Romney said what he said, but focus on the fact that he did not mean it

¹⁷⁵ David Corn. “Full Secret Video of Private Romney Fundraiser.” *MotherJones.com*.

¹⁷⁶ *The Daily Show*, episode dated September 18, 2012

¹⁷⁷ *The Daily Show*, episode dated September 19, 2012.

¹⁷⁸ *The Daily Show*, episode dated September 19, 2012.

exactly as he said it. Most clips discussed how he could have put it more eloquently, and one person argued that the meaning of the whole speech was that Romney wanted the American Dream to be open to anyone, the message here being that what Romney said had just come out wrong. Round 3 showed the opinion that Romney was simply telling the truth, that these were the facts, and one claimed that this episode would be an ultimate win for Romney. At the end of these clips, Stewart summed it all up: “This in-artfully stated, dirty, liberal smear is a truthful expression of Mitt Romney’s political philosophy and it is a winner. Let me tell you, you don’t summit Bullshit Mountain unless you know your way around a turd or two.”¹⁷⁹

The Fox News spin on this video continued with a variety of pundits brushing it off as a distraction from the real issues of the campaigns; like unemployment and the national debt. In one clip, a guest on *Fox & Friends*, Laura Ingraham, stated: “You can’t actually discuss serious issues today in the campaign; you have to move on to secretly recorded videos.” Jon Stewart cut in to say that if they wished only to discuss real issues, they could “have at it.” The show then went back to Fox News clips that showed some of the same people discussing a new video that had surfaced with President Obama saying something he perhaps should not have. “Are there *no* rules on Bullshit Mountain?” Stewart asked. “The Obama video is pertinent, but the Romney video is a distraction. Why?” One answer came from a clip of Sean Hannity saying that the Romney video was from “way back in May,” insinuating that 4 months was a very long time ago. So when was this more important video of Obama recorded? It turned out it was a recording from 1998. Stewart sarcastically agreed that 4 months would be a long enough time for Mitt Romney to completely change his political views, but the fact that the video from 1998 was not a distraction in Fox News’ eyes proved a contradicting approach to their own claimed values.

Stewart took some time to discuss “the core of Bullshit Mountain.” The core, as Stewart explained, was the idea that the country is divided into two parts, where half of Americans are hard-working patriots and the other half are lazy, and that the current president has somehow taken from the hard workers and given to the lazy. A few clips from *Hannity* were again used as examples, where one talked about 49 percent of Americans living in a household where at least one person is receiving government handouts, including people on welfare and Medicare. *The Daily Show* added to the list of receivers of government handouts, to prove that Sean Hannity’s list left out a few important ones, for example such companies as

¹⁷⁹ *The Daily Show*, episode dated September, 19, 2012

AT&T and Exxon Mobil, in addition to such issues as tax breaks given to investors, where Stewart named Mitt Romney a “poster-boy for that element of the moochocracy.” As evidence, Stewart offered the math on how much money Romney saved in tax breaks in 2010 alone, which amounted to \$4.56 million. Stewart ended his tirade against Fox News and the political right with saying that the people on Bullshit Mountain believe that “if *they* have success, they built it. If they failed, the *government* ruined it for them. If *they* get a break they deserve it, if *you* get a break it’s a handout and an entitlement. It’s a baffling, willfully blind cognitive dissonance best summed up by their head coach in what is perhaps my favorite sound-bite of all time,” where they cut to a clip from a former Fox News show headed by Glenn Beck where actor Craig T. Nelson contradicts himself by saying: “I’ve been on food stamps and welfare, anybody help me out? No.”¹⁸⁰ Stewart repeated much of what he said here in his opening statement of the debate he had with Bill O’Reilly on October 6th, 2012, where he also called out O’Reilly as the mayor of Bullshit Mountain.¹⁸¹

The debate called *The Rumble in the Air-Conditioned Auditorium* was held at George Washington University in Washington D.C., and was moderated by CNN’s E.D. Hill. It featured O’Reilly and Stewart behind each their podium draped in red, white and blue. It was clear that they ready for both comedy and some actual discussion. The comedy started it all off, with Stewart on an automated lift behind his podium. At the beginning of the debate he would raise himself to look taller, as he is noticeably shorter than O’Reilly (9 inches, according to Hill), with a special focus on raising himself up when he had said something clever. This feature was left alone after a while, as the two got into talking about real issues where they for the most part disagreed. Bill O’Reilly was allowed to start off the debate with an opening statement devoted to some issues Stewart had critiqued on his show, including the 47 percent comment. O’Reilly, who had defended the comment when the story broke, saying that if he had been Romney he would have “run with it,”¹⁸² took a step back from defending the comment itself. O’Reilly did, however, defend the point made by Romney, stating that there are “slackers” out there, but Romney missed the mark by about 27%. Jon Stewart, the media critic, listened to O’Reilly’s arguments about Romney, and how the left had to stop blaming Bush for the amount of spending Obama was behind. According to O’Reilly, Obama had by October 2012 spent more than all the other presidents combined if we disregard World

¹⁸⁰ *The Daily Show*, episode dated September 19, 2012

¹⁸¹ Jon Stewart in *The Rumble*, October 6th, 2012.

¹⁸² *The Daily Show*, episode dated September 19, 2012.

War II, among other things.¹⁸³ When O'Reilly was finished, Stewart said that his "friend Bill O'Reilly" was "completely full of shit," before he started off talking about Bullshit Mountain, and pleaded to its mayor (O'Reilly) for him and its denizens, as he called them, to come down and join the regular people on common ground.

"What is wrong with this country is not that we face problems that we have not faced before. We face a deficiency in our problem solving mechanism. And the reason we face a difficulty in our problem solving mechanism is that a good portion of this country has created an alternate universe. (...) I call this alternate reality; I call this place where these folks live, Bullshit Mountain. The denizens of Bullshit Mountain believe many things (...) but until we can agree on a reality that exists in this country, you [O'Reilly] and those denizens believe that we face a cataclysm, a societal cataclysm between freedom and socialism. And on Bullshit Mountain, our problems are amplified and our solutions simplified, and that's why they won't work."¹⁸⁴

Stewart's opening statement was humorous at times, but he turned serious towards the end, when talking about the need for a common reality. This statement was at the core of what Stewart had been saying about the media, particularly Fox News, in the weeks and months before this debate. Bullshit Mountain illustrated the idea that had been allowed to grow around the country; the alternate reality he referred to where Obama was a socialist (even communist) president, where he was out to take hard earned money from people's hands and give it to the moochers who had no need for it, but wanted it, and where hardworking people's rights and freedoms were being infringed upon for the sake of those same moochers or others less worthy. In Stewart's illustration, Fox News served as a megaphone, spreading these ideas from one pundit or one politician to the masses, to those who were willing to listen. Stewart and O'Reilly got into these issues on several occasions throughout the debate, and Stewart tried to call out O'Reilly on being part of the problem, not the solution. One such issue was about a female student at Georgetown University in D.C., Sandra Fluke, who was denied speaking at a congressional hearing about why contraception should be covered by health insurance. Stewart's claim was that this was a health issue for women, but many

¹⁸³ Bill O'Reilly in *The Rumble*, October 6, 2012.

¹⁸⁴ Jon Stewart in *The Rumble*, October 6, 2012.

conservatives argued that it was all about giving young women an opportunity to be promiscuous. Conservative radio talk show host Rush Limbaugh went as far as calling Fluke a “slut” on the air merely based on her views on contraceptives.¹⁸⁵ Stewart argued that having contraceptives covered by health insurance based on possible promiscuity was a double standard, as Viagra was already covered for those who could need that.¹⁸⁶

In the same debate, the moderator asked about media bias, quoting vice-presidential candidate Paul Ryan who had said that there is a liberal bias in most of the media, and that this part of the media want a “very left-of-center president.” Stewart’s response to this was that there may be a portion of people in the media who place themselves to the left, but that most of the organizations that deliver news are not activists. He referred to Fox News’ conservative bias as “an overreaction” to the so-called liberal agenda, saying that they were an auto-immune disease against falsely claimed liberal activist organizations like NBC, CBS and ABC.¹⁸⁷ When O’Reilly responded with the profits made by Fox News per year, Stewart quickly added sarcastically; “Yes, you can’t make money selling crap in this country, that’s for sure,” accompanied by a great deal of laughter from the audience. Again, Stewart uses his comedy infused with straight-shooting to critique what the Fox News hosts are doing, which tends to be what he does when he is face-to-face with his opponents. But *The Daily Show* also uses other methods to show their disdain for the job the media is doing.

You cannot get around talking about the correspondents from *The Daily Show* when discussing the way the show communicates critique. They are the ones that, like Colbert, play an exaggerated version of media figures today to make a point of the issues the media faces. After the second presidential debate, John Oliver assembled a panel of experts to analyze how the debate went, just like many news sources had done and would do after each debate. The panel consisted of experts on body language and auras, a pageant judge, a man who worked at a tie store, a woman who did not speak English, an easily bored teenaged girl, someone who had recently had knee surgery, and a yenta. Stewart thought this was a somewhat ridiculous group of people to gather for such a panel, and Oliver agreed; “That’s because it was, Jon.”¹⁸⁸ In the clip, Oliver showed the debate to this panel and wanted them to react in real-time. He started the tape, and stopped it as soon as both candidates had entered the stage and shook

¹⁸⁵ Jack Mirkinson. “Rush Limbaugh: Sandra Fluke, Woman Denied Right To Speak At Contraception Hearing, A ‘Slut.’” *HuffingtonPost.com*.

¹⁸⁶ Jon Stewart in *The Rumble*, October 6, 2012

¹⁸⁷ Jon Stewart in *The Rumble*, October 6, 2012

¹⁸⁸ *The Daily Show*, episode dated October 17, 2012.

hands, asking who the panel thought was winning so far. Many answered Obama, but the body language expert said it was too soon to tell. “Because both walked on to the middle of the stage, shook hands, and literally nothing else has happened so far,” Oliver added. “Exactly,” replied the expert. Next the tie salesman discussed the tie Romney was wearing and said that it had an English stripe as opposed to an American stripe, this was new information for everyone else in the panel, because none of them were tie experts, but this fact made at least one panelist turn against Romney for not picking American. To expand on the ridiculous nature, Oliver tested what the panel thought of the debate with no sound on, and what they thought about it with the audio from an episode of *CSI Miami* running over the footage from the debate. The latter made the debate more enjoyable in the panelist’s eyes. Oliver then left his panel to go to another room where another panel was waiting. These experts were analyzing what the first panel was doing. Finally he left for another room, where the only panel that mattered was sitting. This panel was one man who Oliver called “Ohio voter.” When this man said Obama won the debate, Oliver concluded “Obama it is then, because you are the only one who counts. What a waste of time.”¹⁸⁹

This segment pointed to a variety of criticisms *The Daily Show* had with the media during the campaign. The first was the fact that most news networks would organize for so-called experts to analyze a wide variety of facial expressions, hand gestures, and general body language, all in the name of figuring out who had won a debate or who had come across as more presidential at rallies or in speeches. This was a common denominator for all media outlets. The criticism of the media being distracted from what was really going on was something the show delivered to all networks. The second criticism, also dubbed a distraction, was the amount of attention the media, and candidates, give to swing states like Ohio. Stewart talked about this concern when facing O’Reilly in *The Rumble* as well.¹⁹⁰ This criticism was given just by doing what the media was doing, but in a satirical way, of course. The correspondents were also visible as media critics during the conventions, like when Aasif Mandvi reported from the Republican National Convention as he was reporting from a storm, dressed in a hooded rain jacket to protect himself from the sweat from all the hardworking Americans who were in the convention center. This critiqued what Stewart referred to as a draw toward sensationalism in the media, and was a stab at the constant reporting from hurricanes that had become increasingly popular in the media in recent years.

¹⁸⁹ *The Daily Show*, episode dated October 17, 2012.

¹⁹⁰ Jon Stewart in *The Rumble*, October 6, 2012.

On election night, November 6, 2012, *The Daily Show* aired live at 11 pm and mocked the election night coverage of news networks, perhaps CNN in particular with their extravagant hologram technology from 2008. The opening to the show listed all guests and correspondents featured on the show, which included the hologram of Edward R. Murrow¹⁹¹, the former American news anchor, who has often been referred to as one of the most important journalists in American broadcast history. Murrow did not make a holographic appearance, but former president George Washington, played by Jason Jones, did. The opening also included journalists like Anderson Cooper (CNN), Bob Schieffer (CBS), Tom Brokaw (former anchor of *NBC Nightly News*), and Fox news contributor judge Andrew Napolitano. These people did not actually appear on the show, but had filmed the opening segment in the studio in advance. The opening credits were narrated by actor Patrick Stewart. Throughout the show, Stewart talked to his correspondents who had various technologies to use in order to ridicule those who try to use it in a serious manner. John Oliver had several touchscreens to follow the developments on, including one strapped to each arm, one on the wall and a smartphone he used to send Instagrams of himself to the other screens. Stewart stayed in his news anchor role and reported on election results, while checking in with his correspondents from time to time. Wyatt Cenac and Al Madrigal were there with each their laptop to analyze the results, and the results they were reporting on were that Hillary Clinton would win the election of 2016 over Jeb Bush, which would probably be the topic of discussion on several news programs as soon as this election was over.

When the election show was nearing its end, and Stewart had projected Obama as the winner, to big cheers from the crowd, Stewart threw to Colbert in a split screen asking what his take was on what had happened. Colbert quickly stopped him saying he could not start his show “knowing anything about what [his] show is about.” He followed up saying: “I enter every show like a newborn baby... clean slate, no preconceptions.” After a little back-and-forth, Stewart wished Colbert a happy election night. “It’s election night? Why did you tell me? I said no spoilers!”¹⁹² This led into *The Colbert Report* for the evening, also live, and the show had a new opening graphic with an elephant beating up a donkey outside of the White House. The way Colbert acted was very much in character, and at the core of how he is a media critic by acting like the media. He continued playing the conservative when he said the election was still up in the air, even though Stewart had projected Obama as the winner

¹⁹¹ *The Daily Show*, episode dated November 6, 2012.

¹⁹² *The Daily Show*, episode dated November 6, 2012.

10-15 minutes earlier. But it did not take him long to report that Obama had won. His rant afterwards, was in large part a criticism of Fox News and other media outlets owned by Rupert Murdoch: “Fine, America, it’s your funeral. We tried to warn you about this guy, with a multimedia empire telling you he was an America-hating, socialism-loving, anti-capitalist, wealth-redistributor who was possibly lying about his birthplace, and his religion. (...) We job-creators are not going to take it. We are going Galt, just like in Ayn Rand’s *Atlas Shrugged*, we are going to leave all you parasites behind, and relocate to an island where only rich people can live. Manhattan.” These ideas were not far off from what could be heard on conservative talk shows during the campaign season. Colbert continued talking about the dangers of Obamacare and socialism, in true conservative pundit fashion.¹⁹³ He also referred to America as a girl who had chosen the wrong boy to date, listing the things America could have had if she had chosen Romney.

Both *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report* act as critics of the media. Stewart allows himself to do it directly, while Colbert does it through mimicking. This is where they find themselves doing the most important job of the fifth estate, showing the media that they are doing something wrong, and informing the public of these wrongdoings so they can keep a critical eye on the information they receive.

¹⁹³ *The Colbert Report*, episode dated November 6, 2012.

Chapter 5

Conclusion

As the first chapter stated, there is little doubt that *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* and *The Colbert Report* have acted as the fifth estate in an American context for quite some time. Most scholars wrote about this during an era of conservative leadership, with George W. Bush as president, and one of the questions of the thesis was whether it was still the case under new leadership with Obama. The findings of this thesis show that these two shows still have a standing as the fifth estate. They are mainly critics of the way American media runs, with particular emphasis on the 24-hour news networks, and with this criticism they sometimes take over the job they think the media is not adequately doing, and sometimes they simply mock the way the media is in fact working. In chapter 2, the research was focused on how *The Daily Show* covered the 2012 election, and how it took over the job of some media outlets to become a source for news itself. The most interesting aspects of this are how the show reports the news, and what methods they use to get the points across. The fact that it sometimes resembles a news source, does not take away from the fact that the show is first and foremost a comedy show on a comedy network. But the show gets many of its laughs from being honest and straightforward with the audience, and the fact that the audience is commonly on the same page as Stewart is does not hurt. Stewart is a fairly liberal host, and his audience members are generally young and feel the same way, even if they are not all “stoned slackers,” as Bill O’Reilly put it. When Stewart covered the Republican National Convention, and showed clips of politician after politician talking about how they had built their own success in accordance with the ideals of the American Dream, he only needed five words to, first of all tear down everything they had said, and second get the viewers on his

side. “Republicans have shitty lives too,” stated that the party that is often seen as the wealthy one were only pandering to those in the public who hope to become successful someday, and underlined how politicians twist the truth to fit a narrative. The narrative of the evening was that we all build our own success, and in a miraculous way, all the speakers that day had struggled from rags to riches. In these instances, Stewart is “cutting through the fog”¹⁹⁴ and exposing what is really going on.

In the work Stewart did with his correspondents, covering both the conventions and the debates, the show used a few other methods to report on what was behind the fog, if you will. When Samantha Bee took to the convention halls in Tampa and asked delegates about Romney’s right to choose, she proved the double standards that these people had about choice without the delegates even noticing, at least as far as us viewers could see. Some of the credit must go to the editors of the show as well. Whoever was to blame, the delegates did not come off as intelligent. This segment was also an example of where the show would use the Socratic Method to an extent. Judith Barad argued that this method was mostly used by Stewart himself, but within the context of the election coverage, this was more often used by correspondents. In the segment where John Oliver ridicules both political parties’ image of Obama, Oliver and Stewart used exaggeration and imagery to prove the point that both ideas of this person were insane. The fact that Oliver and Stewart were saying all this as comedians, allowed them to not worry about accuracy or convention, leaving them with the opportunity to say exactly what they were thinking.

Even though it can seem like *The Daily Show* gives conservatives a harder time than anyone else, the show did take a deeper look at Democratic delegates and their feelings toward typical Republican stereotypes. The results of the interviews among delegates in Charlotte showed that the Democratic Party has a long way to go if they want to call themselves the party of inclusion, particularly when one stated that conservatives were “a bunch of gun-toting, hillbilly Tea Partiers.”¹⁹⁵ This type of reporting will not be seen in a regular news cast, and it is hard to say whether it should be or not. The correspondents do sometimes trap their interviewees in their own words, and that would probably not be part of the journalistic convention and ethics. It is, however, helpful because it shows that after all is said and done both Republican and Democratic delegates are only human.

¹⁹⁴ Smolkin, “What the Mainstream Media Can Learn From Jon Stewart.”

¹⁹⁵ *The Daily Show*, episode dated September 5, 2012.

When Stewart covered Bill Clinton's convention speech, we got to see how he really felt, not only about Clinton, but about other politicians in comparison. Stewart could again hide behind his comedian cape, and say what was on his mind. He praised Clinton for using math and logic as if it was something no one else had done. This showed Stewart as a news man and as a political commentator, as he clearly stated that politicians rarely talk about anything of substance that regular people can understand. The criticism was mostly directed towards Paul Ryan, whose budget was being explained by Clinton in terms the public could understand. Paul Ryan had never really talked about the specifics of his budget, and Clinton helped point that out.

Although Stewart was happy to criticize Obama for his poor performance in the first debate, most of the criticism and mockery landed on Republicans, which reflected what Stewart said to Chris Wallace in 2011, that his comedy was informed by political ideology. And although Colbert has not admitted to having a liberal bias, he also let the fair share of his criticism and mockery fall on the Republicans. But Colbert's approach is somewhat different from Stewart's. Colbert's persona is a very solidly built character, and he always sticks to his guns, and that's why *The Colbert Report* is less of a news source than *The Daily Show*. This does not mean that Colbert is not cutting through the fog as well, but his methods are very different, and that is what the findings of chapter 3 show. Colbert did not bother to get into detail about what happened at the conventions or during the debates. It can look as though Colbert's comedy is much more fitting within the realms of satire than Stewart's because Colbert plays this character. Colbert's coverage was in many ways more comedy-ridden, with his focus on some of the smaller, inconsequential stories from the campaign trail, like the comparison between Romney and former president Polk, or the Etch-a-Sketch gaffe. By putting himself in the position of a conservative pundit, Colbert lived through those moments with feeling, and created laughs for both his studio audience and viewers at home. But did he leave us with the feeling of having exposed any truths? Perhaps not, but in one case he really followed through on uncovering the truth, when he launched his own Super PAC to expose the recently changed campaign finance standards. The Colbert Super PAC, his run for President of South Carolina, and the inner working of his PAC and campaign exposed more than enough for people to see that the Supreme Court decision in *Citizens United* had impacted election campaign in a major way. No other news outlet covered the story with such depth, which is understandable in a way. First of all, a news outlet cannot be as selective with what they cover as Colbert can, and second, a news outlet will have certain rules to follow

that Colbert can find a way out of. Like Stewart, Colbert, as a comedian, can say and do almost whatever he wants.

Colbert's persona, imitating the political pundits, with emphasis on conservatives, is a good vessel for media critique, and the chapter that was going to look at Colbert as a newsman ended up showing him as a blend of that and a critic. His criticism stayed somewhat hidden in his persona, yet thinly veiled. And with a persona that mocks a certain set of media figures, there is bound to be criticism found in almost anything they do. In chapter 4, the research was focused on Jon Stewart as a media critic. The reason for that was that he does not hide himself behind a persona, and therefore has a way of being direct when he can. And the research showed that the direct attitude he showed on *Crossfire* in 2004 had not gone away. His direct criticism of Fox News anchors Bill O'Reilly and Chris Wallace proved that he still has issues with the current climate in American media. The various ways he criticized the different media outlets during the election cycle (2011-2012) showed that most of his critique goes to Fox News. In criticizing other networks, he focused on the distractions and the laziness found in media today, for instance he criticized CNN's hang-up on fancy technology by making fun of it, brushing it off as them being silly. He also claimed that the media in general showed a draw towards sensationalism rather than what was truly important, without always specifying what that may be. When it came to Fox News, Stewart was relentless in his criticism, and again we find his comedy and criticism perhaps informed by his own political ideology. This does not mean that he is not right to criticize Fox News more than other networks, but it is still important to note that Stewart is himself not without bias and should therefore also be understood through critical thinking. None of the scholars who have written about *The Daily Show* as a possible news source or fifth estate, have given this bias much consideration, and that could be because it does not matter all that much. The criticism is valid, and the only counterargument comes from Fox News' hosts themselves. But in any case, *The Daily Show* may be the type of program Neil Postman was describing when he called for a television show to teach the public how to watch other television shows. And as Postman warned, this television show could end up as just another part of the problem. And while we are on the subject of Postman, he argued that the problem was *how* people watch television, and that shows itself in the context of *The Daily Show* vs. Fox News, when scholars agree that the viewers of *The Daily Show* agree with the ideology that is being upheld on that show, and the viewers of Fox News agree with their ideology. It is then only in

instances when Stewart visits Fox News shows, or people like O'Reilly visit his that anyone can truly get a different opinion than their own presented about the subject.

In terms of *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report* acting as the fifth estate, they are still relevant in the post-Bush era. Even though a Democrat holds the office of President, politicians on both sides will still need to be checked and put in their place, and the two shows are not always cheering for Obama. The methods the two shows use vary, but are mostly effective and funny while thought provoking. They each find their methods from the satire genre and use them quite well. On the question of whether the shows are important in current political discourse, there are several answers. The fact that they are still relevant also makes them important. When the Republican Party had a post-mortem of their election results, they found these shows that many of them had tended to avoid, to be important tools in youth outreach, and put the shows in their plan to go forward as something more Republicans should consider appearing on. And their media critique gives both shows an important role in political media discourse. Fox News is the most viewed cable news network in America, and “with great power comes great responsibility.”¹⁹⁶ These satire shows are there to make sure that anchors are doing the job they are meant to do, and letting them hear it if they are not. Fox News gets the heavy load of criticism because of their monopoly in news shows with a conservative ideology, and because of their popularity all over America. It is this author's opinion, that it will not matter which party is control of the White House, the Senate, or the House, as long as the public and political discourse finds itself being as polarized as it is today, the US will need the fifth estate to help shine a light on the issues of the day, and both *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report* have taken on that role successfully.

¹⁹⁶ Borrowed from character Ben Parker in the movie *Spiderman* (2002)

Afterword

For Further Research

Hindsight is 20/20, and if I had known what I know now, I would probably have chosen a different case study than the election of 2012. For further research it could be interesting to see exactly how they treat the Obama administration, and there has been plenty of criticism from both shows in the past year to study in that regard. The election of 2012 had Mitt Romney, who turned out to be very “mockable”, and most of the coverage was focused on him and the Republicans. Or perhaps the shows were just too nice to the Democrats.

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