

Is “Fake News” the New News?

The Effect of “The Daily Show” on Media and Political Knowledge

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Abstract

One can hardly argue the impact that “The Daily Show” and “Colbert Report” have had on popular culture. But do these shows also hold an impact on journalism and political knowledge? In other words, are “The Daily Show” and “Colbert Report” reasonable sources of news? Using data gathered by the Pew Research Center in April of 2008, and by myself through a survey of Bemidji State University students enrolled in political science courses, I attempt to answer the following questions: Are people who watch either “The Daily Show” or “Colbert Report” more informed than their counterparts? Do people who watch these types of programs also get news from other sources?

Introduction

In the winter of 2008, I was skimming through the TIME magazine when I came across the phrase “The Colbert Bump”, which is the bump in poll numbers presidential candidates experience after they appear on the *Colbert Report*. A similar show, *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*, which helped launch Stephen Colbert and his *Colbert Report*, hosted all the major presidential candidates during the 2008 campaign season. In addition, Jon Edwards announced his candidacy on *The Daily Show* in 2004, and Joe Biden appeared on the show the same day he announced his candidacy in late 2007. Senator John McCain has appeared on the show a total of 13 times, and feels it’s an excellent way to reach out to young voters. Furthermore, *The Daily Show* was invited to cover both the Republican National Conventions and the Democratic National Conventions in 2004 and 2008. While both of these shows purport themselves to be

“fake”, it does seem that they hold at least enough legitimacy to be considered players in the political scene.

The reciprocal relationship between media and politics is one that has been well documented. However, it does seem that a new genre is emerging – the “infotainment” genre. This new genre goes for style over substance, and *The Daily Show* and *Colbert Report* (hereafter referred to as *TDS* and *CR*, respectively) are no exception. Both shows feature somewhat garish graphics, a script relying heavily on humor, and both hosts – Jon Stewart and Stephen Colbert – are not shy about making their own biases apparent. Also, both shows have a younger audience than more traditional sources, largely made up of 18 to 25 year olds, which is also an audience that is turning away from more traditional sources like newspapers. This is also the age group that has historically been the most civically disengaged, so it will be interesting to study the effect that *TDS* and *CR* have on this group’s political knowledge, since both programs feature prominent political commentary.

Given all this, I hope through examining both *TDS* and *CR* I will come to understand better the effect that these programs have not only on media and journalism, but also people’s political knowledge. I will do this by examining previous research and also using data gathered by the Pew Research Center Media Survey of April 2008, and by data collected by myself through a survey of Bemidji State University students enrolled in political science courses in the spring of 2010. I also conducted a follow-up focus group of Bemidji State University students, which I will discuss the results of as well.

Literature Review

Firstly, *TDS* has garnered some critical attention for its “Indecision” presidential campaign coverage. *TDS* started the “Indecision” programming in 2000, the infamous Bush/Gore election. The same year, *TDS* won its first Peabody award for the “Indecision” coverage, and four years later, in 2004, it would go on to win a second Peabody for the “Indecision” coverage. *TDS* also won a Television Critics Association Award for ‘Outstanding Achievement in News and Information’ in 2003; beating out more traditional programs like *Frontline*, *Nightline*, and *60 Minutes* (Feldman, 2007: 410). In 2008, *TDS* was again nominated for a Peabody award, this time losing out to its successor, *CR*. *TDS* also received some attention from journalists in 2003, when a reporter from the *Fort Bragg Advocate* wrote a letter to *American Journalism Review* that stated the following:

The TV networks didn’t do their jobs during the Iraq war, and the sad fact was the best news coverage on the subject of the war was to be had on Comedy Central’s *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*. A comedy show practically broke the story on the Halliburton no-bid contract connection to the Bush administration. (Mickey, 2003:5).

In fact, in a study entitled “*The Daily Show* and Public Attentiveness to Foreign Policy Crises” Xiaoxia Cao found that exposure to *TDS* increases the attentiveness of people who don’t normally follow the news. Cao also found that *TDS* devotes 46% of its coverage to world events in non-election years. Furthermore, *TDS* has twice imbedded

journalists in the Iraq war and the war in Afghanistan – Iraq in 2007 and Afghanistan in 2009.

Another study entitled “Dispelling Late Night Myths” by Dannagal G. Young and Russell M. Tisinger found that 21% of people ages 18 to 25 were getting their campaign news from *TDS* and its “Indecision” coverage. The same study also found that *TDS* viewers tended to be more knowledgeable than average, although having more knowledge wasn’t necessarily contributed to watching *TDS*. As Jon Stewart himself stated, “If [kids] came to our show without [prior] knowledge, it wouldn’t make any sense to them,” (Young, et al: 2006: 117). Jon Stewart was on to something, because it was found that people who watched *TDS* tended to be heavier consumers of all types of news, and that learning from *TDS* was positively associated with learning from more traditional sources. In fact, watching *TDS* was likely a gateway to consumption of more traditional news.

However, not all the news about *TDS* has been good. In a study entitled “The *Daily Show* Effect: Candidate Evaluations, Efficacy, and the American Youth”, Jody Baumgartner and Jonathan S. Morris assert that while presidential candidates can improve their image while actually appearing on *TDS*, the relentless skewering they suffer when not on the show may actually do more harm than good. This study also contradicted the Young study, and found that while 48% of college age young adults watch *TDS*, only 23% followed more traditional sources closely, which contributes to artificially inflated perceptions of the viewer’s own political knowledge. Furthermore, *TDS* viewers exhibit a greater degree of cynicism towards the electoral system and media as a whole, which could possibly lead to the college age group to not participate in the

election process. This is troubling because again, this age group (18 to 25) has been historically the most civically disengaged group. In fact, this study led Richard Morin of the Washington Post to posit, “Jon Stewart and his hit Comedy Central cable show may be poisoning democracy,” (Morin: 2006). Another study by Jonathan S. Morris, “*The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* and Audience Attitude Change During the 2004 Party Conventions” found that exposure to *TDS* and its convention coverage was associated with increased negativity toward President Bush and Vice-President Cheney. However, the Democratic National Convention coverage did not change attitudes toward the Kerry/Edwards ticket. The same study also found that the conventions were covered differently on *TDS*, with the DNC coverage “tend[ing] to highlight humorous appearance, momentarily odd behavior, incidental errors, or political miscalculation,” while the RNC coverage “focused on policy and character. Both policy and character shortcomings were exploited for laughs with significantly more frequency during the Republican Convention,” (Morris, 2008: 86-87).

TDS elicits the same sort of response from other journalists. That is, there are those who praise the program, and others who are somewhat adverse to *TDS* as a source of news. Former *Nightline* host Ted Koppel said of *TDS*, “A lot of television viewers – more, quite frankly, than I’m comfortable with – get their news from the Comedy channel on a program called *The Daily Show*,” (Cao, 2006: 2). Bill O’Reilly echoes with a similar sentiment, saying that it’s “really frightening” that *TDS* may play a role in the election campaign, (Young, et al, 2006: 130). During an interview with Jim Wallis of *Sojourners Magazine*, Jon Stewart himself had this to say about his program:

I don’t know that it’s to hold [other media] accountable,

because I feel that is a role [*TDS* has] not embraced. Maybe we're kidding ourselves in thinking that's not what we're doing. My mentality is more from the perspective of an angry guy at a bar...we hopefully do it the way we know best, which is with absurdity and sarcasm and silliness. (Wallis, 2009: 20).

There are others, like Jessica Clark in her article, "In Politics, Comedy is Central" who call Jon Stewart and Stephen Colbert "the era's most effective media critics". In a study called "No Joke: A Comparison of Substance in *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* and Broadcast Network Television Coverage of the 2004 Presidential Election Campaign", Julia Fox, Glory Koloen, and Volkan Sahin found that while *TDS* is more humor than substance, its "Indecision" campaign coverage was found to be just as substantive as the broadcast networks' campaign coverage.

Methods and Analysis

So what does this all mean? Can *TDS* and its companion show *CR* be considered a reliable source of news? Furthermore, as previous studies have suggested, does watching these types of programs lead one to consume more traditional sources of news?

Hypothesis 1: It is possible to gain some political knowledge by watching *TDS* and *CR*.

Before looking at this more closely, I would like to point out that the reason *CR* has largely been left out until now is quite simply because it is a newer program and there really haven't been any serious studies done about it yet. Data gathered by the Pew Research Center in 2008 and by myself in 2010 was used in order to test this hypothesis.

The following table represents the Pew Research Center data regarding *CR*. It measures the frequency with which the respondent watched *CR* with how the respondent performed on a short political knowledge quiz. Here, the relationship between viewing the *CR* and performance on the political knowledge quiz is significant and moderate, with a Somer's d value of .137. As demonstrated by the table, political knowledge did tend to

<i>CrfreqP</i>	Never	Rarely	Occasionally	Frequently	Total
<i>Polquiz</i>					
None Right	203 / 30.7%	23 / 23.5 %	18 / 15.3 %	4 / 8.5%	248 / 26.8 %
One Right	182 / 27.5%	25 / 25.5 %	20 / 16.9 %	9 / 19.1 %	236 / 25.5 %
Two Right	133 / 20.1%	28 / 28.6 %	30 / 25.4 %	12 / 25.5 %	203 / 22%
Three Right	143 / 21.6 %	22 / 22.4 %	50 / 42.4 %	22 / 46.8 %	237 / 25.6 %
Total	661 / 100%	98 / 100%	118 / 100%	47 / 100%	924 / 100%

Table 1: Colbert Report Viewing Frequency and Political Information (Pew Data)

increase among those who watch *CR* while those who never watch *CR* tended to perform more poorly overall. Specifically, approximately 47% of those who watch *CR* “frequently” were able to answer all three political questions correctly, as opposed to only about 22% of those who reported “never”.

The next table represents the Bemidji State University student data regarding *CR*. Here again, the table is measuring the frequency with which the respondent watched *CR* with how the respondent performed on a short political quiz. As shown on the table on the following page, the results are fairly similar to that of the Pew Data. Again, the number correct on the political quiz tended to go up among those who frequently watch *CR*, and the “never” category performed more poorly overall. Of those who watch the program frequently, about 46% were able to answer all three political questions correctly,

with only about 19% able to do so who reported never watch *CR*. Also, the relationship here is again moderate between watching *CR* and performance on the political quiz, with a Somer's *d* value of .139

<i>CrfreqB</i>	Never	Rarely	Occasionally	Frequently	Total
<i>polquiz</i>					
None Right	38 / 21.6%	8 / 18.2%	9 / 18.8%	2 / 8.3%	57 / 19.5%
One Right	57 / 32.4%	10 / 22.7%	10 / 20.8%	7 / 29.2%	84 / 28.8%
Two Right	47 / 26.7%	15 / 34.1 %	14 / 29.2%	4 / 16.7%	80 / 27.4%
Three Right	34 / 19.3%	11 / 25%	15 / 31.3%	11 / 45.8%	71 / 24.3%
Total	176 / 100%	44 / 100%	48 / 100%	24 / 100%	292 / 100%

Table 2: Colbert Report Viewing Frequency and Political Information (BSU Data)

Table 3 analyzes the Pew Research Center data regarding the frequency of viewing *TDS* and performance on the political knowledge questions. Here again, when looking at the percentages, it appears the watching *TDS* is associated with better performance on the political knowledge quiz. For respondents who watch *TDS* frequently, about 44% were able to answer all three political questions correctly, compared with only about 16% of those who never watch the program. Similarly to the Pew data regarding *CR*, the relationship between *TDS* consumption and performance on the political knowledge quiz is moderate, with a Somer's *d* value of .138.

<i>TdsfreqP</i>	Never	Rarely	Occasionally	Frequently	Total
<i>polquiz</i>					
None Right	179 / 31%	21 / 18.6%	33 / 21.9%	7 / 17.1%	240 / 27.2%
One Right	175 / 30.3%	36 / 31.9%	37 / 24.5 %	12 / 29.3 %	260 / 29.5%
Two Right	129 / 22.4%	25 / 22.1%	42 / 27.8%	4 / 9.8%	200 / 22.7%
Three Right	94 / 16.3%	31 / 27.4%	39 / 25.8%	18 / 43.9%	182 / 20.6%
Total	577 / 100%	113 / 100%	151 / 100%	41 / 100%	882 / 100%

Table 3: Daily Show Viewing Frequency and Political Information (Pew Data)

The fourth table represents the Bemidji State University student data, and again compares the frequency of viewing *TDS* against performance on the political knowledge questions. Again, performance on the political knowledge was better for frequent viewers, while those who never watched performed more poorly overall. For those who reported frequently watching *TDS*, 55% were able to answer all three political questions correctly, as opposed to only about 18% who never watch *TDS*. The relationship between viewing *TDS* and performance on the political knowledge quiz is slightly stronger than all the previous data regarding both *CR* and *TDS*, with a Somer's d value of .160, which, while still only moderate in strength, is slightly stronger, than the previous relationships.

<i>TdsfreqB</i> <i>polquiz</i>	Never	Rarely	Occasionally	Frequently	Total
None Right	39 / 22%	8 / 15.1%	8 / 19%	2 / 10%	57 / 19.5%
One Right	58 / 32.8%	12 / 22.6 %	10 / 23.8%	4 / 20%	84 / 28.8%
Two Right	48 / 27.1%	17 / 32.1%	12 / 28.6 %	3 / 15%	80 / 27.4%
Three Right	32 / 18.1%	16 / 30.2%	12 / 28.6%	11 / 55%	71 / 24.3
Total	177 / 100%	53 / 100%	42 / 100%	20 / 100%	292 / 100%

Table 4: Daily Show and Political Information (BSU Data).

Finally, previous research mentioned that watching *TDS* and *CR* probably indicated consumption of other types of news as well. To that end, I look only at the Bemidji State University student to see if the previous research holds true.

Hypothesis 2: Students who at least occasionally watch *TDS/CR* are also getting news from other sources.

Out of the 62 Bemidji State University students who at least occasionally watch *TDS*: 35 watch CNN, 29 watch NBC, 22 watch MSNBC, 21 watch FOX News, 20 watch ABC, 18 watch CBS, 12 watch CNBC, and 6 watch “other” – most frequently BBC, but with one ESPN viewer which was not really what I was looking for. Of these 62 students, 19 are at least occasionally using social networking sites like Facebook or Twitter as a source for news, 35 read newspapers, and 35 listen to the radio as a source for news.

Out of the 72 students who at least occasionally watch *CR*: 38 watch CNN, 32 watch FOX News, 31 watch NBC, 23 watch MSNBC, 22 watch ABC, 20 watch CBS, 13 watch CNBC, and 5 watch “other”, which was again most often BBC. Out of these 72

students, 26 at least occasionally use social networking sites like Facebook or Twitter as a source of news, 36 read newspapers, and 42 at least occasionally listen to the radio as a source for news.

The preceding paragraphs do demonstrate that at least some of the student who watch *TDS/CR* also consume other types of news, but it appears many do not. To delve into that issue a little bit more, I conducted a focus group on the Bemidji State University campus. During this focus group, I asked more specific questions about media consumption, why the participants watch *TDS/CR*, and if they consider these programs to be valid sources of news. One interesting thing that came out of the focus group, which sort of goes against some previous research, was that one of the participants considered *TDS/CR* to be his main source of news, but overall he just wasn't that interested in current events. He did state, however, if either show featured something he wasn't sure about, it prompted him to look it up on the Internet to learn more about it. Another participant said that he has watched *TDS* since its inception in the mid-1990s while Craig Killborne was still hosting it, and that it did probably help to increase his consumption of news as he got older. Another participant said that he didn't start watching until about 2002, and that he now considers it to be his main source of news. Another thing to note is that all of the participants were young, male and liberal, which is consistent with previous research, and particularly the Young study, which stated that the strongest predictor of whether or not someone watches *TDS* is gender.

I then asked the participants why they chose to watch *TDS/CR*. One participant said that he watched *TDS* because he felt it was good at pointing out flaws in other media and also in both political parties. The other participants echoed that sentiment, with one

adding that he felt Stephen Colbert in particular was able to get away with things that other journalists cannot; because of the satirical character he's created. Another participant said that Jon Stewart is able to do the same thing, and that because he is more comedian than journalist (which Stewart will always deny when asked if he is, in fact, a journalist) he is able to provide a commentary that perhaps more conventional journalists would be unwilling or unable to provide. In a way, it is somewhat Shakespearean, with Jon Stewart and Stephen Colbert as the court jesters who are getting at the truth of the matter. A couple of the participants brought up that *TDS* is broadcast on International CNN as though it were "real" news. One stated that while he was in Africa it seemed that more people were watching Jon Stewart and *TDS* than other news programs.

Finally, I asked the participants more specific questions about their other sources for news. The participants reported reading the following periodicals: The Economist, Foreign Affairs, Newsweek, and Utne Reader. The participants also reported watching the following programs: *NBC Nightly News with Brian Williams* (Brian Williams has appeared on *TDS* a few times, with Jon Stewart even asking a giant Brian Williams head for advice), *The Newshour with Jim Lehrer* (who has hosted Jon Stewart as a guest on his program), *Countdown with Keith Olbermann* (who is often ridiculed by both Stewart and Colbert for his radical, divisive reporting style), and *The Rachel Maddow Show* (who so far hasn't had much to do with either program). When asked about the Internet as a source for news, the participants said they didn't really consider it so much a source as a supplement to the news, although one participant stated that he will look something up using the Internet if he doesn't know much about it.

Discussion and Conclusion

Looking at both the Pew data and the Bemidji State University student data, I am not comfortable stating that viewing either *TDS* or *CR* necessarily leads to more political knowledge since the relationship was only weak to moderate in both surveys. However, from the results of the focus group, it is clear that at least some people who watch these programs are learning something from it. While previous studies have shown that *TDS* viewers performed better on political quizzes, I wasn't able to make as strong assertions. The Bemidji State University student data also shows that at least some of the people who are watching either *TDS* or *CR* are also getting news from other sources, although it isn't clear whether these programs were the "gateway" to these students going to other sources of news. Even the results of the focus group were a little bit mixed, with one participant stating that he really had no interest in current events whatsoever outside of what he sees on *TDS/CR*. Overall, the results are largely inconclusive, and while I maintain that it is probable for someone to be informed by watching *TDS* or *CR*, it would probably behoove that person to use other sources of news as well.

Appendix

Pew Research Center Media Survey and Political Knowledge Index

Respondents were asked the following questions via telephone:

- Do you happen to know which party is in control of Congress?
- Do you happen to know who the current Secretary of State might be?
- Do you happen to know who the current Prime Minister of Great Britain might be?

These questions were asked randomly and the answers were added together to create a scale, with the highest score being three (that is, all three questions were answered correctly) and the lowest score being zero (no questions were answered correctly).

Respondents were also asked the following questions regarding *TDS/CR* via telephone:

- Now I'd like to ask you some questions about other programs. For each that I read, please tell me if you watch, listen or visit the show's website - regularly, sometimes, hardly ever or never – *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart?*
- Now I'd like to ask you some questions about other programs. For each that I read, please tell me if you watch, listen or visit the show's website – regularly, sometimes, hardly ever or never – *The Colbert Report with Stephen Colbert?*

These questions were also randomly asked and the answers coded as “1” for “Regular”, “2” for “Sometimes”, “3” for “Hardly Ever”, “4” for “Never” and “9” for “Don't Know”. I recoded these answers as “3” for “Regular”, “2” for “Sometimes” “1” for “Hardly Ever” and “0” for “No” and “Don't Know” to better correspond with my own data. Also, I changed the answer categories from “Regular” “Sometimes” “Hardly Ever” and “Never” to “Frequently” “Occasionally” “Rarely” and “Never” and again, this was to better correspond with my own data and also for the sake of uniform table information.

Bemidji State University Student Survey and Political Knowledge Index

Respondents were asked the following questions via paper survey:

- Who recently won the Senate Seat in Massachusetts?
- Who is the Secretary of State?
- Who is the Prime Minister of Great Britain?

The answers to these questions were added together to create a scale, with the highest score being three (that is, all three questions were answered correctly) and the lowest score being zero (no questions were answered correctly).

Respondents were also asked the following questions regarding *TDS/CR*:

- How often do you watch *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*?
- How often do you watch *The Colbert Report*?

The answers to these questions were coded as follows: “3” for “Frequently” “2” for “Occasionally” “1” for “Rarely” and “0” for “Never”

The students were also asked about other sources for news, and for other cable network sources I listed: FOX News, CNN, MSNBC, CNBC, and Other, and asked the respondent to circle each one they watched and additionally to fill in the blank for the Other category. I coded “1” per circled response and “0” for each one not circled.

The students were also asked about using social networking sites as a source for news. Here the response categories were again “Frequently” “Occasionally” “Rarely” and “Never” with the answers being coded as “3”, “2”, “1,” “0”.

I also inquired about reading newspapers as a source for news, and here again the response categories were “Frequently” “Occasionally” “Rarely” and “Never” which were again coded as “3”, “2”, “1”, and “0”.

Finally the students were asked if they used the radio as a source for news. The response categories again were “Frequently” “Occasionally” “Rarely” and “Never” and coded as “3” “2” “1” and “0”.

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