

3. Bissell says in paragraph 18 that the games that interest him the most are the ones that tell stories. How are they different from stories in films or novels?
4. So what? It's clear that Tom Bissell cares a lot about video games, but how does he make clear, as his title suggests, why they matter?
5. Bissell closes by asking, "How is it, finally, that I keep returning to a form of entertainment that I find so uniquely frustrating?" Write an essay about why you like video games—or if that's not the case, write about some other activity that you like a lot.

The Good, the Bad, and The Daily Show

JASON ZINSER

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IN RECENT YEARS an increasing number of Americans have turned away from mainstream media sources and tuned in to alternative, fake news programs such as *The Daily Show* with Jon Stewart. By cleverly blending comedy with coverage of newsworthy events, these programs create a hybrid form of entertainment-news. However, this new form of "infotainment" raises a number of unique ethical questions. Is it good to have large numbers of people getting their news from a comedian? What kind of information—or misinformation—do fake news programs impart to their audience? Might fake news like *The Daily Show* have a negative effect on the media and the culture at large?

Like most things, *The Daily Show* isn't all good or all bad. The question isn't whether Jon Stewart or the show's produc-

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ers and writers are morally corrupt people, but whether or not fake news is, on the whole, beneficial or damaging to society. What questions should we be asking about this apparent shift in journalism? What should we expect from the media? We wouldn't have to worry about such questions if fake news programs weren't influential, but their popularity requires us to examine them critically. As I will argue, *The Daily Show* exhibits both virtues and vices. The real challenge will be to assess the overall impact of fake news.

Before we can assess the news value of *The Daily Show*, we must first ask why we should care about where people get their news and whether it's important for them to be informed. The dissemination of news is extremely important for them to be informed. The dissemination of news is extremely important in a democratic state. Just think of the damaging effects state-controlled media have on North Korea, Iran, or Iraq under Hussein's regime. An informed public is the grease that keeps democracy running properly. Although foreign and domestic issues aren't settled by popular vote, an informed public wields great democratic power. An indirect test of this is the emphasis that politicians place on packaging their partisan messages, often in the form of a coordinated attack on the hearts and minds of the public. If our opinion didn't really matter, why would politicians go to such lengths? If our opinion does matter, then it seems we should be concerned with having the proper institutions in place to ensure that we're being properly informed.

Journalists like Tom Fenton have blamed the media for failing to anticipate the pre-9/11 threat posed by terrorism.¹ By reducing the number of foreign correspondents and cutting down on hard news stories, real foreign policy issues had been more or less remaindered to the periphery of the news. Threats

like Al Qaeda were able to fly under the media's radar, even after the first World Trade Center bombing in 1993. Having a population concerned and informed about relevant facts and issues helps guide the future course of the country. Although the media is supposed to report stories "in the public interest," Fenton complained: "The networks are obsessed with the ratings race. Politicians and statesmen line up to appear on the ersatz news *Daily Show*, and bloggers seem to be breaking the real news. Even as the urgent problems of Iraq, Iran, North Korea, and a resurgent Russia compete for our attention, the news media fiddle while Rome burns" (p. x). Do fake news programs merely reflect this shift in media and culture, do they themselves change the journalistic landscape, or does the influence run both ways?

The Vices of Fake News

Ted Koppel, former host of ABC's *Nightline*, commented, "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*."² What's the cause of Koppel's discomfort? I see two potential problems with so-called fake news programs: *deception* and *dilution*. Unlike dramatizations such as *The West Wing*, *The Daily Show* uses real events as a vehicle for comedy. Furthermore, the program's guest list would turn the head of any network news exec. Calling *The Daily Show* fake news is somewhat misleading (so we'll put the term in scare quotes—"fake"—from here on). At the same time, *The Daily Show* bills itself as a "nightly half-hour series unburdened by objectivity, journalistic integrity, or even accuracy." This leaves us with a tension: the show is "unburdened by objectivity," and yet "informs" large swaths of America about foreign

and national news events. I'll call this the problem of deception—cloaking (even if it is unintentional) a real news program as entertainment. The second concern I'll call the problem of dilution. The success of *The Daily Show*, which attracts over 1.4 million for their daily dose,³ may prompt traditional journalistic venues, such as nightly news programs on major broadcast networks, to infuse hard news with entertainment, which might dilute the news media at large. Each of these criticisms will be dealt with in turn.

The popularity of *The Daily Show* reflects its entertainment and comedic value. People tune in to watch Jon Stewart and his onscreen staff because they're funny. But laughs aren't the only thing viewers take away. The jokes and skits are based on, and peppered with, real news items and real stories. Whether people tune in to be entertained, to be informed, or both, the fact is that *The Daily Show* shapes people's perspective on the world. Once we realize this, we can and should question the quality of the information viewers are receiving.

Although the incidental imparting of news might be seen as a benefit (as I will discuss later), one could raise the complaint that, because of its use, because of how it functions, or is taken to function, *The Daily Show* should, but doesn't, hold itself to the same journalistic standards traditional news agencies do. Can a show "unburdened by objectivity" be expected to communicate news to the public accurately and responsibly? Can a program concerned with getting ratings through comedy be expected to provide objective and responsible coverage of world events? Of course "deception" means "the intentional imparting of false information to another," and it doesn't seem that *The Daily Show* fits this definition. For one thing, it's probably not meant to deceive anyone, and for another, it claims to be something other than a legitimate news source. However, is this

claim fair? As already mentioned, the show's content and guest list suggest otherwise. Of course there are many purely entertaining, merely funny segments, but most of the show is centered on the news and newsworthy events. Furthermore, I'm not suggesting that viewers can't distinguish between the pure entertainment and the news-driven stories. I'm assuming that the audience is intelligent enough to thresh the wheat from the chaff. Even so, people might well think they're being fully or sufficiently informed when they watch *Daily Show* news segments. Can one be expected to get quality reporting from a comedy show? Does a comedian have the expertise or rigorous standards to communicate newsworthy events reliably?

Analogous arguments are often levied against violent video games and sexist music videos. Invariably, the creators of these perceived violent or offensive media claim that their products are fictional and not intended to be taken literally. Intentionally or not, if negative but predictable consequences result from particular media, the creators should, in some sense, be held accountable. Likewise, if people watch *The Daily Show* to become informed, either explicitly or implicitly, then the show may have obligations to provide a responsible product.⁴

A more pernicious form of deception occurs when entertainment is presented under the guise of unbiased, objective reporting. There are clear examples of this form of media deception emanating from both political parties and a variety of special interests. Anecdotally, I viewed Michael Moore's notorious film, *Fahrenheit 9/11*, at a university screening. While I cringed at many points during the screening, the undergraduate crowd erupted in cheers. My discomfort had little to do with my political leanings, and more to do with Moore's fallacious and rhetorical style, which is dangerous because many students likely took the film to be an unbiased retelling of events

surrounding 9/11. The reasoning that leads to a conclusion is often as important as, if not in some ways more important than, the conclusion itself. There are a lot of unsound or invalid arguments that have true conclusions. You want an argument to yield a true conclusion, yes, but only when it has proper premises and strong reasoning to take you to that conclusion. Whatever the take-home message of *Fahrenheit 9/11* was, however justified it may be otherwise, it wasn't well argued for.

Although, unlike Moore's movie, which claimed to be a documentary, *The Daily Show* doesn't claim to be a news show, it may fall prey to similar criticism. While I find myself agreeing with many of the points made on the show, the path taken to these points is often short, even slight. Rather than prolonged discussion or detailed analysis of a particular topic, *Daily Show* news is, and must be, molded into joke form. The journey to a conclusion is often too quick, the answers too pat. When journalism is done well, it gives people enough information to make up their own minds. But substandard media tends to be pandering, not informing, often to the lowest common denominator, as Jon Stewart himself self-effacingly admits. Where *The Daily Show* falls on the continuum between substandard news media and good hard news remains an open question.

Another potential problem with "fake" news is the threat of dilution, undermining the integrity and substance of hard news. There are two ways that *The Daily Show* may be contributing to such dilution of the mass media. The first is that "fake" news, along with blogs and other alternative forms of media, fragments the face of journalism, making it difficult to decide which news sources to trust, perhaps unduly undermining audience confidence in news agencies. As such, *The Daily Show* may simply be part of a greater problem. For example, the internet has transformed research in a variety of ways, often for the

worse. At my fingertips are staggering numbers of resources, an overwhelming amount of information. However, while the quantity and immediacy of access to information has certainly increased, it's not clear that the quality has. Practically anyone can put practically anything online whenever they want. Similarly, some have argued that the ever-increasing quantity of academic journals has reduced the quality of many of these journals. Not all sources or resources are created equal. If *The Daily Show* increases the dilution by adding another alternative to hard news, so much the worse.

A second form of dilution may be a result of the show's influence on the media at large. Make no mistake, like *The Daily Show*, mainstream media is part of the profit-driven corporate world. The pattern of mixing entertainment with news, mastered if not created by *The Daily Show*, might and perhaps already has spilled over into hard news, although whether *The Daily Show* is really to blame for this is another matter. Some see the hiring of Katie Couric as lead anchor of the CBS *Nightly News* as a nod to style over substance. Critics have noted that Couric clearly isn't being cast as a Walter Cronkite or Edward R. Murrow, but rather as an entertaining, engaging personality that can attract more viewers. The more popular "fake" news programs become, the more likely traditional media will continue to follow suit, softening hard news with mere and mixed entertainment. To echo Fenton, the fiddling becomes louder.

The Virtues of "Fake" News

Not all the news on "fake" news is bad. The criticisms raised in the previous section focused on the negative but unintended effects of "fake" news. If we can criticize *The Daily Show* for such consequences, then we should also be able to praise it

for any unintentional, not to mention intentional, benefits. Matthew Baum argues that "fake" news imparts knowledge of certain issues (especially foreign policy) to an otherwise inattentive portion of the population.⁵ Backed by extensive empirical data, Baum argues that regular viewers of "fake" news programming are more aware of foreign affairs than those who don't watch such programming. Like sneaking vegetables onto a pizza, *The Daily Show* delivers the news in a way better suited to our ever-shrinking attention spans. From this perspective, the show isn't "converting" viewers from traditional media venues, but rather informing an untapped segment of the population which would be uninformed otherwise. If true, this seemingly would be a genuine benefit, even if unintentional. In some ways Baum's view has been confirmed by a 2004 National Annenberg Election Study which found that *Daily Show* viewers could correctly answer more questions about the Presidential candidates than viewers of national television news or newspaper readers.⁶ Unlike Baum, the authors of the Annenberg study were quick to point out that *The Daily Show* itself might not be responsible for raising the knowledge level of its viewers. Perhaps the show is simply more appealing to those who *already* happen to be informed.

Let's assume at least that Baum is correct in that *The Daily Show* attracts and informs an otherwise inattentive and uninformed segment of the public. Is this enough? Not necessarily. More than the content itself, the quality of the news is important. If *The Daily Show* simply informs viewers enough to be able to identify certain people, places, and events, and to know that certain things are going on in the world, it's not clear that the show provides a valuable public service. It isn't enough to simply report the facts or certain interpretations of them; news should be balanced and comprehensive, informing the audi-

ence in a useful, robust way. If viewers simply parrot what they happen to hear on *The Daily Show*, how can they be expected to make informed decisions about public policy? As the saying goes, "a little knowledge can be dangerous." To show that *The Daily Show's* imparting of minimal knowledge to an otherwise inattentive audience is really beneficial, something more is needed than what "fake" news usually provides. What's needed is for "fake" news to provide depth and insight, and not just make viewers aware, say, of where to locate Venezuela on a map. (This in itself would be no small feat, given Americans' poor knowledge of geography. But the news is supposed to do more than this.)

It would be truly beneficial to have *The Daily Show* impart 15 a kind of knowledge that traditional news can't. Surprisingly, this might be the show's greatest virtue, and perhaps also a significant reason for its success. Being "unburdened by objectivity," *The Daily Show* is unfettered by the typical constraints of traditional news. It has more freedom to comment on, and to counteract, the spin that so often accompanies news stories of the day. Through sarcasm, cynicism, parody, and irony, the show can impart a kind of information inappropriate and unavailable to conventional news outlets. Furthermore, *The Daily Show* isn't afraid to offend political parties, business concerns, religious (and other) groups, or individual people. To this extent, the news presented by *The Daily Show* is often more honest in certain respects than hard news is. Jon Stewart has the freedom to say the things that most anchors can only say off camera.

It's important to note that political and social changes are often initiated by a variety of means. Three stories come to mind. One fateful night at a campaign rally in Iowa, Howard Dean, in a moment of hyper-excitation, screamed into the

microphone. This embarrassing moment was caught by the media, especially "fake" news. Shortly afterward, Dean's campaign ran out of steam—many think because of the "yawp heard round the world." It wouldn't be the first time that a presidential candidate fell due to an unfortunate turn of events. During his bid for the Presidency, Bob Dole fell off a stage during a campaign stop in Chico, California. Most commentary on the evening news concerned how many points Dole's fall would cost him in the polls, not whether such a cost would be in any way justified. What on earth could falling off a poorly constructed stage reveal about the quality of a Presidential candidate?

See Chapter 8
on using transi-
tions to help
readers follow
your train of
thought.

In contrast to these cases, consider the origin of the modern environmental movement in America. Rachel Carson's famous book, *Silent Spring*, brought to light the dangers of pesticides and their destructive effects on ecosystems. Consequently, DDT was banned and the environmental movement was born. Dean's scream and Dole's fall, although embarrassing, seem irrelevant to the qualifications of either as Presidential candidates. Carson, on the other hand, not a scientist but a nature writer, brought about significant change by raising relevant concerns in an innovative way. She didn't merely tell us that pesticides harm the environment, she made a strong case for why we should care about the environment.

The lesson here is that non-traditional news stories and non-traditional news outlets can be catalysts for political and social change, bad or good, the means relevant or irrelevant. As an unconventional outlet with a wide audience, *The Daily Show* is just the kind of vehicle that can, and often does, make a difference. Through amusing presentation of serious stories, *The Daily Show* humanizes them, imparting more than just facts, pro-

viding some perspective on them, reflecting and informing our concerns—exactly what good reporting ought to accomplish.

Teaching to the Top of the Class

To review, the potential hazards of "fake" news include deception and dilution, while the potential benefits include informing an otherwise inattentive audience and providing informed individuals with a different kind of information than that of traditional hard news. For these reasons, *The Daily Show* was both condemned and praised for being "unburdened by objectivity." Critically speaking, the lack of traditional journalistic standards doesn't require "fake" news to be especially thorough or impartial. Important but uninteresting news events may not be covered unless they can be made funny somehow. At the same time, the lack of journalistic standards allows "fake" news the liberty and the tools to inform the audience in ways unavailable to mainstream media. Can both of these be true? Yes. Although *The Daily Show* may be limited in the scope of events it covers, it often says insightful things about the stories it does cover. This is true not only of *The Daily Show*, but of a variety of "fake" news shows and other types of new media: blogs, quasi-documentaries, and cable news programming.

One important difference between *The Daily Show* and tra- 20
ditional media sources is that "fake" news typically doesn't gather the news, but rather comments on stories first reported by traditional news. As Aaron McKain puts it, traditional media acts as a "gatekeeper" for "fake" news.⁷ So even when *The Daily Show* criticizes the traditional media, they may provide a different perspective on news content, but they don't provide a true *alternative* to it. McKain illustrates this problem by pointing to a particular episode: April 18, 2004. That day, mainstream

media was focused on Michael Jackson's indictment, not on more newsworthy events like the Presidential election or the war in Iraq. When Jon Stewart is confronted by mainstream media criticism, his tactic is to claim that *The Daily Show* is comedy, not a news show. This seems at best rather convenient and at worst perhaps a bit hypocritical, and reinforces the charge of deception aired earlier. Nonetheless, the show can still be a useful foil to mainstream media. Even if *The Daily Show* is a little hypocritical in criticizing the media without offering a real alternative, it doesn't follow that the show is unreliable, or that its content is false. If a smoker tells his children not to smoke because it's bad for their health, he may be a hypocrite, but it doesn't follow that smoking isn't bad for one's health. To argue that because someone is a hypocrite, what they say is false, is an informal fallacy called *ad hominem*. To reject the advice simply because the advisor doesn't follow it is called *tu quoque*.⁸

The final verdict on *The Daily Show* seems to depend on its overall effects. How, for instance, would the mainstream media deal with the diluting effect of "fake" news? Reacting to "fake" news, conventional news could "harden," focusing more on breaking real news stories and less on sensationalism. That would be good. An unfortunate reaction would be for conventional news to follow *The Daily Show's* lead and become even more entertainment orientated. Mainstream media could drift more towards MTV than PBS, although certainly this might happen without "fake" news entering into the picture. Mainstream media could instead be unaffected by "fake" news programming. The thinking here would be exactly what was argued for by Baum, namely that people who watch *The Daily Show* aren't consumers of mainstream news to begin with, or they have their views reinforced rather than changed by "fake" news programming.

Assessing the overall impact of *The Daily Show* depends, then, not only on media reaction, but also on the net effect on the viewing audience. Here too there are several possibilities: good, bad, and indifferent. First, the show might provide, as said before, additional insight for already-informed individuals. Again, *The Daily Show's* fresh perspective on stories attacks them from angles unavailable to mainstream media. Another possibility is that *The Daily Show* draws viewers who would typically go elsewhere, even though it's not a true alternative to conventional news and would, in that case, perform a public disservice. Finally, the show might minimally inform viewers who otherwise would be ignorant about newsworthy events. Although the information isn't up to hard news standards, it's perhaps better than nothing. Here, the benefit would be marginal, with some low-grade information getting through in *The Daily Show's* less-than-comprehensive coverage.

Of course, these phenomena might well occur in combination. The empirical investigation discussed earlier seem to reflect both the good and the relatively indifferent scenarios. Baum's study suggests that "fake" news informs people who are previously uninformed, while the Annenberg study found that *Daily Show* viewers are well informed, thus supporting the "good" scenario. It's important to note that while Baum's study focused on "fake" news in general, including segments of shows such as *Late Night* with David Letterman and the *Tonight Show* with Jay Leno, the Annenberg study focused specifically on *Daily Show* viewers compared with control groups. Thus the Annenberg study seems to more accurately reflect the relationship between watching *The Daily Show* in particular and audience awareness, supporting the "good" scenario. Taken together, the studies suggest that we shouldn't treat all "fake" news the same way.

Again, due to *The Daily Show's* emphasis on humor and constraints such as the gatekeeping function of mainstream media, it's not a true alternative to mainstream news. The position of *Daily Show* writers, producers, and performers is in a way analogous to the situation that often occurs for teachers, who frequently have to choose who to teach to. Do you try to get a majority of students in a class involved? Do you teach only to the bright kids? Or do you make sure that even the slower students make some progress? This choice is realized in the battle between classroom content and students' interests and attention spans. The more difficult the material, the drier and the less relevant it seems, the more students become uninterested. Some teachers believe it's not their job to be entertaining, seeing themselves as professionals employed to impart knowledge, and students as responsible to motivate themselves. Others think that a good teacher does both—grabbing students' attention, often in entertaining ways, as a means of imparting information.

A few questions can be teased apart here. Is there a necessary connection between entertainment value and informational content? Is there necessarily a trade-off when one teaches to the majority, or when one focuses instead on the gifted or the more challenged minority? What exactly is the educator's responsibility? It's not obvious that there are clear, much less known, answers to these questions. On a practical level, it's often a matter of the educator's choice and personal teaching style. Although the best teachers seem to strike an appropriate balance between information and entertainment, it's tough to say anything useful about how to find this balance.

Some might argue that because *The Daily Show* is entertainment, it's a paradigm case of teaching to the bottom of the class, or at the very best, to the middle of the class. However, this judgment would be hasty. If the Annenberg study is correct, it seems

that the show's audience is composed of reasonably well-informed individuals, whether already informed or informed to some extent by the show. As I argued earlier, there's a unique and valuable kind of information that the show conveys to its audience. This means that *The Daily Show* actually teaches to the top of the class, imparting a higher form of information to those "in the know." Many of the jokes and skits on *The Daily Show* rely on sophisticated forms of humor and a sophisticated understanding of world events. There are, of course, gag skits which are simply entertaining. Perhaps *The Daily Show* teaches to the top of the class while providing entertainment for the rest.

Ultimately, it's each individual's responsibility to be informed. This only works when there are legitimate news sources available to choose from. It seems that as many legitimate media choices exist right now as existed before *The Daily Show* became a major cultural force, although sifting for these resources might be much harder now than it used to be. Who do you listen to? How can you distinguish between spin and fact? This is where *The Daily Show* can help. Rather than substituting for mainstream news, the show can *enhance* our understanding of mainstream media. To return to the teaching example, students must take an active role in their education. As the old saw goes, "you get out of it what you put into it." If you want to be an informed citizen, you must take some responsibility for seeking the truth in our increasingly foggy media landscape.

The Great Switcharoo

A solution to the problems described above is one which is wholly unlikely to occur. I believe that it would be best for *The Daily Show* and Rush Limbaugh to swap their respective audiences. Limbaugh fans should curl up on their couch and flip

on Comedy Central every evening and *Daily Show* fans should listen to a portion of Limbaugh's radio broadcast (listening to the full three-hour broadcast would be beyond the pale). I advise this because both broadcasts are playing to the home crowd. *The Daily Show*, with its left slant, may just reinforce the views of its decidedly left-leaning audience, thus leaving them feeling superior and smug without really having engaged the other side on many issues. The same goes for "the right" and Rush. Listening to the opposition, instead of being continually congratulated for holding on to preexisting views, would press individuals to actively debate the arguments in question. Too often in the great debates of our time (for example, abortion, euthanasia, the war in Iraq, and stem cell research, to name a few) each side envisions a particular characterization of the opposition. In reality, the positions on either side of these debates are often well argued. The debates exist because the issues in question are complex. To ignore this complexity is to become a characterization yourself.⁹

NOTES

1. Tom Fenton, *Bad News: The Decline of Reporting, the Business of News, and the Danger to Us All* (New York: Harper Collins, 2005). Subsequent references will be made parenthetically in-text.
2. Lisa de Moraes, "Seriously: Kerry on Comedy Central," *Washington Post* (August 24, 2004), C1.
3. Thomas Goetz, "Reinventing Television," *Wired* 13 (09) (2005): www.wired.com/wired/archive/13.09/stewart.html.
4. Considering how, or if, we should hold them accountable would take us too far from the focus of this chapter.
5. Matthew Baum, "Sex, Lies, and War: How Soft News Brings Foreign Policy to the Inattentive Public," *American Political Science Review* 96 (1) (2002), pp. 91-109.

6. National Annenberg Election Survey" (press release), Annenberg Public Policy Center (September 21, 2004).
7. Aaron McKain, "Not Necessarily Not the News: Gatekeeping, Remediation, and *The Daily Show*," *Journal of American Culture* 28 (4) (2005), pp. 415-30. Subsequent references will be made parenthetically in-text.
8. For more on fallacies, see Liam Dempsey, "The *Daily Show*'s Exposé of Political Rhetoric," chapter 10 in *The Daily Show and Philosophy: Moments of Zen in the Art of Fake News*, ed. Jason Holt (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2007).
9. Thanks to Jason Holt and Bill Irwin for helpful suggestions.

Joining the Conversation

1. Jason Zinser discusses positive and negative aspects of *The Daily Show*, considers the show's effects on its audience, and reaches a conclusion about the show's impact that is not entirely positive or negative. How would you summarize his argument?
2. The second paragraph of the essay contains a statement explaining why it matters whether *The Daily Show* is good or bad. What other reasons could Zinser have given?
3. In paragraph 15, Zinser argues that one of the primary strengths of *The Daily Show* is that it is "unburdened by objectivity." How might you use this same point to make a case *against* the value of the show?
4. Notice that Zinser includes almost no examples from *The Daily Show*. Help him out. Watch the show, looking for examples that support his argument. Transcribe them as Antonia Peacocke does on pp. 304 and 307 and explain what they demonstrate about the show.