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The Fake Newsroom: Making Doomsday Easier to Swallow

In a world full of bad news, many people choose to ignore the sources that provide that news. We buy into the idea of out of sight, out of mind on issues ranging from immigration to climate change. However, one type of “news” outlet is working to make these issues more approachable. Although comedy news shows like *The Daily Show*, *The Colbert Report*, and *Last Week Tonight* do not fall into the same category as mainstream or cable news, they address many newsworthy issues in a way that is more accessible to many Americans than the regular news networks. Because comedy news shows are based in entertainment and not information, they are able to present the news while also making jokes about the people in power. Comedy news shows use video clips, theatrics, and humorous remarks to amuse a like-minded audience while also presenting serious political issues and perspectives in a way that is easier to digest.

The template for the comedy news genre was established when Jon Stewart became the host of *The Daily Show* in 1999 (Smith). The genre grew to include shows like *The Colbert Report*, in which host Stephen Colbert satirizes right wing media outlets by impersonating a conservative news host, and *Last Week Tonight*, which includes longer research pieces. The genre has also greatly expanded in recent years, most likely in response to the polarizing conditions of the 2016 election, to include shows like *Full Frontal*, *The Opposition with Jordan Klepper*, and more. Although these shows all have their own individual quirks, they share the

same basic format and an ideologically left-leaning audience. Most of the shows feature a host sitting behind a desk delivering jokes and interacting with a variety of correspondents and/or guests. The host covers a variety of current events and political topics, including serious issues like racism, sexism, immigration, elections, and armed conflict abroad. The perspective taken on each of these issues is influenced both by the host and a team of comedy writers, who are almost all college educated and share left-leaning political views. Because the political views of the writers are reflected in the show, the audience tends to be composed of people who share those liberal political views. According to a survey conducted by the Pew Research Center, 34% of people with consistently liberal values watch *The Daily Show*, as opposed to 1% of people with consistently conservative values. Overall, the shows write intentionally with the purpose of sharing a political perspective or exposing the hypocrisy in the political system. However, these shows are also owe most of their success to their ability to make people laugh, so they must prioritize humor when writing pieces.

In 2014 *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*, *The Colbert Report*, and *Last Week Tonight* all filmed pieces that address climate change. The clips on *The Colbert Report* and *Last Week Tonight* were created in response to the Obama administration's release of the National Climate Assessment, and the clip on *The Daily Show* was filmed in response to a hearing held by the House of Representatives Committee on Science, Space and Technology. It is also worth noting that Stephen Colbert and John Oliver (hosts of *The Colbert Report* and *Last Week Tonight* respectively) were both correspondents on *The Daily Show* before starting their own shows, and that Jon Stewart was actually a producer of *The Colbert Report*. The working relationship between these hosts is probably one of the reasons why they have similar strategies and themes in their shows.

In addressing climate change, the hosts of these three shows have several themes in common. First, all three clips present climate change as an accepted fact. Stewart calls it an “accepted scientific phenomenon pretty much everywhere” and Colbert presents Obama’s National Climate Assessment as the truth, but Oliver sums it up best when he states that “The only accurate way to report that one out of four Americans are skeptical of global warming is to say that one out of four Americans are wrong about something” (*The Daily Show, Last Week Tonight*). They also all convey the unwillingness of society to change their attitudes and actions regarding climate change. Oliver notes that “we’ve all proven that we cannot be trusted with the future tense. We’ve been repeatedly asked: “Don’t you want to leave a better Earth for your grandchildren?” And we’ve all collectively responded “Yeah, fuck ‘em” (*Last Week Tonight*). Colbert, in response to the White House report, points out that “doing anything about it is, and I don’t want to get too technical here, hard. I’m afraid I might have to give something up” (*The Colbert Report*). Stewart expresses the perceived view of many conservative politicians, commenting that “what [Representative Larry Buschon] is basically saying is it’s unfair to talk to us about the scientific or medical consequences of our actions because they’re scary. And we really don’t feel like doing anything about it anyways” (*The Daily Show*). In other words, even though climate change is a proven fact, many politicians and citizens refuse to acknowledge its existence or simply choose not to act because combating climate change requires extensive and far reaching actions.

The three hosts also use common strategies to make these points, most notably the use of video clips (whether from the news or congressional hearings) and the use of theatrics. Video clips make the pieces more interesting by providing images other than the host to look at, and, more importantly, they give the host an opportunity to counter their ideological

opponents. Oliver uses the video clips primarily to illustrate the misleading nature of the one on one climate debate before creating a more representative version of that debate. He contrasts this 50/50 split to “a survey of thousands of scientific papers that took a position on climate change [and] found that 97% endorsed the position that humans are causing global warming” (*Last Week Tonight*). On *The Colbert Report*, new clips discussing the inevitability of melting glaciers, wildfires, and heat waves are used to depict the impending doom that humanity faces because of climate change. However, video clips are most important in Stewart’s piece, where clips from a hearing held by the House of Representatives Committee on Science, Space, and Technology are used by Stewart to reveal the absurdities present in the comments made by members of the committee. For example, Stewart responds to a clip of Representative Buschon arguing that public comments deny the existence of climate change by saying “With all due respect, Representative Buschon, I suggest you get the Journal of Applied Meteorology and Climatology as opposed to the YouTube comment feed of Obummerlies1776” (*The Daily Show*). This exchange reveals the absurdity of relying on the opinion of a random citizen as opposed to that of a professional scientist, as well as the general unwillingness of climate change deniers to trust the scientific community. These clips give voice to the figures in power that perpetuate misinformation about climate change.

However, theatrical displays are the defining feature in each of these pieces because they provide a focal point and make the pieces memorable. In *Last Week Tonight*, Oliver stages a “statistically representative climate change debate” by taking a typical one on one climate change debate and then bringing two supporters onstage for the climate change denier, as well as 96 scientists to support Bill Nye and argue that humans are causing climate change. The shouting of the scientists drowns out the climate change deniers, representing how evidence for

climate change should override the voice of skeptics. Colbert places recycling bins on his desk to represent himself taking action to protect the climate. However, when he sees the news clips suggesting the situation is futile, he shoves the bins off his desk and yells “Fuck it!”, showing how individual action can seem pointless in the face of an overwhelming issue like climate change. Stewart’s theatrical display takes the form of a science demonstration. When Representative Steve Stockman attempts to claim that sea levels won’t rise because “if your ice cube melts in your glass, it doesn’t overflow,” Stewart takes a full glass of ice water and adds additional ice cubes to the glass, causing it to overflow. He narrates this display with simple language, asking Stockman to imagine “there’s a whole bunch of other ice that’s not in the water, it’s on the land. You know, the part where the water isn’t” (*The Daily Show*). This demonstration and oversimplified narration exemplify the ignorance displayed by members of a congressional committee meant to address these issues. Theatrics give the viewers a way to remember an issue by creating an absurd situation that exemplifies the issue of climate change denial and the unwillingness of society to make changes.

The patterns discussed above show the ability of comedy news shows to prioritize humor while still taking a position on a political issue (in this case climate change) and exposing the contradictions and hypocrisy present in the arguments of many people in power. When addressing climate change the hosts do not argue against the audience directly, but instead argue against those in the media (such as in Oliver’s handling of the 50/50 debate), those in politics (as in Stewart’s responses to the ignorant congressman), or a general conservative other (as in Colbert’s addressment of the “Nation”). Although these shows do attack liberal politicians on occasion, their tendency to target conservatives demonstrate the liberal values of the hosts. In addition, because the hosts’ arguments take the form of monologues that treat their opponents’

opinions as something to be mocked, it can also be said that the hosts assume that their viewers share their liberal values. This relationship between the host and the audience and explains why the genre is generally limited to more liberal viewers.

Comedy news shows present their serious political content as theatrical attacks on the government and the media because dramatic displays, snide remarks, and over the top arguments make the underlying commentary about our broken planet and political system easier to swallow. Although this genre does have the potential to change minds about political issues (including climate change), it is limited by its audience and the necessity of prioritizing humor. In an interview following his retirement, Jon Stewart told Stephen Colbert that “There are nights when I find myself impotently shouting into the abyss, which if you think about it, wasn’t that different from what I did on a nightly basis,” and Colbert agreed by saying that “Ultimately these shows are shouting into an Altoid tin and throwing it off an overpass” (*The Late Show*). In other words, although the hosts of these shows write with the intention of changing minds and imparting new perspectives on an issue, they recognize that their impact is limited. Because comedy shows are meant to entertain, they can only go so far in addressing hypocrisy before righteous anger overtakes the punchline. In addition, because the audience is largely made up of people who already share the hosts’ political views, it is probably a rare occasion that shows like these actually change someone’s mind about an issue. Despite these limitations, the shows are ultimately effective because they are able to simultaneously share political perspectives and generate laughs.

Comedy news shows provide a space for like-minded individuals to see their views reflected on television. In a time when many people are frustrated with America’s political system, comedy news shows allow certain people to feel that their political views, such as the

necessity of addressing the impending danger of climate change, are valid. However, it is also important for these shows to exercise caution and avoid the temptation to push their perspective even farther to the left. Comedy news shows are now faced with a paradox. If their opinions are too strong, they will drive away more moderate viewers and contribute to the increasing polarization of our political system; if they remove the political perspective from their shows, they lose the driving force that gives the show meaning and allows it to resonate with others. Faced with this challenge, it is up to the writers to decide whether to unapologetically express their values even in the face of increasing polarization, or to hold back polarizing viewpoints in order to avoid further division in a country already torn apart.

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