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I am journalism (and so can you!): Jon Stewart, Stephen Colbert, and the role of the journalist

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I AM JOURNALISM (AND SO CAN YOU!):

JON STEWART AND THE ROLE

OF THE JOURNALIST

by

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ABSTRACT

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Satire news has garnered considerable critical attention, yet the question of just what mainstream journalism might take from it has yet to be asked. This study aims to clarify the normative potential of such alternative discursive approaches. Geoffrey Baym's theory of discursive integration, which argues that once distinct modes of discourse are now blending together, may help explain the relationship between humor and the mediation of current events. This study uses a discourse analysis to compare how mainstream television news outlets and *The Daily Show* approach truth claims, finding that journalistic credibility suffers, at least in part, from avoiding critical evaluation of events. Of the four media outlets examined here, only *The Daily Show* made truth the focus of its coverage. Host Jon Stewart avoids the structural biases which prevent mainstream journalism from fulfilling its social responsibilities. Three main approaches to news reporting emerge which may enhance journalistic quality and credibility: redaction, contextualization, and authorization.

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I dedicate this thesis to my family. Every thought I gave to this work was an effort meant for them. As it was born, my son was born. As it grew, my daughter grew. It drew my attention away from my wife, but never my heart. My children may never know how much of my time and attention they lost to this paper; my wife surely does. I thank them for their patience and grace, and for standing by me though it was not always easy, or happy. ksh-isou.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The Pew Research Center for the People and the Press (2004) reported that 21% of 18-34-year-olds used programs such as *The Daily Show* to learn about the 2004 presidential campaign – a figure nearly equal to the 23 percent of the same age group which used network news for the same purpose. One might ask how a comedy could cover serious discourse. One might also ask, so what? "It may not be an exaggeration to say that the American news system today is approaching a crisis of confidence on the part of citizens," writes W. Lance Bennett, "It may also be approaching a period of historical choices for journalists who recognize that many of their core professional practices are becoming hard to defend even within the profession," (2007a, p.xv). CNN/U.S. President Jonathan Klein seemed to admit this in cancelling the long-running political debate show *Crossfire* in early 2005. Ten weeks earlier, *Daily Show* host Jon Stewart had appeared on the program, launching a withering assault on its methods. Klein agreed that viewers need "useful" information, which *Crossfire* failed to convey, and that Stewart "made a good point about the noise level of these types of shows, which does nothing to illuminate the issues of the day," (Kurtz, 2005, para. 1). Dannagal Young writes that the incident "confirmed what many journalists, scholars, and even fans already knew: while his influence on elections may be difficult to quantify, [Stewart's] influence on the state of contemporary journalism and emerging models of journalism is palpable," (2008, p. 242). Media executives, politicians, and the public are all paying serious attention to comedic discourses. A comedian played an instrumental role in bringing down a hitherto

respected political debate program. A man whose job involves making funny faces made professional journalism look foolish. How could this happen?

An Experiment in Journalism

Starting in 1996 on the cable network Comedy Central, *The Daily Show* was known for parody and spectacle. The program built its current reputation with the addition of Jon Stewart in 1999. Stephen Colbert, who started as one of several *Daily Show* correspondents, spun-off his own show, *The Colbert Report* (pronounced with both t's silent) in October, 2005. These shows are, in Geoffrey Baym's term, an "experiment in journalism" (2005, p. 259), demonstrating that "political discourse can be both serious and fun… and perhaps may be more democratically useful for it" (Baym, 2007b, p. 112). Where Stewart's show opens a space for satiric discourses, Colbert's program satirizes pundit programs (Druick, 2009; Jones, 2010).

Many names have been given to hybrid informational/entertainment subgenres, among them new news, soft news, fake news, mock news, satire news, new political television, infotainment, and even infoenterpropagainment. The term soft news assumes that traditional news programming is naturally or uniformly hard (a notion put to rest by W. Lance Bennett, 2007a). Terms such as fake news, mock news, and infotainment emphasize, and thus privilege, the entertainment context of the programming. At the other extreme, terms such as new news and new political entertainment obscure this entertainment and fail to convey the genre or subgenre involved. By and large, the above terms fail to differentiate between such diverse offerings as *The Jerry Springer Show* and *The Daily Show*. This study favors the term satire news, as it clarifies the subgenre

involved without judging its value or reinforcing traditional perceptions of news standards. The term satire news will here denote any televised program that regularly applies satire to current events. Under this definition, satire news includes, but is not limited to, *Saturday Night Live*'s "Weekend Update," *Real Time with Bill Maher, The Daily Show with Jon Stewart,* and *The Colbert Report*.

Purpose of the Study

Satire news has garnered considerable critical attention. A growing number of researchers consider its normative implications and compare it with traditional forms of journalism (Baym, 2005, 2007a, 2007b, 2008, 2009, 2010; Borden & Tew, 2007; Brewer & Marquardt, 2007; Feldman, 2008; Hollander, 2008; Jones, 2010; Nabi, Moyer- Gusé, & Byrne, 2007; Waisanen, 2009; Warner, 2007; Xenos & Becker, 2008; Young, 2007, 2008). Yet the question of just what satire news may have to offer a journalism in flux not only has yet to be answered, it has yet to be asked. This study aims to clarify the normative potential of the alternative discursive approaches found in satire news.

Researcher Geoffrey Baym's theory of discursive integration (2005, 2007a, 2007b, 2007c, 2008), unique in specifically addressing satirical rhetoric and relating it to broader trends in media, may help explain the relationship between humor and the mediation of current events. Discursive integration reflects "a way of speaking about, understanding, and acting within the world defined by the permeability of form and the fluidity of content," (Baym, 2005, p. 262). Baym argues, and critics of satire news would agree, that satire news engages in a simultaneously serious and humorous way with public affairs; it is serious comedy (2008). Although *serious* and *comedy* can be

considered antonyms, “it is clear that the two are less distinct than they were once thought to be,” (2008, p. 22). Baym goes on to argue that satire news programming shows that “the serious and the silly are blending, interweaving in powerful ways and challenging a host of assumptions about how we can, and should, talk about politics,” (2008, p.22). In short, serious comedy expands discursive possibilities by successfully blending forms of discourse which are assumed to be mutually exclusive.

In the absence of concrete generic distinctions, even the most trivial discursive venue may support meaningful social communication. Discursive integration remains at present a largely untested model, hence this study will seek to demonstrate its potential utility, and clarify whether satire news may offer potential tools for future journalism. If, as Baym (2008) and others (Jones, 2010; Jordan, 2008; Young, 2008) assert, serious comedy is competent to conduct a political discourse, public opinion should support expanding the journalistic toolbox beyond its traditional tools. This study will further examine the discursive integration model in the literature review.

A Discussion of Relevant Terms

This study will now clarify several key terms. The term *satire* in particular requires differentiation from the ideas of parody and farce before its potential role within public discourses may be understood. Given the eventual relevance of the critical debate surrounding the potential discursive costs and benefits of cynicism, the term cynicism will also receive clarification and be differentiated from both skepticism and an important related concept, kynicism. A final new term, ressentiment, will then be introduced and briefly discussed.

Satire

Satire differs from parody or farce in its intent, and thus has often been viewed in rhetorical terms (Simpson, 2003). The ambiguity of parody and farce may allow them to praise the object of their humor, but satire must always pierce its object (Burwell, 2007; Simpson, 2003). It achieves its purpose with irony, humor, and ridicule and may use parody or farce as its tools. This study addresses satire as a potential venue for significant public discourse. As Rachel Caulfield explains:

> Satire is not often considered an important form of political dialogue, but it serves many distinct and important roles in a democratic society: it encourages critical debate, sheds light on perceived wrongs within society and government, points out hypocrisy, and makes political criticism accessible to the average citizen. (2008, p.4)

This study will demonstrate that such programming as *The Daily Show* or *The Colbert Report* lives up to these ideals.

Cynicism, Skepticism, and Kynicism

Cynicism questions sincerity or authenticity, regardless of evidence (Cappella & Jamieson, 1997), and is a contemptuous reaction against those in a position to oppress others (Halsall, 2005). Skepticism, on the other hand, reflects a healthy degree of doubt, and is based on reasonable information (Cappella & Jamieson, 1997). Interestingly, *The Daily Show* has been described as both cynically subverting (Baumgartner & Moris, 2006, 2008; Hart & Hartelius, 2007) and radically enabling (Baym, 2005, 2007b; Bennett, 2007b; Hariman, 2007; Warner, 2007; Young, 2007) democratic discourses. Matthew Jordan addresses the paradox of an idealistic cynicism by linking it to a "fidelity

toward the true application of laws and political institutions that were being corrupted by untruth" (2008, para. 15). In other words, a knowing counter-cynicism could subvert cynically-applied messages. Philosophers Peter Sloterdijk and Friedrich Nietzsche call this kynicism, after the original term used by the Athenian philosopher, Diogenes (Halsall, 2005, p.168; Jordan, 2008). Yet by virtue of its open acknowledgement of its manipulation of power, an inherently cynical power elite cannot, in theory, be subverted (Halsall, 2005). Any working theory of satire news effects must address this contradiction.

Ideology and Ressentiment

If kynicism can indeed subvert cynical discourses, it may also highlight valid but ideologically unacceptable ideas. Nietzsche calls this ressentiment, which involves resistance against dissonant ideas by individuals who rely upon familiar, established heuristic models to interpret events (Halsall, 2005). The satirical message may circumvent such filters, provided it achieves a "restoration of gravity," (Nabi, Moyer-Gusé, & Byrne, 2007), meaning that the humorous message establishes serious intent. Otherwise, the attempted subversion of ressentiment will lead to the message being discounted rather than enhanced (2007; Waisanen, 2009)). In short, humor may grant access for ideas even within hostile audiences, yet access alone does not guarantee the persuasive power which can only derive from the potency of the message itself.

Michel Foucault said, "knowledge is not made for understanding; it is made for cutting," (1980, p. 154). Satire provides the necessary breach. A case in point came when Merriam-Webster named the word "truthiness," popularized by Stephen Colbert, as their

word of the year for 2006. Truthiness means “truth that comes from the gut, not books,” or ”the quality of preferring concepts or facts one wishes to be true, rather than concepts or facts known to be true” (Merriam-Webster online dictionary, 2005). Colbert’s wordsmithing fits a Foucaultian view of discourse as the production of a limited, incomplete truth, one “divorc[ing] reality from any sense of fact” (Baym, 2007a, p. 368).While this study is largely concerned with the relationship between reality and fact in communicating public discourses, Colbert here offers the irony that it may be necessary to invent an artificial language just to communicate at all.

Context of the Study

The following section first discusses the development of satire in its modern, televisual form. Following this discussion, the media context is clarified and the three key media trends of commercialization, nichification, and technological change are outlined. In addition to situating the emergence of satire news, these trends enable the theoretical phenomenon of discursive integration to occur, and are therefore of crucial importance in explaining why a comedic voice may claim journalistic authority.

“You’re Doing Something. You’re Watching TV:”

Media Trends and Developments

The diffusion of television parallels the development of postmodernism. The first televised satirical programming occurred in Britain in the 1950’s and 1960’s, questioning the reverence automatically afforded to public affairs (Street, 2001). In the 1970’s and 1980’s, political satire and parody were applied with increasing frequency within conventional American generic formats, with *Saturday Night Live* (hereafter *SNL*) being

the most notable example of this trend. *SNL*'s major contribution came in its professional approach towards its "Weekend Update" mock news segment, and the impact of its presidential parodies. "By taking what they do seriously, the cast and crew of *SNL* have fulfilled a need in American society to give mainstream voice to alternative points of view and to question publicly the system and government leaders," (Reincheld, 2006, p. 196). The power of this voice surprised even the show's crew. Comedian Chevy Chase never anticipated that his caricatures of a bumbling, clumsy Gerald Ford would define the president in the popular imagination (Reincheld, 2006).

By the early 1980's, the proliferation of cable TV channels and the advent of the 24-hour news cycle was beginning to affect both the production and consumption of television genres, and distinctions between entertainment and non-entertainment began to blur (Delli Carpini & Williams, 2001; Hollander, 2008; Street, 2001; Warner, 2007). By the 2000 presidential election, presidential candidates had realized the political potential of late night talk shows. In September, 2000, democratic nominee Al Gore had more speaking time on *The Late Show with David Letterman* than he did on the evening news of all three major networks combined (Farnsworth & Lichter, 2006). Michael Moore's TV news magazines, *TV Nation* and *The Awful Truth*, were presaging satire news. Moore's major innovation was his kynical approach to the story, throwing his guests (or targets) off balance in order to accomplish his agenda. Moore's films also exemplify this confrontational approach. *Fahrenheit 9-11,* released just prior to the 2004 U.S. presidential election, generated considerable interest, controversy, and scholarly attention (Holbert & Hansen, 2006; Holbert, Hansen, Mortensen, & Caplan, 2006; Holbert, Hansen, Caplan, & Mortensen, 2007; Jones, 2007, 2010).

The Daily Show and its spinoff *The Colbert Report* adopted Moore's interest in a satirical role for journalism, blending the conventions of the nightly news and late-night talk-shows. The discursive integration model differentiates satire news from its predecessors by noting discursive approach, which can be considered in relation to general trends in the media. Where earlier satire created or was surprised by its own audience, satire news addresses the audience directly, as in Stephen Colbert's opening remarks from his first episode, "You're the folks who say something has to be done. And you're doing something. You're watching TV," (quoted in Burwell, 2007, p. 6).

Before discussing the current state of mediated public discourses, it would be prudent to examine the key trends which define the contemporary media landscape. Discussed here are three major trends: the reorientation of news media towards ever-greater profitability (Choi, Watt, & Lynch, 2006; Esser, 1999; Underwood, 2001), the specialization and fragmentation of media outlets (Hayes, Singer, & Ceppos, 2007; Hollander, 2008; McKain, 2005), and the rapid changes in the availability and uses of new technologies (Cook, 2001; Allen, 2008; Rosen 2009; Underwood, 2001). Together, these trends form the background to this study.

Commercialization

The media no longer consist of numerous small, tightly-regulated companies proclaiming a public duty, but rather of large, lightly-regulated media conglomerates primarily obligated to their shareholders. Five corporations today control most of the world's media; a quarter-century ago, that list was ten times longer (Bennett, 2007). In 1962 CBS creator William Paley, told his reporters "You guys cover the news; I've got

Jack Benny to make money for me," (quoted in Baum, 2003a, p.34). Network news bureaus were not expected to make a profit, so long as there was no significant competition. Yet an important conceptual shift regarding the nature of the press was underway. Where there once existed a view of the media as a semi-sacred public trust, a new belief emerged towards the close of the 20th century that regarded the press as just another business (Fallows, 2003). By 1984, CBS CEO Michael H. Jordan would say, "Yes, we want to hold on to journalistic and other standards. But I don't aspire to a Paleyesque role. This is a business," (quoted in Baum, 2003a, p. 35). Consumer demand is here given the duty to ensure social accountability (Bennett & Entman, 2001, leaving the media open to charges of cynicism and manipulation by media consultants attempting to shape public discourses for political and economic ends.

Cable TV had provided the competition. Satellite TV and the Internet would soon follow, completing the transition from print to visual-oriented media and leading to a fundamental shift in both media production values and modes of cognitive reception (Bennett & Entman, 2001; Graber, 2001). Where once the three networks together produced only a few hours of news programming each week, today each cable news outlet fills 168. The result is a seismic philosophical shift in news production. TV demands the feeling and seeing of events, favoring the personalization and dramatization characteristic of most narrative constructions (Borden & Tew, 2007). Talk being cheaper than research or field reporting, news producers turn to a professionalized public relations industry consisting of media consultants and celebrity reporters to fill its programming needs. Repackaging the news as a product oriented towards an audience of consumers, rather than civic information provided to citizen viewers, any concern for the broader

social good seems quaint, if not dangerously naïve (Underwood, 2001). The optimal strategy for a newsroom is no longer to reach the broadest reasonable swath of available citizen viewers, but to build a loyal following by targeting a narrow niche.

Nichification

Not coincidentally, news viewers have available to them more news content than ever before. Greater availability in terms of programs, channels, time, and internet access has led to greater specialization (Cook, 2001; Feldman, 2008; Gandy, 2001; Mutz, 2001; Hollander, 2008; McKain, 2005), leading viewers to seek programming that reflects their ideological preferences (Hollander, 2008). Aaron McKain (2005) refers to this process as nichification, capturing a degree of media strategy in creating reliable, miniaturized audiences. Such media fragmentation leads to ideologically homogeneous news outlets, in turn encouraging in the audience rigid ideological heuristic interpretation. Fed by ever-consolidated corporate media oversight as well as ever-more homogenized ideological nichification, polarized audiences scrutinize media presentation ever-more closely (Allen, 2008; Choi, et al., 2006; Bennett & Entman, 2001; McKain, 2005). Salient issues almost inevitably feed highly partisan charges of media bias (Choi, Watt, & Lynch, 2006; Hollander, 2008).

Such arguments ignore the underlying systemic problems which result, in part, from nichification of audiences. Some argue that such fragmentation limits, others that it fatally undercuts, the healthy functioning of any potential public sphere (Bennett, 2007a; Sparks, 2001; Underwood, 2001). Oscar Gandy (2001) states the logical conclusion of this position, arguing that nichification, and its attendant phenomena of media segmentation and targeting, is antithetical to a healthy public sphere. “Among the most

important requirements is that deliberation be inclusive – no one should be excluded, and all should have an equal chance to enter into and take part in discussion and debate," (Gandy, 2001, p. 142). The fear here is that as audiences become more sequestered, and as this sequestration becomes increasingly self-reinforcing, that the notion of a viable public sphere itself dissolves into a variety of independent, fragmented discourses. In theory, this process threatens any sense of shared social or political identity.

Technological Change

As the proliferation of media outlets has contributed to the fragmentation of media audiences, improved technological capabilities have led to a ubiquity of information and the breakdown of previously concrete time and space limitations (Allen, 2008; Baym, 2005, 2007c; Hayes, et al., 2007; McKain, 2005; Rosen 2009; Slater, 2001). Theoretically, the advent of the Internet offers universal user access, adding to the traditional "one-to-many" media model both "many-to-many" and "one-to-one" (e-mail) capabilities (Dahlgren, 2001, p. 46). Communication channels flow in multiple directions. Audiences bypass mainstream media sources and communicate in real time. Thus the media's traditional gatekeeping role – its ability to define for society what is socially controversial, deviant, or a matter of consensus (Hallin, 1986; Rosen, 2009) – is compromised. While the Internet is an unrivalled enabling technology, it is not used to its full civic potential (Sparks, 2001). Demographic limits to access remains a problem (Dahlgren, 2001; Sparks, 2001), while users continue to view the Net recreationally rather than in civic terms (Hill & Hughes, 1998). The infrastructure of the Internet privileges commercial over civic interests (Dahlgren, 2001, p. 49). Yet most crucial here may be the related problems of quantity and trust. "As technology has advanced, people

have gained access to more information, more ideas, more truths. In this, the most informed society in history, being informed and feeling assured of 'the truth' have gradually drifted apart," (Johnson, 2007, p.3). The ubiquity of available facts potentially overwhelms the ability of audiences or even media to safely define truth.

Together, the three trends discussed above describe a media landscape which has in the span of a single generation reinvented its tools, its venues, its goals, its audiences, its methods, and its values. These changes have led many of the scholars cited herein to turn to a unique application of comedy to current events to reaffirm the value of the public sphere. These trends follow closely a society now more interested in celebrity and individuality and authenticity, absent which objectivity is suspect (Corner & Pels, 2003). Credibility shifts away from story content and towards the story's framing and presentation, which are too often designed with ratings in mind (2003; Hayes, Singer, & Ceppos, 2007). New possibilities for satire emerge in the hybrid satire news format developed by *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report*.

Summary and Implications

Starting from the premise that Stewart is responsible for some good comedy, this study explores how he may also produce some good reportage. The topic holds far-reaching implications regarding the functionality of journalism in a hyper-mediated context, and thus the communication of salient social and political information. According to the discursive integration model, satire may be one tool with which to address, if not overcome, the media's weaknesses. Despite (or possibly because of) its

situation on the periphery of journalism, by giving freer voice to discursive criticisms, satire news' approaches effectively target journalism's ills.

If in contemporary culture, political discourse is crafted for a televisual rather than a public context, public discourse resides within the context of a televisual sphere (Baym, 2007b). Against the context of a commercialized and nichified contemporary communications system, and the rapid advancement and diffusion of new communications technologies, satire news programming has fashioned a counter-discourse out of tools such as kynicism, subverting journalistic conventions and redefining the terms and conceptions of public discourse. In a postmodern media environment in which traditional ideals have been harnessed for commercial purposes, or replaced by high-volume political punditry, the satirist may be uniquely positioned to speak on behalf of public interests. At issue is the shape of the public sphere in a hyper-postmodern media environment which may be defined, if not precisely then at least accurately, as breaking the news all day every day. On *The Daily Show*, the news is already broken. It develops no further. The mark of the program's seriousness is that it does not ignore this broken toy.

The following chapter examines the literature pertaining to both satire news and its broader antecedent, soft news. The chapter begins by examining the theory of discursive integration, the basic outlines of which have already been drawn. In the second part of the literature review, problems with traditional approaches will be examined, followed by a discussion of ethical approaches to journalism. Finally, the discussion will conclude by considering these ethical approaches with satire news specifically in mind.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

The foregoing discussion laid out the purpose, context, and key terms of this study. This chapter will examine the extant research, in two parts. Part one surveys research progressing from theory to soft news to the more focused subfield of satire news. This body of research has grown considerably in recent years, though its focus has generally been on political knowledge effects or alternative discourses. Few studies have directly addressed the implications of such programming for mainstream journalism. Part two examines the structural biases that undergird contemporary journalism and provide a target for satire news – a model from which to diverge.

Even Better than Being Informed:

From Soft to Satire News

Several researchers argue for the need to differentiate satire news from soft news or infotainment (Baym, 2008; Caulfield, 2008; Moy, 2008; Young, 2008). Speaking of *The Daily Show*, Paul Brewer and Emily Marquardt write, "The show often addressed policy debates in both its news stories and its guest interviews. Such findings suggest that taking mock news seriously is far from absurd," (2007, p. 264). Dannagal Young and Russel Tisinger concur, arguing that "*The Daily Show* should be considered… something *completely* different: a program designed to entertain but that functions predominantly as a political program," (2006, p.129, emphasis in original). A strong body of research continues to develop and to explore both the possibilities and the limits of hybrid entertainment/news forms. While researchers remain divided over approaches to the

study of satire news, its effects, and its terminology, one theory has developed that offers a unique take on the subject.

Theory: Discursive Integration

Geoffrey Baym's theory of discursive integration specifically addresses satire news, placing it within broader societal trends. The theory is premised on the destabilization of the project of modernity after three centuries dominating western thought (Baym, 2008). While conceptual categories and ways of understanding are agreed upon via a process of social rationalization and agreement, discursive domains increasingly mix or overlap, and as a result the discursive capabilities of any one domain become valid within any other: comedy can teach, and news can entertain.

Baym points to three master trends which destabilize modernist frameworks: consolidation, multiplicity, and integration (Baym, 2005). These forces closely resemble the media trends outlined in chapter one. Consolidation entails the merging of the many to create a giant few, in this case media firms[1] (2005). Multiplicity reflects the growth in availability of news content following the widespread adoption of cable TV and the Internet. As media firms consolidate, they target ever-more differentiated audiences. Yet as Bennett points out, the variety of information has actually decreased as these trends have progressed (2007a). Consolidated firms oversee a wide variety of media outlets, all under a common management likely to pool information, resources, and personnel across once distinct media outlets so as to minimize cost and inefficiency. Consolidation and multiplicity mirror this study's trends of commercialization and nichification,

[1] One of which, Viacom, owns the Comedy Central network which airs both *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report*.

respectively, which draw on Bennett (2007a) and Aaron McKain (2005) in clarifying the focus of these trends.

Baym points to the broader trend of integration, which concerns the ability of technologically-enhanced communications to transcend time, space, and even (to a degree) cultural boundaries (Baym, 2005). Integration also denotes any blurring of traditional lines, borders, or distinctions, and thus includes the breaking-down of the metaphorical walls between public and private spheres, public affairs and popular culture, information and entertainment, as well as business and editorial affairs. The effect is "a rethinking of discursive styles and standards that may be opening spaces for significant innovation," (2005, p. 262), enabling new discursive possibilities even as it allows the (discursively) destructive trends described above.

This study departs from Baym's model in viewing the key trend of integration as a conceptual element of the theory rather than a trend described by it. The element being one half of the model's name attests to its theoretical, as opposed to contextual, relevance. This study thus focuses the third contextual trend in terms of technology as an enabling force and considers integration as an overarching theoretical principle. Like Baym's concept of integration, technological change enables both the commercialization-nichification cycle and the possibility of an alternate discursive response. Unlike Baym's notion of integration, however, technology remains firmly in the background as a contextual element.

While the Internet looms large over this discussion (particularly regarding audience participation in *The Colbert Report*), television remains the primary venue for satire news. Television privileges images, emotions, speed, and action over words, logic,

caution, and deliberation, impacting general perceptions and worldviews (Baym, 2007b). Discursive integration reflects "a media environment defined by the collapse of previous distinctions among once-differentiated genres, social practices, and discursive fields," (Baym 2007a, p. 373). Thus the model discusses developments which occur within a discursive *televisual* sphere (Baym, 2007b). As professional codes and generic distinctions dissolve and lose their relevance, the potential scope of venues for discourse grows (Baym, 2005, 2008; Corner & Pels, 2003; Kovach & Rosenstiel, 1999). Delli Carpini and Williams tie this idea to the fallacious distinction between the serious and the comical (2001), arguing that the structures

> that distinguish fact from opinion, public affairs from popular culture, news from non-news, and citizens/consumers from experts/producers… these walls – in place throughout most of this century – are rapidly eroding, the result of changing communications technologies, the new economics of mass media, and broader cultural trends. (2001, p.161)

The risk is of limiting discursive outlets and, by extension, public understanding (2001; Corner & Pels, 2003; Gandy, 2001; Rosen, 1994, 2009). Baum's (2002, 2003a, 2003b) studies decisively demonstrate the capacity for entertainment-oriented fare to include substantive messages and lead to significant effects. Jeffrey Jones (2010) further contends that popular cultural norms offer an avenue for a constructive public involvement, making the entertainment-information split counter-productive.

If, as discursive integration suggests, discursive standards are in flux, then the journalist can justifiably cross previously held lines against subjectivity, or shift voices in the middle of a report or interview (Burwell, 2007). The value of this approach lies in its

focus on the rhetorical functions of the subject, and to recognize the crucial moment of transition in the media. Baym (2005, 2007a,2007b, 2007c) and Julie Warner (2007), in particular, argue that if Stewart is seen as asking the questions that the audience wants to have answered and engaging the audience in a more thoughtful discussion, then the comedian conducts a legitimate discourse. As John Street notes, "interviewers legitimate themselves by reference to their audience" (2001, p. 54). Furthermore, if Colbert can succeed where even CBS news once feared to tread by attempting to interview every member of Congress, then somewhere in all of those interviews is "the potential to link audiences' lifeworlds with the increasingly foreign sphere of formal policy and legislative processes," (Baym, 2007a, p. 362), suggesting that journalistic credibility may also be subject to the same piggybacking effect outlined by Matthew Baum (2002, 2003a, 2003b). Baym notes that Stewart's and Colbert's approaches are no panacea for the ills of the media industry, but rather that they reevaluate the discursive possibilities of political communication (2007b).

On Soft News and Infotainment

The word *entertain* can mean two things: first, to amuse, interest, or please; second, to engage with or consider (Baym, 2005; Jones, 2010). Moy, Xenos, and Hess (2005) point out that audiences are increasingly turning to late-night TV and other soft news outlets in place of traditional sources of political information (such as the network news, newspapers, and local TV news programs). As the profile of entertainment-based civic programming in general, and political comedy in particular, have been unambiguously on the rise, so too has attention to these forums by scholars primarily interested in documenting effects on political knowledge or attitudes (Xenos & Becker,

2008; Baum, 2002, 2003a, 2003b; Brewer & Cao, 2006; Hollander, 1995, 2005; Niven, Lichter, & Amundson, 2003). While terms such as soft news and infotainment are problematic – conflating a disparate range of programming types, dismissing their potential social impact, and assuming that a traditional 'hard news' exists which is neither soft nor softening – these labels provide the context and the research tradition from which satire news has emerged.

Soft news draws its fascination from its potential to reshape communication patterns. In his groundbreaking examination of soft news in wartime, Baum (2003a) explored how soft news penetrates viewers' attention to foreign affairs. Baum notes that soft news reports favor human impact and morality frames. Yet even mainstream journalism is susceptible to such framing devices, as we shall see later in this chapter (Bennett, 2007a). As these frames exist in most foreign crises, they form a natural 'piggybacking' effect whereby dramatic stories also carry substantive political discourses. Baum's case is that the American public can glean political information as an incidental byproduct of seeking out entertainment. While largely circumstantial, this argument goes well beyond a reasonable doubt in demonstrating the constructive semi-journalistic role of such programming (2002, 2003a).

Channeling Neil Postman (1985), Marcus Prior (2003) is skeptical of the capacity of soft news to communicate indirectly via humor, and warns that high ratings for soft news are exaggerated. Prior also dismisses Baum's focus on viewer attentiveness as inadequate, arguing instead for direct measures of knowledge. Yet Prior's reframing of program viewership in terms of a cost-benefit analysis echoes Baum in suggesting that soft news minimizes the potential cost side of the equation in terms of viewer

gratifications (Prior, 2003; Baum, 2003a, 2003b). Taken together, Baum's and Prior's research suggests that "soft news coverage of political issues most likely does have meaningful consequences for American politics, but that such consequences are not without limits," (Baum, 2003b, p. 187).

The Task of Saying the Right Thing

A growing body of literature exists which has mainly focused on either quantitatively measuring the effects of satire news or qualitatively deconstructing the discursive strategies of such programming (Tenenboin-Weinblatt, 2009). These inquiries have yet to examine what methods and ideas satire may hold for journalism. This section provides a general overview of the topical literature with an eye towards clarifying what satirical concepts may apply within mainstream journalism.

Charges of Cynicism

Some argue that satire news cynically alienates viewers from politics and society (Baumgartner & Morris, 2006, 2008a, 2008b; Feldman, 2007; Hart & Hartelius, 2007; Prior, 2003). In particular, Jody Baumgartner and Jonathan Morris (2006) argue that watching *The Daily Show* depresses trust that news media are fair and balanced. Several studies argue that satire news cynicizes its audience (Baumgartner & Morris, 2006, 2008a, 2008b; Hart & Hartelius, 2007; Holbert, Lambe, Dudo, & Carlton, 2007; Hollander, 2008). Roderick Hart and Johanna Hartelius (2007) in particular attack Jon Stewart for being nihilistic, undemocratic, and merely rhetorical (read empty); in doing so, however, they rely on anecdotal rather than empirical evidence, and base their arguments on a confusion between the (distinctly modern) understanding of *cynicism* and the ancient philosophy of kynicism.

On closer examination, most of these studies concede either the possibility or the likelihood that satire news encourages a more critically-minded audience (Baumgartner & Morris, 2006; Rottinghaus, Bird, Ridout, & Self, 2008). To blame the audience for its disappointment too easily absolves mass media producers of responsibility for the disappointing quality of its product. To argue, as Baumgartner and Morris do (2006, 2008a, 2008b), that watching *The Daily Show* increases distrust of the media, is to ignore that the program skewers what is manifestly stylized, sensationalized, commercialized, and itself cynical (Brewer & Marquardt, 2007). After all, some of the best satire allows its subject to undermine itself.

Several researchers argue persuasively for the discursive utility of satire (Bennett, 2007b; Brewer & Marquardt, 2007; Hariman, 2007). Some studies even raise the possibility of a civic engagement effect, particularly among more politically knowledgeable viewers (Boler & Turpin, 2008; Jones, 2010; Young, 2007). Even Baumgartner and Morris (2006) concede that by making the complex world of politics more understandable, *The Daily Show* increases internal efficacy, and may encourage political participation. One final distinction remains – Jon Stewart is not acting. Stewart's sober appearances in a range of venues – *Bill Moyers NOW*, *Larry King Live*, and above all *Crossfire*, to name a few – speak to an earnest desire for a better public discourse. Stewart is neither the source nor the object of broad public cynicism. "To deny Stewart and Colbert's contributions to civil society and a healthy public sphere (as scholars such as Hart & Hartelius advance) is to deny the very activity that communication critics most value," (Waisanen, 2009, pp. 120-121).

General Effects

Such studies as have approached satire news in a systematic, quantitative manner indicate that viewers could potentially use and process satirical news in a similar way to traditional news, and that satire news viewership may encourage more critical thinking on current events and on the performance of the mainstream media. One study reveals that political knowledge acts as an effects moderator (Young, 2007), with more knowledgeable viewers of satire news tending towards greater civic engagement and less knowledgeable viewers tending towards cynicism and distrust of governmental institutions (2007). Megan Boler and Stephen Turpin (2008) also find that exposure to satire news spurs community involvement. "The effective incitement to reconfigure action or social relations can be measured in part through counterpublics and their formation," (2008, p. 7). Another study found that *The Daily Show* acted as an interpretive filter when viewed immediately prior to *Headline News* (Holbert, Lambe, Dudo, & Carlton, 2007), while one further study noted satire news as one of several long-term sources of political information (Hollander, 2008). The key trends underlying discursive integration play a significant role in this process. "There is growing evidence that the high-choice media environment has drained significant numbers of casual consumers from news to more entertainment-oriented fare," notes Barry Hollander (2008, p. 33), examining media fragmentation as it relates to changes in viewing choices over time. Long a skeptic of soft news to impart more than trivial knowledge, Hollander (1995, 2005) shows that *The Daily Show* has gained from recent media trends. He also notes the relative dearth of hard data on opinions of news and entertainment. More direct,

pertinent survey questioning is needed so as to clarify the role of entertainment- related current events programming in an atmosphere of media fragmentation.

Younger viewers tend to approach the show from a more skeptical perspective, having emerged from an environment in which "the line between news and entertainment has never been clear" (Feldman, 2007, p.422). Doris Graber (2001) shows that members of generation X (those born between 1966 and 1978) are more adept at interpreting visual rather than linear print information, prefer diverse and interactive sources of information, and tend to edit out any unwanted media content. Political predispositions and activity may also provide underlying heuristic cues for the interpreting satire (Moy, Xenos, & Hess, 2005), and could activate the ressentiment effect. Such an issue occurred in a recent survey in which conservatism proved to be a significant predictor of a belief that Stephen Colbert of *The Colbert Report* dislikes liberalism (LaMarre, Landreville, & Beam, 2009).

And Journalistic Norms

The Daily Show and *The Colbert Report* borrow from the network news an instantly recognizable visual language (Baym 2005, 2007a, 2007b; Warner, 2007), including nods to American or generic journalistic iconography. Yet these shows also subvert this language, such as the title segment of *The Colbert Report*, which features a 360 degree tracking shot of its host in which Colbert faces the camera even as it crosses his back. A similar logic informs the use of so-called senior analysts, who supposedly report on-location – but in reality stand a few feet away from the host in front of a green screen (Warner, 2007).

Several researchers have explored the nexus between political spin and media style on *The Daily Show*, in particular the programs' parodic news format, strategic use of

video, Socratic interview style, and discursive patterns (Baym, 2005, 2007a, 2007b; Bennett, 2007b; Brewer & Marquardt, 2007; Feldman, 2007; Hariman, 2007; Jones, 2010; McKain, 2005; Warner, 2007). These studies point to satire's capacity to call attention to the shoddy work of journalists, to the ways in which journalistic norms bolster and are manipulated by public figures, and the interdependency of media and politicians (Jones, 2010). Jon Stewart's interviews borrow more or less equally from network news and late-night interview styles. Stephen Colbert's interviews tend to favor the more adversarial, personality-driven interview styles more characteristic of TV news magazines and cable news hosts (Baym, 2007a).

Reasoned Conversation and Rhetorical Intent

If mainstream news reports conform to the notion of news encapsulated within tidy stories (Bennett, 2007a), Stewart's offer an alternative discourse in the Foucaultian sense of the word as encompassing rhetoric in general (Jordan, 2008). Premised on the fluidity of generic distinctions, the discursive integration model argues that any genre can perform the roles of any other. Even if Stewart is incorrect in arguing that the contemporary mainstream media have become "purposefully obtuse," (Baym, 2005, p. 268), he is still justified in assuming the voice with which he criticizes media practices. Stewart is free to act as a dialogical mediator.

Significantly, the satirical formats of *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report* also offer both host and guest a plausible deniability, a sense that anything serious which occurs need not be taken too seriously. The hosts thus possess the latitude to construct a dialogue which need not be one-dimensionally humorous without fear of necessarily alienating his present or future guests (McKain, 2005). Both parties to the conversation

are expected to hold their end of the conversation, and to present a coherent point of view. Jon Stewart said more about the state of the media than about his guest when he closed his 2004 interview with John Kerry by thanking him for just having a normal conversation (Stewart, Karlin, & Javerbaum, August 24, 2004).

The impact of the terrorist attacks of September 11th, 2001, may be instructive here. Following the attacks, the balance between civic power and the media, precarious in the best of times, shifted dramatically towards power. In the immediate aftermath of the attacks, political critique fell out of fashion. Critical voices were suddenly challenged to find new rules and standards for public discourse (Achter, 2008). Not everyone made this shift successfully. Shortly after the attacks, Bill Maher remarked that American actions, rather than the terrorists', had been cowardly. The reaction was swift, and decisive. Then White House press secretary Ari Fleischer sounded Orwellian: "The reminder is to all Americans that they need to watch what they say, and watch what they do, and that this is not a time for remarks like that," (quoted in Bennett, 2007a, p.16). Shortly thereafter, *Politically Incorrect* was cancelled. Although "the task of saying the right thing – or of not saying the wrong thing" (p. 276) raised numerous rhetorical problems for satirists, they were well-positioned, given their experience in exploiting the shortcomings of the mainstream media, and versatile enough to offer the kinds of critiques that the mainstream media itself was suddenly averse to providing.

Several insights emerge from this varied body of research. Mixing news with entertainment can lead to an increase in attention to and awareness of issues (Baum, 2002, 2003a, 2003b), and may make dense public affairs programming more palatable.

Charges levied against satire of being dangerously cynical (Hart & Hartelius, 2007) have been repeatedly and forcefully rebutted (Bennett, 2007b; Brewer & Marquardt, 2007; Hariman, 2007; Rottinghaus, Bird, Ridout, & Self, 2008; Young, 2007), in one case by researchers who expected to find clear evidence of such cynicism (Baumgartner & Morris, 2006). In the end, however, few studies have yet touched upon satire news' potential for modeling an emerging counter-discourse, and by extension its potential value in holding out new ideas about, approaches to, and tools for journalism. This question motivates the remainder of this chapter, which takes a deeper look at the professional challenges facing journalism as it is practiced today.

Journalistic Standards

"It is hard to argue with the ideals of balance, fairness, and truth," writes Bennett (2007a, p.xv), who goes on to argue against the permanence or infallibility of these ideals. The journalistic "quest for relevance," framed in questions of "objectivity versus subjectivity, detachment versus advocacy, observer versus watchdog," (Johnstone, Slawski, & Bowman, 1972), is nothing new. The discursive integration model argues that such oppositions were always artificial, and are blurring (Baym, 2005, 2007a, 2007b). The news, if it can be defined at all, is not defined by its relationship to the truth, but rather its qualities as a genre of media production (Street, 2001). The wall between media forms that entertain and those that inform is

> supported by a set of understandable but ultimately artificial structures and practices…. These walls – in place throughout most of this century – are rapidly eroding, the result of changing communications technologies, the new

economics of mass media, and broader cultural trends. (Delli Carpini & Williams, 2001, p. 161)

If this is the case, then what comes next? Or, better yet, what could come next?

The Trouble with Ideals

One critic describes the crisis facing journalism: "in the midst of a transition, our industry is flailing. Our credibility suffers mightily. The public thinks we're biased despite our reluctance to speak plainly," (Smolkin, 2007, p. 25). Public expectations notwithstanding, objectivity is neither original nor essential to journalism. It is linked to the post-Civil War shift from a partisan to a professionalized business model of news production (Bennett, 2007a; Young, 2008; Zaller, 2003). Professional, objective journalism aimed for the largest possible readership, in the process offering a new normative understanding the news as primer for a prepared and informed public (2007a; Hallin, 2000; Schudson, 2007; Singer, 2006a, 2006b; Zaller, 2003).

At least five major challenges to objectivity exist. First, the news cannot cover everything; choices must be made, implying more choices of priority, detail, and approach (Bennett, 2007a; Cartier, 1992; Merrill, 1984). Second, not all ideas are equally viable or true; balance legitimizes and thus favors weaker arguments and problematic ideas (Bennett, 2007a; Mindich, 1998). Third, the profit motive of modern media empires may conflict with enlightened objectivity (Baym, 2005; Bennett, 2007a; Young, 2008). Fourth, objectivity favors the entrenched authority and elite sources upon which it depends for content, at the cost of non-mainstream points of view (Bennett, 2007a; Herman & Chomsky, 1988). A final objection views objectivity as undesirable – objectivity implies that responsibility for news content lies not with the reporter but with

the story itself (Poerksen, 2008). Hence objectivity could conceivably be abused as a shield against responsibility for choices of content, style, and selection (Allen, 2008; Poerksen, 2008; Rosen, 1994; Tuchman, 1972).

The press has not been deaf to these criticisms. Objectivity was always difficult, if not impossible, to achieve. Today, journalists use terms such as fairness, accuracy, and balance to denote the same values (Bennett, 2007a). Yet these terms only extend and entrench the same problems. Talk being cheaper than research, pitting a conservative against a liberal voice achieves the coveted journalistic standard of balance, and such discourse becomes its own ideal. Yet it is not clear what, if anything, this balance achieves. The discrepancy between ideals of objectivity and transparency remains a key problem in clarifying the future shape of journalism (Allen, 2006). Leaving such assessments to an opaque televisual sphere may result in inaccurate public knowledge, which if confirmed by the public as both right and necessary results in a public reliant on ideology rather than knowledge (Black, 2007).

Satire offers an alternative model of opposing discourses, long thought to be the key to establishing the value of possible truth claims (McCarthy, 1994). The satiric juxtaposition of a rhetoric of inquiry with a rhetoric of play shifts the discursive focus of the news away from a battle of ideology (Bennett, 2007b; Hariman, 2007; Jordan, 2008; Warner, 2007). Satire's core concern with questioning systemic abuses of authority, in this instance in the televisual realm (Baym, 2007b), allow it to act as "a critique of false certainty," (Griffin, 1994, p.52). In short, satire news replaces professional standards with an affective critique of public reasoning (Jones, 2010).

As Baym has pointed out, "it is important to remember…that the professional paradigm is proving to be a brief chapter in the history of news," (2007c, p.394); yet there remains no widely acceptable alternative to the professional norm of journalism (Young, 2008). Exceptions certainly exist, such as Hunter S. Thompson's gonzo journalism, which opened up new possibilities for observation-driven narrative journalism. Yet this standard never fully advanced from rebellion to mainstream acceptance. Mainstream media outlets maintain the professional standard for one other reason – the broadest possible audience still expects it.

'If It Bleeds, It Leads,' and Other Salient Biases

While the ethical standards that have come down to us are problematic, narrowing the focus to standards alone misses the larger problem. Recall that the discursive integration model identifies several key trends driving shifts in generic roles and discursive authority on television, hinting at larger, systemic weaknesses. Bennett (2007a) offers perhaps the most cogent analysis of the systemic biases inherent in contemporary journalism. Bennett effectively counters the oft-repeated criticism of a 'liberal media' by describing systemic rather than ideological biases. Bennett's four systemic biases stem from media corporations' needs for profit, power elites' needs to maintain media access and control over their message, and viewers' needs to understand complex stories with clarity. Hence media producers tend to package the news as stories, within narratives. In Shanto Iyengar's (1992) formulation, most news is episodic, not thematic. Any good narrative requires conflict and characters; it does not require a broad or comprehensive context.

To fit into a narrative, the elements of the story must often be distorted. Therefore, confusing or chaotic issues are filtered for personalized and dramatized angles. Personalized news highlights individual actors – the characters of the story, emphasizing the particulars over the larger social or political situation. Horse race politics is one of the more famous forms of this phenomenon. Dramatized news privileges conflict over complexity or abstraction, adhering strictly to the traditional narrative paradigm of beginning – middle – and end. The story's characters become type-cast as villains or heroes; problems quickly become spectacles. In the absence of any genuine drama, spectacles can and often are manufactured, trivializing news production by the biases of the selection criteria. It may be a stereotype, but 'If it bleeds, it leads,' makes for quick, easy, and compelling television (Singer, 2006a).

These biases effectively limit the chances of presenting a coherent view of the issues (Bennett, 2007a). Bennett refers to this problem as the fragmentation bias. It helps explain why the news seems to be just a series of disconnected, de-contextualized narratives. "With respect to information fragmentation, the news defies the old adage that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. In news reality, the whole is decidedly less than the sum of its parts," (Bennett, 2007a, p. 60). Given the lack of meaningful connections, viewers struggle to connect seemingly disparate narratives, or to reason coherently about abstract problems.

Completing the work of the narrative and fragmentation biases is the overarching authority-disorder bias, which ultimately applies dramatization, personalization, and fragmentation to a source material – typically one involving power. The authority-disorder bias treats events as indices of order, with an emphasis on authoritative agency

(Bennett, 2007a). This is news as quasi-fiction. Many successful stories will sacrifice a little accuracy for a lot of drama, with an emphasis on results, effects, and endings, and a privileging of extremes. Political spin doctors have long since learned how to manipulate this system for their maximum benefit by realizing Daniel Boorstin's famous concept of non-spontaneous, ready to report, 'truthy' pseudo-events (Bennett, 2007a; Boorstin, 1992; McKain, 2005).

These four biases help to explain four paradoxes regarding the press' seeming inability to credibly enhance the democratic system. Robert Entman (1989) describes these paradoxes: "abundance without growth," (p. 8) or the ubiquity of news media but decline in political knowledge and interest; "aggressiveness without accountability," (p. 8) or the failure of the press to prevent political abuses even as they adopt an adversarial role; "pressure without reform," (p. 8) or the failure of the media to reform despite ample awareness of their failings; and "power without control," (p. 9) or the simultaneous power of the press to influence politics while also needing access to politicians. Entman details the rise of intense media pressures arising from the parallel development of cable news, media empires, and spin doctoring in the 1980's. As these pressures have grown and been joined by a technology-driven information revolution, these paradoxes remain salient today, two decades after they were identified. The question here is whether satire news has any capacity to resolve them and to restore some measure of press credibility.

Jane Singer argues that journalistic credibility suffers if it is based on an emphasis on process, on selection and dissemination of information, but is enhanced by an emphasis on ethics (2006b). Here, Singer comes close to accurately naming a crucial and self-sustaining journalistic principle. She errs, however, in an insistence on ethics, as

ethical codes and norms tend to favor the very formalized processes she condemns (Himmelboim & Limor, 2005). Rather, what is needed is a journalism based on ethos, or an authority stemming from the character of the speaker and the context of the speech. Singer seems to concur, as she calls journalists "not gatekeepers but sense-makers, not agenda-setters but interpreters of what is both credible and valuable – with the notion of independence keeping those interpretations from becoming compromised by partisan loyalties," (2006b, p.12). Regardless of choices made, it is the notion of trust which makes the question of who is or is not a journalist an important one. These ignored questions of reportorial and audience roles, and the overriding sense of context, are the key elements missing from the media system as Bennett describes it. Without any one of these elements, journalistic credibility suffers. Without all of them, journalism faces a crisis of confidence.

Why do viewers continue to consume such news if it fails to nourish? Several possibilities exist. Bennett himself concedes that the media producers may be right when they claim to produce what people want (2007a). Dramatic coverage does tend to be compelling. Nevertheless, in the absence of meaningful competition, such a point rests on pure conjecture (2007a). Another possibility is that higher quality news puts a higher demand of knowledge and thought on the consumer (Zaller, 2003). Stewart concedes this point, arguing that his humor makes little sense if you don't already know what's going on (Young, 2004). It may also be that consumers don't know any better, that they themselves operate under a subtle cognitive bias in favor of strategically-framed news (Capella & Jamieson, 1997), or associate quality with the boredom that Jim Lehrer once claimed to strive for in an interview with Stephen Colbert (Stewart, Karlin, & Colbert,

4/15/09). The answer to this question may well be elusive for no better reason than the question itself may be misleading. The majority of news on offer comes from a handful of media empires (Bennett, 2007a). Consumers have such little choice that their choices in media have very little real meaning. In any case, consumers do not produce the news. Complaining that consumers do not choose better media is a little like suggesting that they eat cake instead of bread.

Truthiness or Consequences

As the polls cited at the beginning of this study suggest, the satirist speaks within the socio-political realm long mediated almost solely by journalists, and audiences listen. Sandra Borden and Chad Tew (2007) acknowledge that Jon Stewart's "pronouncements strike many as evidence that he can, at times, perform journalism better than journalists themselves," (2007, p. 309). This notion of performing journalism may explain how Stewart and Colbert can perform a valuable media auditing function even while operating as media critics outside of journalistic conventions. While the satirist is clearly distinguished from the traditional journalist, the differences between them raise important normative and ethical issues. For instance, where mainstream news media ask the audience to trust their evaluation of events, satire news programs invite the audience to share in that evaluation, serving "to teach audiences that they have a stake in journalistic integrity," (2007, p. 310). The news has always attempted a form of collective sense making; satire news takes issue with the internal, apparently logical tradition of doing so. "The capacity of comedy to humanize… is an important aspect of its appeal. Ultimately, this quality promotes identification between the audience and comedians." (2007, p. 311).

The role of the journalist is after all a role. Roles can be manipulated. Warner (2007) discusses Stewart's Socratic interviewing style. Rather than basing the news interview on routine questions of who, what, and where, etc., Stewart adopts a faux-ignorant persona, a method particularly useful in revealing flawed assumptions and inconsistent logic, as well as enhancing credibility and fueling debate. Self-effacing humor helps to moderate the interviewer's intent. Furthermore, satire news has the capacity to violate basic tenets of professional interviewing such as the impersonal stance, the non-conversational tone, and the lack of a potentially interfering audience (Baym, 2005). Another study links open opinionation with stronger knowledge gains, particularly for non-partisan viewers not motivated to seek out news updates (Feldman, 2008). Arguing against dismissing more opinionated forms of journalism, Lauren Feldman states that "from a normative standpoint, it seems that the needs of citizens would best be met by a media system that privileges both objective *and* opinionated news," (2008, pp. 26-27, emphasis in original).

Other journalistic norms and discursive borders can be crossed, by shifting voices or tones within an interview, or by via "honest reactions" in an interview or report (Borden & Tew, 2007, p. 312; Baym, 2005). A human response to the reporting of atrocious incidents or crimes, handled tastefully, could reinforce common bonds of culture, ideology, or sympathy. One of Jon Stewart's most powerful tools is his blank-faced silence in response to some surprising or inconsistent statement. The content of the satirical interview, expanding beyond typical episodic treatment, may include a substantial personal focus (Baym, 2005), and a conversational tone may lead to a fuller portrait of an interviewee, a fact not lost on recent presidential candidates (Feldman &

Young, 2008; Holbert, Lambe, Dudo, & Carlton, 2007; Hollander, 2008). Arguably, the most promising aspect of satirical discourses lies in their ability to deconstruct talking points and spin, in particular through redaction (Jones, 2010) and counter-argument (Baym, 2005, 2007). *The Daily Show* excels in first mimicking and then deconstructing the common visual attributes of TV news reporting, such as the ironic and reflexive use of green-screen technology in false field reports used to point out the artificiality of such journalistic conventions. Each of these alternative approaches further assumes a more active role for the audience.

In short, satire news moves discussion beyond process questions of *how* towards motive questions of *why*, viewing journalistic ideals as choices which can and should be justified. The journalist must remain aware of broader ethical questions – can the journalist's voice carry more weight than the elected politician's, do questions of choice and content reflect the needs of the public for salient information and the public's ability to address salient issues, do standard newsgathering techniques advance public or private interests, and should the press act as an interpretive buffer or a neutral conduit for explosive or complex information (Graber, 2007)? Such questions of approach motivate this study.

Summary and Research Questions

This study looks to satirical news not to discover its effects, but to seek more effective methods of civic communication. Even skeptics such as Baumgartner and Morris (2006) concede that entertainment can potentially minimize the perceived

negatives of traditional news broadcasts. The discursive integration model considers satire news as an experiment with the broader principles of mediated communication. Freed from a problematic professional code, *The Daily Show* offers a creative response to the crisis of credibility facing journalism (Baym, 2005, 2007a, 2007b, 2007c; Mutz, 2004). By going beyond the institutional biases of personalization, dramatization, fragmentation and authority-disorder, "*The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report* are helping to educate audiences about what news is and the role of the journalist in public discourse," (Stewart & Littau, 2008, p. 22). Two sets of research questions follow. First, broad questions of whether satire news offers potentially credible tools for the mainstream journalist. To this effect, this study asks:

RQ1: Can satire news avoid the structural biases/paradoxes that affect mainstream news coverage to credibly address public affairs?

RQ2: What satire news approaches could credibly be used by mainstream news media?

Many researchers, skeptical of the value of professionalism relative to critical discourse, point to satire as an outsider mode of criticism (Borden & Tew, 2007; Feldman, 2008; Jordan, 2008; McKain, 2005; Warner, 2007; Young, 2008). Stewart regularly mocks such professional conventions. "Journalists, likewise, should consider adopting performances that are more transparent about the production of knowledge, by journalists as well as the powerful people they cover," (Borden & Tew, 2007, p. 312). The 'performance of news' has been most controversial when it is most relevant – at transitional moments such as this, when paradigms of communication are challenged or evolve (2007). Stewart and Colbert may not be actual journalists; the point of this study is

not to argue that *The Daily Show* and the nightly news are the same thing, on the same level. Discursive integration points out the risks of such dichotomies, and describes a mainstream news media increasingly enamored of the techniques of infotainment while serious comedy reports issues in depth (Jones, 2010). If what these satirists do is even occasionally found to more effectively perform a civic function, then it becomes imperative to examine just what they are doing right.

This study seeks to describe what the mainstream media might take away from the alternative methods of satire news, a concern that guides the next set of research questions, which can be broken down into two further areas – the construction of news discourses and the handling of truth. Bennett's structural biases and Baym's notion of a televisual sphere speak to the importance of televisual conventions in shaping public discourses (Baym, 2005, 2007b; Bennett, 2007a). In the context of news production, the crucial applicable convention is the transformation of events into coherent narratives (Bennett, 2007a). Bennett (2007a) and Joseph Cappella and Kathleen Hall Jamieson (1997) point to the relationship between standard framing techniques and news credibility or cynicism. Baym (2005, 2007a, 2007b, 2010) and Jones (2010) argues that the specific ways in which satire news echoes or diverges from such techniques mark its reportorial bona fides and commitment to discourses of truth. As such, the following research questions are posed:

RQ3: What codes and frames are employed?

RQ4: How are narrative structures used, mimicked, or subverted?

Crucial to this process are notions of truth. The question of whether or not satire news has anything valuable to offer mainstream news discourses rests largely on its ability to treat

truth claims in a meaningful way. Rhetorical theory further points towards the authoritative basis of these claims, raising the important question of how open and transparent the coverage in question may be. Always at issue in this analysis are questions of power relationships which inform narrative context, audience roles, and the means of persuasion that the reality presented is a faithful and complete account of the reality of the situation. Therefore, two final research questions are posed:

RQ5: What truth claims are made in the reports?

RQ6: What is the source of authority for these truth claims?

One further set of guidelines will be used to assess whether or not such an account has been achieved. John Zaller's (2003) standards of news quality provide three basic criteria: informational needs of self-governance, feasibility, and critical potential. Zaller's first criterion addresses the quality of the news by asking whether it provides the information necessary for citizens to discharge their democratic duties (2003). His second criterion addresses overall practicality – does the news on offer require more of citizens than they are able or willing to give? Furthermore, do news standards require more resources than producers are able to provide? Finally, Zaller argues that "the standard must therefore be able to highlight shortcomings in existing news and to generate ideas about how it can be improved," (2003, p. 112). These criteria provide a basic framework with which to more objectively determine the relative value and success of differing news discourses. The following chapter elaborates the approach and the source material of this investigation.

CHAPTER 3

DATA AND METHODS

This study assesses the mainstream potential of discursive approaches employed by *The Daily Show* via a discourse analysis. The following chapters examine coverage within both traditional and satirical news sources regarding the swift boat controversy of August, 2004, three months prior to the presidential election. A direct comparison of the relative truth and merit of coverage between traditional and satirical news sites would be both unwieldy and counter-productive. This study instead focuses on the manifest approaches towards truth claims in general, following the research questions outlined at the end of the previous chapter. Following a brief summary of the swift boat controversy, a more detailed explanation of the data collection and the data itself will be given.

As a central part of his 2004 presidential campaign, Senator John Kerry tried to paint himself as a war hero. During the Vietnam War, Kerry had commanded a swift boat, a type of small, shallow draft boat used by the Navy for counterinsurgency operations, and had been awarded several medals for valorous conduct, including three purple hearts, a silver star, and a bronze star. However, a group called the Swift Boat Veterans for Truth (hereafter SBVT) launched a much-noted media campaign, including the release of attack ads on TV and a book, calling into question Kerry's service and integrity. They launched their first ad on August 5, 2004, releasing three others before the end of the month. Despite occasional questions regarding the credibility of the SBVT, the story remained a major element of the campaign. As the media itself would report, far more people saw the ads on the news than ever saw them as commercial advertisements. Interestingly, Senator Kerry chose *The Daily Show* as the venue of his first interview

following the release of the SBVT ads. Since this time, the term *swift boat* has entered the popular lexicon as a verb, used to mean a concerted attack on someone based upon dubious information and suspect motives.

Methods

The discourse analysis used to examine the swift boat controversy follows Foucault in examining the nexus between power, knowledge, and truth.

> We should admit… that power produced knowledge… that power and knowledge directly imply one another; that there is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge, nor any knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute at the same time power relations. (1977, p. 27)

The particular question facing this study is how mainstream and alternative public discourses produce knowledge, and how that knowledge presupposes and constitutes power relationships. Mediated public discourses are thus viewed, for the sake of this study, as potentially powerful venues for shaping perceptions of and beliefs regarding truth in the public sphere. The particular discourse analysis employed here thus aims to elucidate the structures and motives which constitute the media venue for discussions of public truth claims.

Discourse analysis as a method takes a variety of shapes and follows from a variety of intellectual traditions. Therefore, the particulars of the method's execution remain somewhat varied, and the particulars of the approach may be contingent upon the particular aims, needs, and foci of each particular study. The various manifestations of the method by and large tend to examine how reality, knowledge, and power are

linguistically constructed. The method's strategic flexibility is at once both a weakness and a strength (Fürsich, 2009); this study seeks to make full use of this flexibility as a valuable asset. Nevertheless, this sense of flexibility, in addition to the potential for subjective interpretation, lead this research to advance as cautiously as possible.

This caution has motivated the selection of the three frameworks discussed in the latter sections of the previous chapter. Bennett's (2007a) specific structural biases provide an analytical framework with which to proceed, Entman's (1989) news paradoxes provide a qualitative challenge with which to test the coverage in question, and Zaller's (2003) criteria offer a final tool with which to gauge the overall success of the coverage. These frameworks are together intended to minimize the possibility of subjective evaluations by maximizing the objective measures of discursive success.

The particular analytical method employed begins with an immersion into the data. Each video clip was viewed repeatedly and transcribed, with transcripts carefully verified over multiple repeated viewings. This process was intended to produce in-depth familiarity with the data before beginning the actual analysis itself. Once the clips had been thus reviewed and transcripts made, the transcripts were repeatedly examined in search for key themes. Any insights into the data were noted and video clips reviewed to contextualize this research and reinforce emerging categories and interpretations. These key themes and categories were then examined as potential evidence of Bennett's structural biases. The analysis sought to uncover and explain any internal complexities or contradictions, to ensure that all available data were being represented by the emerging categories, and to ensure that any significant content left unsaid was noted both by the analysis and the key categories (Fürsich, 2009; Rose, 2007).

Following this process, results were arranged comparatively by programming type (mainstream versus alternative) in sections based on the categories that emerged from the study. The data were also subjected to final evaluation according to the standards of Entman's (1989) paradoxes and Zaller's (2003) criteria. Although the researcher's subjective approach cannot be entirely eliminated, these combined frameworks minimized such an interpretation. The analysis of course lacks the rigorous statistical validity of a quantitative approach. In fact, the lack of a quantitative balance to this discourse analysis is the primary impediment to this study claiming the status of the more fully developed critical discourse analysis methodology (Carvalho, 2008).

Data Collection

The data for this study came from several databases and websites. *The Daily Show* website (http://www.thedailyshow.com) features an extensive archive of whole episodes dating back to the show's inception in 1996. A search of these archives of the term "swift boat veterans for truth" yielded seven clips. One clip, a file story investigating campaign finance loopholes, was excluded for lack of direct relevance, and for falling outside of the period of the controversy (August, 2004). Another clip was excluded – an 11 second clip concluding the program, which simply played a brief portion of the original SBVT ad. The five remaining clips, totaling 16:15, were viewed repeatedly and transcribed. One additional clip was added to this sample – the abovementioned Kerry interview, which fell within the month of August. This clip runs 11:28, bringing the total time of the clips examined to 27:43.

Mainstream news reports were accessed primarily through Vanderbilt University's Television News Archive. A search there for the term "swift boat veterans for truth," and excluding special broadcasts, commercials, program introductions, and conclusions yielded 14 results. Of these, eight clips originally aired on the *NBC Nightly News*, and six others aired on CNN. Two clips were selected from each network. All clips were first reviewed and clips containing redundant information excluded. The four clips selected cover a broad range of dates and were chosen in part for their thorough inclusion of noteworthy news developments. The two NBC clips total 5:34, and the two CNN clips total 20:26. Given that the other networks were not represented in the Vanderbilt search, the archives of ABC News, CBS News, Fox News, and MSNBC News were searched for additional sources. Only CBS News yielded results – two clips, both of which originally aired on August 29th. Their total run time was 4:02, bringing the combined total of the mainstream news clips to 30:02. All six of these clips were viewed repeatedly and transcribed. Each of the clips examined here is described in detail below.

Data Descriptions

The six mainstream news reports and the six satirical news reports will be briefly described here. Despite this study's assertion that a completely objective description of any event is theoretically impossible, no meaningful analysis of the data discussed here can occur without first clarifying the nature of these data. In order to provide a meaningful portrait of these data, each news clip will be described in terms of its structure, its factual content, and its visual style. All remaining analysis will be left for following chapters. The mainstream news reports will be discussed first, to be examined

by network and by date. Next, reports from *The Daily Show* will be discussed, to be examined in chronological order.

Mainstream News Sources

To repeat, six news reports regarding the SBVT controversy were selected, two clips each from NBC, CBS, and CNN. While mainstream news sources had reported on the story as early as August 5th, all available archival video footage dates from August 19th, the day that Senator Kerry first responded to the swift boat allegations directly. This event marks the start of the peak period of media scrutiny of the controversy, and media attention to the story increased accordingly. By the time of the final two reports examined here (Sunday, August 29th), two further SBVT ads had aired, creating a series of tangential narratives. While notable differences between network and cable news reports exist, all reports were similar in terms of content and style. Network reports mainly consisted of a single two to three minute story featuring one or two of the day's main developments. These stories may or may not have introductions from a studio anchor, but in no case was the story introduced by the lead anchor (at that point either Tom Brokaw or Dan Rather). Perhaps given its need to fill 24-hours of programming, CNN offered more extensive coverage. The CNN reports consist of eight to twelve minute stories, with both individual reports and interviews.

CNN News Clips

The first CNN clip aired on Thursday, August 19th and lasted 08:10. The clip begins with a brief introduction, followed by the main story, and ending with an interview with media researcher Kathleen Hall Jamieson (who has been cited in this study). The studio anchor and interviewer is Daryn Kagan, with the field report in the

middle handled by Dan Lothian. The primary focus of the field report is Kerry's "aggressive response" that day to the SBVT ads. The story's video shows four moments of John Kerry's appearance at a meeting of firefighters in Boston, the main site of his new response to the ad. Later, two of Kerry's Vietnam War comrades are shown giving speeches in support of Kerry, and another comrade (Jim Rassman, the man whose life John Kerry saved) is shown in a new Kerry TV ad. One brief scene of President Bush on *Larry King Live* is also shown, with Bush calling for an end to all third party political advertisements. The interview segment shifts to another question – the media's role in the controversy and the political manipulation of the event.

The second CNN clip aired on Monday, August 23rd and lasts 12:50. This clip is especially complex, featuring five segments – a brief introduction, a field report, a studio report, a second field report, and an interview. The clip is thematically quite complex as well, with reporter Jill Dougherty focusing mainly on the president's response to the ads, and reporter Bill Schneider focusing mainly on Kerry's antiwar record following his return from military duty. Between these two reports comes an examination of the veracity of the claims against Kerry covered by studio anchor Aaron Brown and an unnamed reporter in voice-over. The interview segment, between Aaron Brown and *New York Times* reporter Kate Zernike, further develops this idea of veracity, discussing the merit of the allegations, and possible connections between the SBVT and the Bush campaign. Visually, the clip includes a variety of content. The first field report features numerous shots of President Bush and his advisors outside of his ranch in Crawford, Texas, where the president was then on vacation. The middle studio report features a number of clips from the SBVT ads as well as a clip of Jim Rassman describing how

Kerry had saved his life. The second field report focused mainly on clips of Kerry being interviewed, although another shot of Jim Rassman as well as a rebuttal by one of the SBVT veterans are included.

NBC News Clips

The NBC clips are introduced by Brian Williams, reporting from the Olympic Games in Athens. Both clips follow the introduction with a single report from another reporter. The first NBC clip aired on Sunday, August 22nd and lasted 02:07. The main body of the report is delivered by Carl Quintenilla and directly covers the political strategizing that has resulted from the SBVT ads. Several current and former Senators are shown trying to make their case for or against John Kerry. Recent appearances by political operatives on *Meet the Press* are featured, while a short clip of the author of the SBVT book attacking Kerry is also shown. The second NBC report aired on Friday, August 27th and lasted 3:27. Brian Williams introduces this clip as well, marking the only repeat appearance of any journalist in the reports analyzed here. This clip also consists of a single report. The body of the report is delivered by Lisa Myers. While noting the lack of documentary proof for the SBVT charges against Kerry, the report details more charges made by one SBVT member, retired Admiral William Schachte. Two of Kerry's comrades dispute these allegations. Visually, the report is dominated by the testimonials of the three former soldiers who appear on camera.

CBS News Clips

Neither CBS story includes any kind of anchor introduction, but go straight into the story. Both clips last approximately two minutes. The first report features John Roberts reporting from a nondescript field in the country. Although there is only one

segment, two topics are covered. First, the resignation from the Bush campaign of a lawyer who consulted for the SBVT. Second, the attempt by former Senator Max Cleland and Jim Rassman to deliver a letter to George Bush at his Texas ranch. The disparity in content leads to a disparity in visual presentation, with the lawyer-related images coming from law offices and office buildings, as well as graphics of the White House, political rallies, and two democratic lawyers. The images from Texas tended to feature the protagonists confronting a crowd of people, first in the street, and later in a press conference. The final clip details the support for John Kerry of a *Chicago Tribune* reporter who served alongside the senator. The story features a photo of the journalist beside graphic quotes from an editorial he wrote for the following day's newspaper, supporting Kerry's war record. The story mentions the allegations against Kerry and the ties that link the SBVT and the Bush family and campaign. Noteworthy is the suggestion that John Kerry seeks to avoid the kind of damage inflicted against Michael Dukakis in 1988 when some of the same people who produced the SBVT ads produced ads mocking Dukakis. Images of Dukakis in a tank dominate the ending of this clip.

Satire News Sources

Six satire news reports regarding the SBVT controversy were selected from the archives of *The Daily Show* on its website. Four reports directly address developments in the swift boat controversy, while a fifth story involved as exchange between Stewart and "Senior Political Analyst," Rob Corddry. The final clip is Stewart's interview with John Kerry, which covers the swift boat controversy, but also includes several other topics. These clips will be discussed below individually, in chronological order, in the same fashion as the mainstream reports described above. These clips cover much of the same

period as the mainstream news sources discussed above, ranging from Monday, August 9th through Tuesday, August 24th, 2004. The August 9th report on The Daily Show was the earliest available report from any source. The first SBVT ad aired on Thursday, August 5th, too late for *The Daily Show* to include on its broadcast that day (the show is not, technically, a *daily* show, and does not air on Fridays). The program's first available opportunity to report on the controversy thus came on Monday, August 9th.

"Vet Defensive" – 8/09 (Mon.)

Jon Stewart's first report on the SBVT ad campaign lasts 03:38 and consists of a brief introduction (also introducing the night's program), a rebuttal of the accusations, and a look at the responses of Senator John McCain and White House Press Secretary Scott McClellan. Included are five brief testimonials from the SBVT ad which claim that Kerry has lied about his war record. Stewart debunks these claims. Similarly, Stewart's attention to McCain's and McClellan's responses to the ad highlights the motives of those who might praise or condemn the SBVT's tactics. Most of this clip features straight shots of Jon Stewart at his desk. A short segment featuring a mock-letter home was shown, with sound and graphics evoking the Civil War era. The "letter" challenged the account of a doctor who claimed in the SBVT ad that he treated Kerry's wounds, which were too minor to be deserving of special commendation. This was one of a total of six major jokes delivered in the segment.

"Swift Boat Veterans" – 8/10 (Tues.)

Stewart responds to a column from *The Washington Post* in which Robert Novak suggests that Kerry's former crew cannot claim he was a hero because they served with Kerry only briefly (in the case of Jim Rassman, for just a few days). Stewart ridicules

Novak's logic, and in particular his claim that, unless effectively refuted, the swift-boaters' book is devastating for Kerry's war record. Stewart here begins to articulate his central thesis that Kerry's war record having been a matter of public record for 35 years, it is incumbent upon his opponents to prove their case, and not the other way around. Other than a few brief graphics featuring a photo of Robert Novak and his column from the day before, the report features only Jon Stewart sitting at his desk. In the clip's 2:22 run time, three major jokes are told.

"Swift Boat Veterans for Revenge" – 8/19 (Thurs.)

This clip also follows in the argumentative mode of a traditional op/ed report, albeit with more humor. This report runs 1:51, and includes three jokes and includes no graphics. The content of the clip details the release of military records which contradict SBVT member Larry Thurlow's accusations that Kerry lied about being under attack. Stewart's restates his argument that Kerry need not be expected to defend the public record. The clip mainly consists of frontal medium shots of Stewart at his desk.

"Sixties Flashback Edition" – 8/23 (Mon.)

This report features four different segments, eight major jokes, and runs 05:05. The first segment attacks another of John Kerry's SBVT critics for hypocrisy, showing the critic denouncing Kerry for lying about being a war hero, and then showing the same man eight years before, campaigning for Kerry as a courageous war hero. The second segment shows a clip of Kerry responding to the SBVT attacks, followed by Stewart mocking Kerry's robotic, image-obsessed manner. In the third clip, Stewart looks at a Bush administration dismissal of allegations that the SBVT are connected to the Bush campaign and uses the denial to actually suggest that a connection does exist. Stewart

ends the report with a redacted analysis of Former Senator Bob Dole's response to the swift boat controversy. The clip features several political figures or critics, and features Stewart interacting with the clips he shows.

"Kerry Controversy" – 8/23 (Mon.)

Continuing from the previous segment, Stewart turns to an interview with one of his "senior political analyst" pundits, Rob Corddry, who is supposedly reporting from a Vietnamese rice paddy (but is in reality standing in front of a blue screen a few feet from Stewart's desk). The interview features discussion of whether and when this story would end, why Kerry must rebut his critics, what it means to remain objective, and how credible the SBVT may be. This report runs 03:17, and features eight major jokes.

"Kerry Interview" – 8/24 (Thurs.)

The John Kerry interview is the longest clip examined from *The Daily Show*, running 11:28. It is one of the longest interviews ever aired on the program, and is topically quite diffuse. The swift boat controversy provides a context for the discussion, and the interview attempts to clear up several misconceptions. Several topics are covered, among them the swift boat ads, truth and politics, democratic debate, talking points, presidential authority, temperament and leadership, presidential debates, energy policy, and campaigning in general. Both parties to the discussion alternate between serious points of concern and self-effacing humor. Jon Stewart ends the interview by thanking Kerry for coming, and for having "just a normal conversation."

Summary

This study looks to an unusual controversy in the midst of an unusual presidential election in order to better understand the latitude of the journalist in mediating truth claims. It is tempting to look at the failures of the mainstream media and dismiss their codes of ethics and traditions. It is equally tempting to turn to the common sense and wit of satire and embrace radical departures in the voice and approach of news reporting. Such temptations would do a disservice to public discourse by too easily dismissing inherited methods and tools, and the motives for using them. The flaws in the current system make analyses of potential solutions all the more urgent. The aim of this analysis is to identify tools that may aid journalism in navigating these tensions. The assumption that newer, better tools could enhance the functioning of the public sphere echoes the very high modern assumptions that already undergird traditional codes of ethics.

This study will employ a discourse analysis to examine alternative tools that may correct for Bennett's news biases – personalization, dramatization, fragmentation, and the authority-disorder bias. Twelve sample reports have been selected to this end – six mainstream media reports, and six satirical news reports. By examining the assumptions under which these reports operate and the means that they use to scrutinize the case before them, this study will demonstrate that the voice of the comedian might well have something to teach us about how to effectively mediate politics.

CHAPTER 4

ANALYSIS

Having discussed the normative dimensions of satire news, having examined the structural biases and paradoxes of the mainstream news media, and having formulated from this research an analytic framework intended to shed light on the potential utility of alternative discursive tools within a mainstream news context, this study now focuses its spotlight firmly on the data under review. To reiterate, six segments from *The Daily Show* exist regarding John Kerry and the 2004 swift boat controversy, all of which have been transcribed. Six further clips have been selected from three well-known networks, NBC, CBS, and CNN; these too have been transcribed. These twelve clips were analyzed according to the research questions laid out in the previous chapter. The first part of the analysis will focus on journalistic authorial roles and the news as text. The second part of the analysis will examine approaches to discourses of truth in the public sphere.

"That Was the Sound Bite, Now Here Is the Story:" Authorial Reporting

The question is "whether [John Kerry] earned the medals that he was awarded. His shipmates say yes, some other vets say no." (CNN, August 19, 2004). Or perhaps instead, "in politics, does it pay to make charges, true or not, knowing that… the media will still report those charges?" (CNN, August 19, 2004). Or maybe, "Just how much does either side now want the swift boat issue to live on?" (NBC, August 22, 2004). Artificial balance. Personalization. Dramatization. Each of the mainstream news reports examined here used these or similar approaches. For instance, the assertion that "Kerry's critics say he invited this kind of scrutiny when he made his Vietnam record a central part

of his campaign," (NBC, August 27, 2004) balances the agency of John Kerry with that of his opponents, uses dramatic and confrontational language rather than documentary evidence, and implicitly questions the strength of the candidate, personalizing the issue and downplaying the context.

Some reports offered quite nuanced coverage of the controversy, and those reports that did use such biases as dramatization or personalization did not do so cynically. Yet these caveats do not address the questions asked by this study regarding the values that underlie such professionalism, or the costs that derive from embracing professional codes. In addition to the benefits that derive from the professional code, the narrative imperative of contemporary journalism sets substantial limits on its ability to make sense of complex events.

Dramatization and Personalization in Mainstream Reporting

The dramatization of news events jumps out most forcefully in mainstream news discourses. Dramatization attracts audience attention with its high-stakes, colorful rendering of events in a narrative form, elements which abound in the case of the swift boat controversy. In approximately 20 minutes of reporting time, the word *attack* or its synonym appeared twelve times. The specific phrase "war of words" appeared twice, across networks and nearly a week apart. CNN's coverage focused on Kerry's "aggressive response" (a phrase used twice), describing the Senator's strategy of "marching out" supporters, and "firing back" at critics. Kerry here decides to "come out swinging" in an "all out effort." He "took the offensive," "launched an attack," and "went after President Bush," "big-time," taunting Bush and his supporters – "Bring it on!" (August 19, 2004). Later reports focus on the "fierce" "race for president" amidst a

"dangerous," "fast paced" and "intensified" debate in which "momentum" is constantly shifting and up for grabs.

Such language evinces the personalization bias as well as the dramatic. In a presidential election, news reports tend to obsess over the titanic candidates and the maelstrom of events that surround them. These figures magnetize this discourse. Until defamiliarized, the terms of discussion seem quite natural. But once again, defending such conventions on grounds of familiarity ignores the degree to which the stated defense is deficient. To point – each of the examples of language given above taken individually seems typical and harmless. Taken together, the examples (and not all such examples were quoted) may seem a bit frivolous. But put into a context in which this language stands in for a key public discourse, all of it occurring in a period several minutes shy of a half an hour, then the dramatic bias becomes both apparent and problematic.

An Alternative Approach

In all of its reporting on the swift boat controversy, *The Daily Show* used almost none of the terms discussed above. The word "attack" was used twice – once to describe the nature of the swift boat ad, and once in a joke mocking Kerry's robotic style. Jon Stewart's only use of the word "response" had nothing to do with Kerry's combativeness: "in the absence of any evidence, the only response necessary was delivered at the Democratic Convention when Kerry's swift boat mates stood with him on stage in support," (August 10, 2004). And the phrase "war of words" appears only one time, in an exchange in which Stewart asks his "Senior Political Analyst," Rob Corddry if the campaigns will ever let this controversy end, to which Corddry replies, "I fear we may find ourselves in a… shadow war of words. Uh, I probably shouldn't say the word 'war.'

Um… a police action of words," (August 23, 2004). More than the language, the approach to the topic was different. While the dramatic and personalized frames give way to comedic norms, it would be a mistake to write off the humor as being incidental to the larger message.

In fact, the jokes told in *The Daily Show's* swift boat coverage comprise a rich source of alternative commentary on the event. Excluding Stewart's interview with Kerry, Stewart told 29 jokes requiring a prepared set-up or rationale. Each joke served a rhetorical purpose, arguing for a particular point or perspective. Five of these jokes are more or less the same, targeting "the ironically named Swift Boat Veterans for Truth, who appear to be neither swift nor truthful," (August 23, 2004). At one point he calls them "these Swift Boat Veterans for Revenge," (August 19, 2004). Stewart also carefully distinguishes them from the (made-up) "BTR-60 Armored Personnel Carrier Drivers for Public Decency" (August 9, 2004) and the "Drunken Stateside Sons of Privilege for Plausible Deniability," (August 23, 2004).

But pointing out the Orwellian absurdity of the SBVT's name was not a discursive achievement so much as an easy target. Stewart's humor conveys hard to palate criticisms. For instance, Stewart's first report on the swift boat ads shows four SBVT members claiming Kerry lied about his service in Vietnam. Stewart responds:

> It is a powerful indictment, or rather, it would be, had any of those guys actually served on Kerry's boat. See, by served with him, they mean they were in Vietnam… at the time. It's kind-of the same way that Snoopy served with the Red Baron. (August 9, 2004)

Translation: these claims rest on false authority. The critics are guilty of the same accusations they make. Thus when columnist Robert Novak points out that Kerry barely knew his crew, Stewart feigns agreement.

> Jim Rassman, the man whose life Kerry saved, was only "spending a few days with Kerry when he fell or was knocked off the Swift Boat." So the guy Kerry saved was [Stewart makes a disgusted face]… some stranger. It makes the whole thing more cowardly, don't you see? (August 10, 2004)

Translation: In order to justify preconceived ideological notions, one must radically twist or ignore facts. Another irony here emerges – in order to maintain objective balance, those reporting on this controversy must transmit sources which manipulate truth. When Stewart asks "Senior Political Analyst" Rob Corddry his opinion of the evidence against the swift boat allegations, Corddry replies, "I'm sorry, my op-, opinion? No, I don't have 'O-pini-aaahns.' I'm a reporter, Jon. My job is to spend half the time repeating what one side says, and half the time repeating the other." (August 23, 2004). Translation: objectivity precludes even declaring what constitutes fact; the reporter is only a neutral conduit for other voices. Corddry concludes, "Not my job to stand between the people talking to me and the people listening to me," (August 23, 2004). It seems that the media must never, under any circumstances, mediate.

Larger Issues of Approach

This section began by quoting CNN's suggestion that the central question of the controversy was whether John Kerry earned his war medals, and a combative Kerry declaring, "Bring it on!" CNN reporter Daryn Kagan replies, "Well, that was the sound bite, now here is the story" (August 19, 2004). The subsequent 30 seconds include three

short clips of Kerry and one of President Bush, all of which can only be termed sound bites. A story set up in opposition to, but comprised of, spin could well be called a minor act of professional negligence, of limited significance. Such a reading would be reductive. The biases of dramatization and personalization discussed here hint at larger issues of approach – precisely what CNN inadvertently highlighted in this coverage. Put another way, these biases are symptoms, and the disease is one of conception, in which the news narrative is largely shaped by available source materials (read: sound bites). As a result a high proportion of mainstream news broadcasts rely on manipulated materials to fill out their narratives, even to the point that they use them either unwillingly or unwittingly.

A glance at the number of clips used by the news reports (excluding interviews) is illustrative (see Table 1). *The Daily Show* used a total of 15 clips over 16:38 of

Table 1: Relative Use of Video Clips Across Networks

Network	No. of Video Clips Used	Total Non-Interview Airtime	Video Clips per Minute
CNN	25	10:41	2.31
NBC	13	5:36	2.32
CBS	5	4:02	1.24
TDS	15	16:38	0.92

non-interview air time, for an average of 0.92 clips per minute. The shorter CBS samples averaged slightly higher levels at 1.24 clips per minute. The NBC coverage included 13 clips – nearly the same number as, but over a period less than one-third the total air time as on *The Daily Show*. NBC's average of 2.32 clips per minute was nearly identical to CNN's average of 2.31 over a 10:41 period. These numbers do not tell the whole story, of course. They merely provide a snapshot of a crucial discrepancy that speaks to the dramatization and personalization biases that pervade mainstream news coverage, but which are absent on *The Daily Show*.

This study refers to this evident difference of approach as authorization, or the attitude towards the agency of the reporter in creating news texts. Reportorial authority typically rest on the official pronouncements of newsworthy public figures, as noted above. Yet the reporter also maintains a share of overall authority, regardless of whether this authority is accepted or acknowledged. Traditional journalistic ethics denies the reporter an evaluative authority. This ethical choice carries problematic implications of its own, not least of which is its denial of the reporter's role in shaping the news narrative. The idea of authorization implicitly acknowledges both the authority and the authorial agency of the reporter.

This analysis suggests that a reportage aware of this authorial ethos, and willing and able to use it, can potentially avoid Bennett's structural biases. Authorization also addresses Entman's second credibility paradox, aggressiveness without accountability, which notes the failure of an increasingly adversarial press to either fulfill a watchdog role or prevent media manipulation (Entman, 1989). Indeed, though the press often acts

aggressively, the problems they report are neither prevented nor made more manageable. This analysis suggests that as long as the press operates subject to the dramatization and personalization biases, they will remain locked in a symbiotic relationship with the power elites they cover. Blocked by their own standards from developing an authoritative voice of their own, they will struggle to meet their discursive obligations to society. In an era of discursive integration, such a denial of ethos is both fictional and irresponsible.

"And That Established, Incontrovertible Fact Is One Side of the Story:"

Approaching Discourses of Truth

The August 19, 2004 CNN report ends with an interview with the prominent political scientist, Kathleen Hall Jamieson, who is well aware of the general strategies and frames employed by the media in reporting events like the swift boat attacks. She is certainly aware of Bennett's seminal contributions to this topic, having cited his book in her own (Cappella & Jamieson, 1997). Unsurprisingly, her appearance is a rare non-spectacle. The interviewer returns again and again to conflict frames and authority-disorder narratives, but Jamieson calmly and confidently speaks to the broader context. The only hint of the personal or dramatic she allows comes when she characterizes the media response to the controversy as "quibbling back and forth about what documents do and do not say, and in the process we're missing some other important discussions. And that's what's tragic," (August 19, 2004). Yet these other discussions are present in all of these news reports – as choices not taken. Certainly, the mainstream media promotes a different set of ideas regarding truth claims and discourses of truth than does satire news.

A key question moving forward is whether the mainstream media can be treated as a single monolithic entity, and whether satire news offers a compelling alternative.

Authority and Truth in Mainstream Reporting

Bennett's authority-disorder bias provides a useful framework for assessing such structural aspects of news coverage. Again, the authority-disorder bias emphasizes the authoritative agency of the major figures of news stories, and treats the events in which they participate or to which they react as indices of order or disorder. The use of the authority-disorder bias rests on several key assumptions regarding the newsworthiness and the underlying reality of an event. The distinction between the authority figure and the event is instructive. Under the terms of the bias, the authority figure is the proper object of scrutiny. The event exists as an outside force, which comes from nowhere and cannot be easily controlled. If anything, the authority figure, embodying this central concern with power, is responsible for its existence (or continued existence). Any relationship between power and truth or moral reason, privileges the role of power. If the news is concerned mainly with power in public life, it will hew closely to the authority-disorder bias.

When Jamieson (quoted above) suggests that the media has missed an opportunity to undertake more substantive discourses, interviewer Daryn Kagan replies, "Is it perhaps possible to make the argument the Kerry campaign picked this fight by focusing so much on his war record?" (August 19, 2004). As noted, Lisa Myers of NBC makes this same point eight days later. In the first case, the question appears in an interview, in response to the suggestion that the news has avoided a substantive discourse of truth. The question appears as a defense; the claim it makes is legitimized to deflect larger questions of

motive. In the second case, the suggestion comes in the closing remarks of a short report on claims questioning Kerry's war record. The claim here acts as a narrative device, transitioning the audience from the contentious debate to the concluding remarks, and on to the next story.

An Alternative Approach

Jon Stewart indirectly addresses this claim in a clip of Former Senator Bob Dole's recent appearance on *Meet the Press*, part of which was shown by NBC on August 22nd: "[Senator Kerry is] a good friend, I respect his record. But three purple hearts have never bled that I know of." Stewart airs more than these 18 words, and does more than just present the comments:

> Jon Stewart (host): But not all republicans have jumped aboard the swift boat band boat. Fellow vet John McCain has condemned the group. And no doubt, a respected, decorated former soldier Robert Dole would do the same thing when *he* was discussing John Kerry.
>
> > Former Senator Robert Dole (in clip from CNN): And here's a, you know, good guy, good friend, and I respect his record.
>
> Stewart: Bob Dole, used to have a reputation as a bit of a party hatchet man, but he's a fair man, I know him well, he used to be on this program quite a bit. He doesn't stoop to that kind of stuff any more, so…
>
> > Dole: But three purple hearts have never bled that I know of, I mean they're all superficial wounds. Three purple hearts and you're out.

Stewart: Oh, he's back, baby! It's the old Bob Dole! He's back! 'Uh, John, John Kerry, good friend, respect him, bit of a pussy… uh, that's uh, you know, I uh, I'm not going to pull any punches here, I like him. Was in the Senate. He's a girl.

Dole: I've always thought about the purple hearts… He got two in one day, I think.

Stewart: Uh, actually, that isn't true. Kerry didn't receive two purple hearts in a single day. I'm concerned Senator Dole's criticism might be based on a misconception. Ah, what the hell, let him rip. Everyone else is doing it.

Dole: Uh, Senator Kerry needs to talk about his Senate record, which is pretty thin. That's probably why he's talking about his war record, which is pretty confused.

Stewart: (grunts) Kalp! So, Senator Dole, who lost the use of his right arm in World War Two is for Bush, so that's gonna carry some weight. But Former Senator and current Kerry backer Max Cleland lost three limbs in combat. I don't know whose wounds to believe. Well, you know what, at this point all we can do is wait for the judgment of the world's most war-injured person, Lieutenant Floating Head Man. Um, I don't know what he thinks. His head says Kerry. But the machine that pumps fluid to keep his brain supple says Bush. (August 23, 2004).

This clip, rather than being given sound bite treatment, is redacted to become a running commentary. Redaction involves the editing of a source material to create comparisons, contrasts, conversations, or commentaries. This method fulfills both the entertainment needs of television (producing a creative collage) and the discursive needs of high-

modern news (by elevating concerns for truth claims and neutralizing the authoritative status of the original source). The commentary clearly builds an argument. We learn also that Senator Dole once had a reputation as "a bit of a party hatchet man." We see that some of his comments are inconsistent ("I respect his record"/"his record… is pretty thin"). Other claims are refuted ("He got two [purple hearts] in one day."). We also get a hint that such commentary is justified by being commonplace rather than by being true ("I'm concerned Senator Dole's criticism might be based on a misconception. Ah, what the hell, let him rip. Everyone else is doing it."). The total effect is more than a good laugh. Through the rhetorical redaction of this commentary, Stewart demonstrates the weakness of the original argument, and the media's general complicity in this process of meaning making.

In addition to the method of redaction just discussed, Stewart uses a unique approach of contextualization. An old context has been deconstructed and a new one added. The two exist side by side, and can be compared. He responds to the lack or the distortion of a meaningful context. Such contexts as are available tend to be selective and reductive sound bites used to create a compelling narrative. Several potential strategies exist which are here collectively termed contextualization. One of these is to decontextualize a report based on faulty assumptions. The foregoing segment is a good example of this. Stewart initially challenges Senator Dole's assertion that Senator Kerry received two purple heart citations in one day, but in the end allows it on the grounds that "everyone else is doing it." The statement's validity, when removed from its initial context, is seen to rest on its ubiquity. Another strategy is to recontextualize a report based on absurd assumptions. A clear example of this comes in the segment titled "Kerry

Controversy," discussed briefly above, in which Stewart interviews "Senior Political Analyst" Rob Corddry:

> Jon Stewart: Here's what puzzles me most, Rob. John Kerry's record in Vietnam is pretty much right there in the official records of the U.S. military, and haven't been disputed for… 35 years.
>
> Rob Corddry: That's right, Jon. And that's certainly the spin you'll be hearing coming from the Kerry campaign over the next few days.
>
> Stewart: That's… that's, that's, that's that's not a, that's not a spin thing. That's, that's a fact. It's, that's established.
>
> Corddry: Exactly, Jon. And that established, incontrovertible fact is one side of the story.
>
> Stewart: But that should be, isn't that, that's the end of the story. I mean, you've seen the records, haven't you? What's your opinion?
>
> Corddry: I'm sorry, my op-, opinion? No, I don't have 'O-pini-aaahns.' I'm a reporter, Jon. My job is to spend half the time repeating what one side says, and half the time repeating the other. Little thing called objectivity. You might want to look it up someday. (August 23, 2004).

Corddry's absurd conflation of fact and spin here become the occasion for Stewart to recontextualize the discussion in terms of the accuracy of truth claims.

A third approach addresses missing contexts, one of the most factually troubling aspects of the swift boat coverage. While mainstream news reports occasionally discuss key figures (specifically, Larry Thurlow, William Schachte, and William Ruud) who may or may not have been in one of the five boats (three boats in Ruud's account) that made

up Kerry's squadron, none of the reports question claims by other SBVT members who claim to have served with John Kerry in Vietnam. Only Thurlow is widely acknowledged as having served with Kerry during the incidents in question, though he served on a boat other than Kerry's. This background is never fully considered by the mainstream news reports. Furthermore, none of the mainstream reports examined here ever mentions Dr. Louis Letson, who appears in the first SBVT ad (though an August 25th report on CNN which has not been examined here twice cuts off clips of Larry Thurlow as he mentions the doctor). After showing several other SBVT testimonials claiming that Kerry has lied about his military record, Stewart examines Dr. Letson's claim:

> Jon Stewart (host): Now, to be fair, and we are going to be fair, at least one veteran in the ad, Dr, Louis Letson, does have a first-hand account to relate.
>
> > Dr. Louis Letson (in SBVT ad): I know John Kerry is lying about his first purple heart, because I treated him for that injury.
>
> Stewart (host): Again, a powerful indictment. Or… rather, it would be, had the doctor's signature appeared anywhere on Kerry's medical treatment record. It does not. But, Letson remains adamant the wound was only, quote, "A small piece of metal sticking in the skin of Kerry's arm. The metal fragment measured about one centimeter." Now… why would a superficial wound like that stand out to a doctor who, I would imagine, had treated countless horrible injuries? The answer lies, perhaps, in the doctor's letters home from Vietnam…
>
> > Mock Voice-over (Dr. Letson reading mock letter home, accompanied by Civil War era harmonica music): Dearest Prudence, The horrors of war are as mild as they are terrible. Today I saw a wound so minor it

> made me question what kind of God would injure a man so superficially. Pray for me my dear, Dr. Louis Letson. (August 9, 2004)

This was Stewart's first report on the swift boat ads, and the only report to discuss Dr. Letson, let alone question the clarity of his recollections of a long-past minor event. Lisa Myers of NBC notably points out the problematic nature of memories, particularly memories as distant as these. Aaron Brown of CNN echoes this analysis, "What are the facts here? Not necessarily the whole 'gospel truth,' given that memories fade and records don't tell an entire story, but the facts as best we know them, and nothing more." (August 23, 2004). While Aaron Brown's report in particular offers a needed fact check on the swift boat allegations, neither that report nor any other from the mainstream media ever effectively question the swift-boaters' claims to have served with Senator Kerry.

Larger Issues of Approach

Even the most carefully considered news reports fail to provide a full context, and utilize easy conflict frames. As discussed at the outset of this section, the consistent presence of the authority-disorder bias indicates an approach to news discourses rooted in concern for power over truth. The foregoing discussion supports this claim. The mainstream news reports do contain a variety of voices on the matter of the swift boat controversy, and thus cannot be considered as acting entirely in chorus. Nevertheless, each of the mainstream news outlets contains examples of the authority-disorder bias, and none of these sources provides anything resembling a complete context for the allegations. The coverage on *The Daily Show* instead develops several redactive and contextual tools with which to evaluate news events. Certainly, *The Daily Show* has its own biases – the need to be funny, for instance. However, *The Daily Show* demonstrates,

in contrast to mainstream news reports, a primary concern for genuine discourses of truth. While the detail of the reportage on *The Daily Show* falls far short of the overall requirements of any good news program, what it can offer is a more considered approach to truth in news discourses.

Entman's third paradox, "pressure without reform," describes the media's failure to reform despite awareness of its weaknesses (Entman, 1989). The problem is not one of asking the right questions; CNN's Aaron Brown, for instance, does this quite well. His report is nevertheless limited by assumptions of power and balance. The authority-disorder bias distracts news discourses from their public aims, and must be addressed. It is a mark of its kynical, and not cynical, nature that *The Daily Show* observes and critiques an approach to news reporting that is disinclined to change.

"More About the Future, Less About the Past:"
Lessons for the Production of Public Discourses

Jon Stewart returned again and again to the fact that for 35 years a public record existed which identified John Kerry as a war hero. In Stewart's formulation, "for the first time in half a century the democratic candidate is a decorated war hero, a thrice-wounded recipient of the silver star who pulled a wounded comrade to safety. And we know we can't have that, can we?" (August 9, 2004). If the mainstream media had any one central point, it was to gauge the political effects of the controversy. Mainstream reports frequently asked whether Kerry's conduct in the Vietnam War was deficient, and often noted his controversial anti-war activities upon his return from the war. Such horserace

coverage of this controversy marks mainstream coverage as unambiguously affected by Bennett's structural biases.

The biases of dramatization and personalization frequently appear together. Both stem from the narrative imperative of current news discourse. Dramatization comes through in choices of aggressive phrasing and colorful framing. If the dramatization bias requires a violent verb such as 'attack,' then personalization requires a villain to commit the attack and a hero to receive it (or vice-versa). The viewer here is part of a captive audience, invited to sympathize and to project the events onto their own lives. Meaning exists readymade. Sitting slightly above these phenomena is the meta-bias of authority-disorder. This bias centers the discourse on the relative sense of stability that inheres to the status quo. That is, it focuses on power, and whether it is waxing or waning. This bias drives the exact selection and use of the dramatization and personalization biases. Together these biases help to explain the paradoxical failures of the press to act as a competent watchdog or to reform itself, despite its fervent (and presumably sincere) efforts to do both. So long as the structural biases determine the style and nature of news coverage, news discourses will center upon a distorting concern with power rather than truth.

Two further paradoxes, and one further bias, remain unexamined. Entman's first paradox, "abundance without growth," poses crucial questions about the shape and functioning of the press today (Entman, 1989). Its parallel focus on the ubiquity of news media and the decline in political participation points toward questions of media effects – questions not asked here. The final bias is fragmentation. The term bias is somewhat misleading – the absence of fragmentation from the discussion thus far owes less to any

question of its validity than to its nature as an approach to news production. News events seem to suddenly emerge from out of, and then vanish into, nowhere. News is more easily conveyed in tiny uniform fragments than in a grand epic. Yet the sharp edges do not lend themselves to easy reassembly. Without diligent attention, the typical viewer sees a world continually lacking significant details. Fragmentation undergirds the other structural biases, and thus exists as a constant low-level issue of approach. It also addresses Entman's fourth paradox, "power without control," or the interdependence of media and power elites even as the media may significantly influence politics (Entman, 1989). As the press requires access to power elites, these sources may shape reportage to their particular needs, thus favoring fragmented coverage.

This raises the problem of authorization. Reportorial credibility rests on the denial of one's agency within the news narrative, even as one exercises it. Thus structural biases are reinforced, along with problematic ethical guidelines such as objectivity, which may lead to greater distortions of discourses of truth than they prevent. Authorization helps to explain the confluence of elite power and ethical considerations in the crafting of news discourses, even as the reporter acts to try and reveal social truths by participating in the journalistic process.

The procedural norms of narrative construction may prevent the journalist from achieving the desired effect of a full and transparent examination of public truth claims. This is arguably satire news' greatest asset. Unconstrained by the need for comprehensivity and timeliness, or by the bias of fragmentation, satire news can deconstruct and/or reconstruct the narrative context as needed, or produce a report that uses and compares multiple discourses simultaneously. These phenomena are here

referred to as contextualization and redaction. Contextualization refers to the ability to make sense of fragmented narratives. This requires methodological choices based on the particulars of a given report – whether to deconstruct a faulty context, build an absent one, or compare various manifestations of a background. Redaction can have multiple applications. It may involve a conversation between host and video clip, or between video clips, revealing inconsistent logic, deeper meanings, or inappropriate comments by public officials. Thus it is particularly useful in analyzing truth claims and rhetorical strategies such as sound bites. Redaction can also include the production of fake material to be edited into a larger montage in order to enhance a particular point. While this last approach goes well beyond traditional journalistic standards, the concept of redaction has been used on several news programs, including *Countdown with Keith Olbermann, The Rachel Maddow Show,* and *Campbell Brown*.

In her interview on CNN, Kathleen Hall Jamieson comments that "We should be talking more about the future, less about the past," (August 19, 2004). The next chapter will attempt, in addition to a brief summary of this study, a discussion of one potential future form of journalism. Chapter Five will seek to synthesize this and past research, and will address the research questions posed previously, in particular attempting to draw specific recommendations to enhance journalistic credibility and encourage discourses of truth. The various theoretical elements comprising this study will be briefly integrated, and areas of further research will also be recommended.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSIONS

In all the reports examined here, only Jon Stewart disputed the veracity and newsworthiness of the swift boat allegations. Within the first minute of his first report on the topic, he had impugned the critics and implied that they were playing a childish game. In closing his second report on the controversy Stewart linked the strained logic necessary to support the SBVT with antidemocratic activity, notably calling right wing columnist Robert Novak "a douchebag of liberty," (August 10, 2004). These reports reveal the unique capacity of satire news to address truth claims, as well as the limits to that capacity. Satire news is limited by its overarching need to be funny, thus limiting the type and amount of information it can convey. However, the humor of satire news is more than knock-knock jokes and silly gags – it is fundamentally rhetorical. Every organized joke in the sample examined here argued a particular point. Following the 2001 terrorist attacks, and facing the challenges discussed during the 2004 presidential election, this concern for truth was a valuable, and rare, tool; and *The Daily Show* seemed to exeplify it more often than the mainstream media.

"A Different Kind of High Stakes Battle:"

Newsy Truths and Truthy News

The mainstream press, even when running 'fact checks' on the SBVT allegations, never transcended the need for balance. Thus when the public record contradicted the accounts of specific SBVT members, such as Larry Thurlow, the allegations were given equal time alongside the public accounts which refute them. In

other cases the mainstream press said nothing at all. Again and again, mainstream reports aimed for an objective balance of information. Again and again, they provide news framed around dramatic events or personalities. These stories never fully develop. The context remains lacking. The core question is what the events mean politically, and not what is true.

The question of what is true, and what truth is, spans the whole of the (western) tradition of human knowledge. Whether truth exists outside of and above human activity, or whether it is in some sense created by this activity, has never been definitively answered, and probably never will be. Whether one takes an absolutist or a relativist approach to truth is purely philosophical, and is entirely justifiable either way. For the news to claim an ability and a need to present the day's events at all, particularly in accordance with ethical guidelines based on such normative values as objectivity and balance, journalists rely on an essentially absolutist position regarding truth. Otherwise, the ethical guidelines themselves have no meaning or purpose, and the entire exercise of reporting becomes an act of conscious discursive manipulation.

It is thus surprising and disconcerting to see the inconsistency apparent in these reports regarding the core issue of truth. The developments of the ethical guides in question arise from a particular set of historical circumstances. The methods of news production, and the structure of the media, would have been unrecognizable at the inception of current ethical standards. Yet the same basic ideals endure. To practice journalism as it has developed is to practice an art divorced from its purpose, in the service of vested power interests, with uncertainty regarding the audience for the work and their relationship to the work. Honestly, the picture is not so bleak. Reporters by and

large believe in their craft. This study has pointed, in particular, to the quality of Aaron Brown's reporting for CNN as well as the choice of the prominent media scholar Kathleen Hall Jamieson as an interview subject. The motives of the reporters studied here remain unquestioned. Nevertheless, as representatives of their institutions, as adherents to problematic ethical codes, and as human beings to some degree naturally compelled to craft compelling stories, these reporters advance a particular set of assumptions regarding the relationship of power to truth in communicating civic discourses.

Research question three asks how the news media code and frame their reports. The analysis supports Bennett's (2007a) structural biases. In particular, the mainstream news sources examined in this study all rely upon the authority-disorder bias, the primary bias that directs such mechanisms as dramatization, personalization, and fragmentation. As its name indicates, the focus of this bias is on the status of a given authority figure or institution, and to any challenges to their authority. This authority fixation was the very basis for the swift boat controversy. Yet, never content to relegate such concerns to background context (and in general averse to contextual exposition), several examples of the authority fixation are apparent. All three networks included at least one discussion of possible connections between the SBVT and President Bush (NBC, August 22; CNN, August 23; CBS, August 29, two reports). Other examples include repeated statements by veterans and politicians challenging the president to condemn the ads, the introduction of an August 29th CBS story as an "unwanted surprise" for the Bush campaign, and CNN's highly self-reflexive August 23rd report, in which the controversy and the reporting on the controversy briefly became the topic of the report. These examples all suggest a pattern of reportage that hews closely to the authority-disorder bias.

Research question four asks how news narratives are structured. The reports examined here as a rule dramatize and personalize events, setting up showdowns between major political figures such as Kerry or his running mate John Edwards against the president, or Jim Rassman or former Senator Max Cleland against the SBVT vets. The first line of the first story reviewed here similarly transitions from a report on the war in Iraq to the swift boat controversy: "We focus back home now for a different kind of high-stakes battle – the firefight over John Kerry's service in Vietnam and whether he earned the medals that he was awarded. His shipmates say yes, some other vets say no." (August 19, 2004). The focus on these confrontations results in a series of fragmented narratives. No news report references past reports, even in cases using multiple clips. Each narrative element exists fully independent from other elements comprising the same story.

The effects of structuring news reports in this way come to the fore in the next set of research questions. Research question five asks what truth claims are made in the reports; research question six seeks the source of authority for these truth claims. As discussed above, the mainstream reports create power dichotomies – he said, he said constructs which imply either that the truth inheres in one side or the other, or that it is somehow shared between them. Either scenario results in a discourse that at best substitutes suspicion for skepticism. In the case of the swift boat controversy, with its subject matter of spectacular attacks on one candidate's character and credibility, the balance was quickly lost. Often, the narrative regarded Kerry's inconsistency, or his capacity to recover and regain the advantage.

Strikingly, the two mainstream interviews included a substantial focus on truth. Kathleen Hall Jamieson stuck to issues of truth and media manipulation, despite fielding

some dramatic questions. These topics happen to be Jamieson's area of expertise – no doubt a major reason for her appearance. The discourse of truth here is driven by entirely Jamieson's responses. Aaron Brown's interview, on the other hand, defies much of the analysis given here. Brown interviews *New York Times* reporter Kate Zernike, an authority on Senator Kerry and the SBVT. Brown's first question deals with the one SBVT allegation which might factually contradict Kerry's account of his service in Vietnam – his claim to have been in Cambodia. Brown also questions the consistency of the SBVT accounts and their basis in reality. As these are the only mentions of these topics in any of the mainstream reports, this interview is the exception that proves the rule. Yet even this interview falls back on authority and narrative biases in the end.

These reports clearly demonstrate the primary importance of outside, established sources of authority in creating the news narrative. These sources need not be too far outside of the immediate circle of news producers – after all, Jamieson studies the news, and Zernike reports it. The established authority source may also serve as the focal point of the authority bias. Thus the following paradox: the Bush campaign provides ideological legitimacy for the SBVT ads, even as possible ties between the two become a central preoccupation of the press. X legitimizes Y, but if Y is tied to X, both suffer a loss of authority. The irony, however, only begins here. The press itself never acknowledges its role in this equation. This is one of the central flaws of the contemporary press, its denial of its own discursive authority.

The portrait that emerges is of a press peopled by motivated reporters but subject to forces beyond its awareness, given the professional assumptions of its ethical codes. These forces stem from the master trends discussed at the beginning of this study which

push genres to integrate and perform new roles. The mainstream of journalism remains uneasy about new roles, given core normative and epistemological concerns regarding alternative discursive models. This discussion aims in part to demonstrate that, however highly motivated these concerns may be, they are in certain respects backward.

The coverage of the swift boat controversy amply demonstrates that the three relevant paradoxes proposed by Entman (1989) are alive and well. Coverage of the swift boat allegations was aggressive and powerful, yet the SBVT was never held to account for any spurious allegations, and the media itself relied too much on the political actors within the stories to exercise any meaningful control over the narratives. Even when the topic turns to issues of power or coverage, it slips back into the same biases, unchanged.

The mainstream reports also struggle against Zaller's criteria. Regarding the informational needs of self-governance, viewers might consider Kerry's record highly dubious, and thus vote in the election based on questionable assumptions. Furthermore (as Jamieson points out in her interview), the question never arises as to whether any of this information has any bearing on the candidate's ability to make executive decisions. Regarding feasibility, or the question of whether the news requires more of citizens than they are able or willing to give, the results are not encouraging. The structural biases do not favor the kind of information needed to participate in democratic processes, and fail to encourage critical thought. They also require prohibitive effort on the part of the citizen to assemble a meaningful context. Crucially, the news cannot adequately correct for this imbalance given its lack of funding, time, and personnel. Finally, the critical potential criterion yields some modest success. Again, all of the journalists involved in these reports demonstrated their professional dedication, and some of them successfully

opened up valuable discourses which did address truth and normative concerns. Yet these cases occurred along the periphery of these reports. The heart of the coverage comprised stories of public conflict, not stories of professional growth.

"Not My Job to Stand Between the People Talking to Me and the People Listening:" An Ethos of Comedy

In the midst of the swift boat controversy, the story had become its own story. Jon Stewart repeatedly asks how Kerry's public record, which went unquestioned for 35 years, could suddenly be considered dubious. Outside of a mainstream context, the idea that the burden of proof rested on Kerry became a joke. Kerry struggled under this burden. His decision to appear on *The Daily Show* rather than a mainstream outlet initially seems odd. Yet what emerges from the interview is a three-dimensional portrait of a man who elsewhere comes off as dry and robotic (and who had in fact been mocked by Jon Stewart for these qualities). *The Daily Show*'s discourse provides two things – humor and truth. By appearing on *The Daily Show*, Kerry could portray himself as a 3-D human being, and bolster the portrait as true. In any case, the conventional wisdom had grown untenable, as the mainstream had embraced the spectacle of the controversy above all else.

The Kerry interview, while different in style and form from the other clips, typifies many of their core themes and approaches. To address the third research question, the codes and frames employed here differ significantly from the structural biases employed in the mainstream coverage. The primary frame employed is humor. Beyond this, *The Daily Show* will often address the context of the commentary or event at

issue. News material is given any lacking context, if needed. News material using distorted or incongruous context is recontextualized and thus developed. News material of questionable validity is decontextualized and thus shown to be strange. The use of context by satire to defamiliarize news texts serves as a particularly relevant model for mainstream news production. A core concern with context would weaken both the fragmentation and authority-disorder biases.

The following exchange includes both humor and a general concern for context. The interview avoids interrogation. It is a conversation, and the questions that are asked may be more important than the answers they produce. Thus even as Stewart asks two fairly substantive questions, he allows simple responses. The truth being discussed here is the distorted nature of news discourse in general, with an adjunctive sense of character exposition such as that found in playful banter.

> Jon Stewart: I gotta run through this list, because, you know, I am, as any good fake journalist should do, I watch only the 24-hour cable news. This is what I learned about you…
>
> Senator Kerry: All right.
>
> Stewart: …through the cable news. Please refute, if you will. Are you the number one most liberal senator in the Senate?
>
> Kerry: No.
>
> Stewart: Okay.
>
> Kerry: You happy with that? (LAUGHTER)
>
> Stewart: Yeah, I'm pretty happy with that. 'Cause… I'm just going to go on the talking points that I've been given.

Kerry: Yeah, yeah. Go ahead.

Stewart: You're the number one most liberal senator -- more liberal than Karl Marx, apparently. (LAUGHTER) Are you or have you ever flip-flopped?

Kerry: I've flip-flopped, flop-flipped.

Stewart: Done a little of that. (August 24, 2004)

With both of these questions, and others from this interview, Stewart removes the question's content from its original context, in the process critiquing basic assumptions. The idea of Kerry as a flip-flopping über-liberal quickly dominated his portrayal in the media. Stewart also does what the mainstream media reports fail to do – he addresses these personalization frames. There is no reason why a mainstream reporter could not, or should not, ask Senator Kerry if he flip-flops.

The Kerry interview does not fully address the structural concerns of research question four. This study finds that Stewart routinely explores or interacts with the news material he examines. The material is not held at arm's length and allowed to speak unquestioned. The topic itself becomes a challenge with which to wrestle. It is always subject to sudden rearrangement, comparison with itself and with other discourses, or forced into a new and different dialog. These techniques are collectively referred to as redaction. This idea is not new. What is new here is its application at the discursive level as well as at the point of editing. The Kerry interview, or a Stewart monologue without graphics or video clips, are redacted discourses if they produce meaning by the creative juxtaposition of (generally parodic) multiple voices or concepts of truth. Redaction thus becomes one more potential tool with which to scrutinize truth claims in the media.

Regarding research question five, the truth claims made within these reports, again, center around the questioning of a long-accepted public record. Stewart more or less directly calls these charges lies, and points to several public figures as enabling or participating in these lies. *The Daily Show* is clearly violating accepted journalistic practice in making or implying such truth claims. Yet the core question remains as to how the mainstream press can avoid manipulation and whether it can evaluate news discourses. This directly concerns the sixth research question. The key to an evaluative role comes by recognizing the agency of the journalist within the discourse being created. The denial of discursive authority is based more on professional values than on the realities of news production and consumption. Both the journalist and the audience play active roles in this process. In order to build and enhance credibility, this normative authority must be recognized. Regarding the swift boat controversy, this would require news producers to demand documentary evidence of the SBVT if the group wishes to avoid an overly skeptical press. The individual reporter might legitimately do so by dwelling on the identities and histories of the figures who form the SBVT, or discuss the details of the military record and military procedure. In short, the reporter should favor context (and therefore perspective) as opposed to balance.

None of Bennett's biases appear on *The Daily Show*. Contextualization even corrects for Bennett's fragmentation bias. As a self-styled media critic, Stewart holds the press accountable for its coverage, and in the process models potential reforms. Stewart certainly benefits from his outsider status; nevertheless the tools reviewed above hold ample mainstream potential. The self-conscious performance of journalism encourages self-critical journalism. This study suggests that Entman's final paradox, regarding news-

power interdependency, may be at least partially circumvented by alternative discursive tools such as redaction, contextualization, and authorization. Furthermore, seen through Zaller's standards of news quality, *The Daily Show*'s coverage appears quite strong, though certainly not infallible. This analysis suggests that Jon Stewart's sincere but skeptical discourse of truth in this instance provides a greater than adequate supply of information to satisfy the informational needs of self-governance. This is particularly striking given that the limits to the amount of information the program can discuss. The second criterion, feasibility, is more ambiguous. An openly humorous and satirical take on the news is more acceptable on Comedy Central network than on CNN. Regardless, mainstream adoption of the tools described above would not pose prohibitive economic or professional costs. Zaller's final criterion, critical potential, closely fits the satire news coverage here, which both highlights the shortcomings in the news today and offers means of correcting these flaws. While satire news does not fully satisfy Zaller's criteria, neither do the mainstream news media. In fact, while neither venue offers ideal coverage, the mainstream media fail to keep pace with a more authentic satirical discourse.

"And Yet It Was a Relatively Substantive Discussion:" Conclusions

This study finds that the credibility of the television news media suffers, at least in part, from avoiding critical evaluation of events. It remains for future researchers to determine whether public support exists for a more evaluative model of journalism. The discursive integration model suggests that such a model would receive support as one of an increasing array of discursive forms which borrow useful approaches from previously distinct generic traditions. *The Daily Show*'s reporting suggests that authorized

evaluations of news events can credibly enhance the news discourse. To be sure, traditionalists and ideological voices could protest such methods. Yet current practices hardly receive the rousing public support they seek. Such criticisms may be inevitable; better they arise from a concern with truth than from an aversion to risk.

A case could certainly be made that these recommendations are naïve. This may well be true. Yet enough concern for the public good surrounds the idea of journalism, and the profession itself faces such unprecedented pressures, that any drive for substantive reforms could well be considered inevitable necessity rather than airy hope. It should also be noted that the recommendations outlined here are not comprehensive, but arise from the focused analysis of a single narrow form of public discourse. Other salient ideas for other productive forms of journalism can likely be found elsewhere. The hope here is to distill a few potentially useful tools with which to strengthen journalism's capacity to deliver a democratically useful discourse.

In addition, this analysis faces a limit to its overall validity. This analysis has focused on reports from a small portion of all broadcasts, on a single controversy in the midst of a heated presidential campaign. To what degree the same patterns of reporting might appear in such different but politically relevant topics as economics, health care, or the culture wars is uncertain. This analysis suggests that such topics would likely also be subject to the core structural biases of both the mainstream and satirical news media would likely remain the default interpretive frameworks for each. Nevertheless, the limited topic of analysis also limits the overall generalizability of the analysis.

This study has operated under the assumption that the SBVT ads were ideologically motivated and included information that was, at a minimum, exaggerated.

Whether or not one agrees with Jon Stewart's oft-repeated assertion that any challenge to a long-accepted public record demands of the accusers (and not the accused) the burden of proving their charges, extant documentary evidence overwhelmingly supports Senator Kerry's account. This context is a rich one for the primary focus of this study – the media's ability, and desire, to engage in discourses of truth, and its ability to structure its discourses accordingly.

This leads the discussion back to the two central research questions of this study. First, can satire news avoid the structural biases/paradoxes that affect mainstream news production? While satire news inevitably frames its reporting in a humorous way, it nevertheless approaches its reports with a manifest concern for the truth of the issue. It therefore avoids the distorting concerns with outside authority and narrative strength that characterize mainstream media coverage. Of the four outlets of coverage surveyed here, only *The Daily Show* made truth the focus of its coverage. It did so early and often. Stewart is largely able to correct for the three relevant paradoxes raised by Entman – his media criticism gives voice to a desire for accountability while also modeling potentially stronger discursive tools. Through its humorous approach as well as a reliance on pre-existing media sources, Stewart avoids an interdependency with outside power sources. Research question one is thus answered in the affirmative.

Research question two asks what satire news approaches could credibly be used by mainstream news media. Three main approaches to news reporting emerge from this analysis: redaction, contextualization, and authorization. Again, redaction involves the interactive challenging of multiple discourses, often achieved by the creative juxtaposition of video elements. Contextualization entails the addition, subtraction, or

substitution of a particular context for a news report, thus altering the meaning of the news event. Authorization acknowledges the inherent evaluative role of the reporter in the news narrative. That Stewart often constructs truth claims subjectively naturally complicates any potential mainstream adoption of satire news techniques. Yet even this subjective construction provides an enhanced level of transparency and credibility by acknowledging the authorial role of the reporter in the construction of the news discourse.

To return to the quandary of kynicism discussed at the beginning of this study, the above analysis has demonstrated that despite its humorous situation, satire news can indeed restore gravity and thus expose and counter cynical media tendencies. Satire frequently builds meaning via its ability to make the mundane strange. Satire news is indeed, as Baym (2008) has described it, serious comedy. Yet its success here ultimately relies on action, not information alone. Whether or not cynicism has been successfully undermined is ultimately determined by the audience's reactions.

Future research must address the relationship of emerging counter-discourses to the audiences they seek (or create). In particular, the high degree of interactivity between Stephen Colbert and his audience ('The Colbert Nation') speaks to a fundamental re-conceptualization of this relationship. Reception studies offers a much-neglected and much-needed area of untapped potential. Also, a more direct, large-scale comparison of the structuring of mainstream and satire news discourses could further aid in the realization of more effective news forms. Other potentially rich areas to explore include the relationship of authenticity to authority in news discourses, and the role of the audience in satire news. One final suggestion would be to determine the public support of alternative discourses in general alternative discursive tools in particular. Any sense of

legitimacy or credibility ultimately relies upon public support; it would be interesting to see just how much support these non-traditional means could garner.

This study suggests that audiences might embrace both traditional and non-traditional forms of public discourse. Discursive integration suggests that such distinctions are based on false assumptions which are now being blended and rethought. This allows for innovation, but also disorientation. The desire for the most substantive possible discussion at the lowest possible cost is both vexing and natural. In his interview with John Kerry, Stewart addresses this tension quite well:

> In the 2000 election it was an election I think the country didn't realize how important it was going to be, and yet it was a relatively substantive discussion. I can recall in the, in the debates, there was a lot of talk about funding Social Security and, education and all these things. This election is clearly the most important one of our lifetimes… and yet it's very difficult to have that discussion. (August 24, 2004)

This in part explains why Stewart ended the interview by thanking Kerry for just having "a normal conversation" (August 24, 2004). Both parties to the conversation had repeated chances to digress and to think out loud. These thoughts often dealt more directly with nagging concerns, such as the quality of public discourse, than they did with their own ostensible subject matter. One gets the sense here that in many ways the rules that were designed to ensure a fair public discourse constrain the journalist from ever fully producing one. Stewart seems to say, 'Just do what works, if it helps.' I, for one, agree.

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