

ANCHORING THE NEWS WITH COMEDY: CONSIDERING THE ROLE  
OF CRITIQUE IN NEWS THROUGH AN ANALYSIS  
*OF THE DAILY SHOW WITH JON STEWART*

By

Tabitha Louise Simenc

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of the thesis submitted by

Tabitha Louise Simenc

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The following individuals read and discussed the thesis submitted by student Tabitha Louise Simenc, and they evaluated her presentation and response to questions during the final oral examination. They found that the student passed the final oral examination.

Seth Ashley, Ph.D. Chair, Supervisory Committee

Julie Lane, Ph.D. Member, Supervisory Committee

John McClellan, Ph.D. Member, Supervisory Committee

The final reading approval of the thesis was granted by Seth Ashley, Ph.D., Chair of the Supervisory Committee. The thesis was approved for the Graduate College by John R. Pelton, Ph.D., Dean of the Graduate College.

## DEDICATION

Dedicated to my husband, Dan, for his support and encouragement during my time working on this thesis and throughout my graduate studies, for which I am extremely grateful.

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## ABSTRACT

This study examines the role of critique in news and its necessity in a media landscape focused on journalistic ideals of objectivity. Using *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* as a case study, this research, first, examines the way in which the program fulfills the normative tasks of the media and can be considered news. Second, it considers how the program and others like it operate outside the realm of traditional news media and are, consequently, not subject to expectations of objectivity, potentially allowing for greater critique of powerful political, economic, and media entities. Finally, the role of news in U.S. democracy is examined, looking at the topics covered on *The Daily Show* and the potential for the show to inform citizens to be educated participants in their political system.

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## INTRODUCTION

On January 7, 2013 *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* addressed Republican congressional representatives and their actions with regard to Hurricane Sandy relief. In a six-minute segment titled “C#@k block you on the hurricane” (The Daily Show, 2013, January 7) host Jon Stewart covers a Hurricane Sandy aid bill involving \$60 billion to be used in the northeast to repair damage from the devastating hurricane and the fact that the bill failed to pass the House because 67 GOP legislators voted against it. Coverage includes clips of Republican politicians from the affected area calling out the House Republicans, clips exposing the hypocrisy of legislators who voted against the bill asking for relief money for their own states, and some jokes making fun of the politicians in question. The segment ends with Stewart addressing House Republicans directly:

Stewart: “Look, Republicans ... here’s the thing: If you guys can’t vote for this then we’re fucked for the next two years. And I’m not saying you’re responsible for all the problems facing our country, but you sure are making them a lot harder to fix.” (Jon Stewart on The Daily Show, 2013, January 7)

*The Daily Show* airs on Comedy Central and is widely considered to be a comedy show, as the humor in this segment demonstrates. However, there are clearly other elements present in this clip that go beyond the bounds of mere comedy. The fact that the segment did not go unnoticed by the national news media, with various stories detailing Stewart’s “righteous indignation” (Blake, 2013, January 8) over the matter and his lack of

“a joke at the end of his rant against the 67 GOP members of the House” (Huffington Post, 2013, January 8), suggests that the host is not only presenting comedy but also a potentially serious analysis of the situation. It also presents information on a political topic that those unfamiliar with the situation could become informed from. Despite this, the host does not claim to objectively report the situation, instead focusing on exposing the actions of the aforementioned politicians, demonstrating their misuse of power and addressing them directly. While mainstream news outlets with an objective focus would likely cover only the outcome of the House vote, *The Daily Show* goes a step further to inform viewers on the situation with a focus on critique and questioning the motives and actions of those involved, something that a focus on objectivity alone does not allow. The program covers news, but a different, more critical, view of the news than can be seen through the lens of objectivity in mainstream news media. It is news merged with comedy, operating outside the norms of journalism.

*The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* is one of an emerging number of programs that merges news and entertainment content. The end result is a hybrid show that combines news and comedy for an entertaining dose of information and critique. Despite its similarity with other political satire programs, *The Daily Show* appears unique in that it has spawned copious amounts of academic research with scholars critiquing the program (Baym, 2005), examining its content (Brewer & Marquardt, 2007), and studying its effect on viewers (Hoffman & Young, 2011). To build on this research, the present study uses *The Daily Show* as a case study to consider the potential news value in programming that operates outside the constraints of the mainstream news media. *The Daily Show* operates without the hindrance of a focus on objectivity, which has been said to limit traditional

news outlets. Objectivity restricts traditional news media from making value judgments, taking positions on an issues (Schudson, 1978) and critically analyzing the news (Smolkin, 2007). This stands in contrast to shows that combine their entertaining premise with news, which have the potential to bring much needed critique into their coverage. *Normative Theories of the Media* (Christians, Glasser, McQuail, Nordenstreng & White, 2009) is used as a framework of news media typologies to examine the extent and nature of the news content in *The Daily Show*.

Despite the classification of *The Daily Show* as a comedy, the notion that the show could contain some news-like elements is not a new one. Various media scholars consider the show to have some journalistic or news-like aspects (Brewer & Marquardt, 2007; Hoffman & Young, 2011; Smolkin, 2007; Wise & Brewer, 2010), one going to far as to call it “alternative journalism” (Baym, 2005). The informed nature of the show’s viewers (Pew Reaseach, September 2012) and the interest the program stimulates in public affairs (Hoffman & Young, 2011) also attests to the show’s journalistic characteristics. Moreover, it is not just the informative nature of the show that helps provide news value. The critical analysis performed by the show’s host – demonstrated in the aforementioned Hurricane Sandy segment through Stewart’s questioning and evaluation of Republican House members – also provides something of potential value that differs from traditional news (Smolkin, 2007). This critical format is less likely to be seen in traditional news media. *The Daily Show*’s focus on comedy allows it to operate outside of the traditional news media and makes the critical analysis possible; Stewart’s critique often comes in the form of satirical comedy allowing the host to question and “speak truth to power” (Gray, Jones & Thompson, 2009, p. 6), alongside comedy for the

sake of laughs with no aspirations to an informative or critical role.

So why does it matter that *The Daily Show* could include some informative and critical elements mixed with comedy? It matters because news is a central element of democracy; news is necessary to help make the public aware of pertinent issues, creating an informed citizenry, to help stimulate an interest in public affairs and to act as a government watchdog. In studying *The Daily Show*, scholars have identified that it has some news-like elements, which leads some scholars to apply the label of “soft news” (Baumgartner & Morris, 2006). However, this can be difficult to define as it can include a variety of programming, from entertainment news to late-night comedy to daytime talk shows (Hoffman & Young, 2011). All of these stand in contrast to “hard news,” or the more traditional sources of news. But these labels can be limiting, as they don’t take into account the changing news environment with entertainment melding with news shows, and news melding with entertainment shows. The label of soft news implies that the program is less legitimate than traditional sources of news, making it less important when considering the program’s role in U.S. democracy. Categorizing *The Daily Show* in this way is constricting and does not address the potential newsworthiness of the content.

Critics of *The Daily Show* often diminish the impact of the program because of its place outside the traditional news media and within the realm of comedy. Bill O’Reilly of Fox News, for example, dismisses the impact of *The Daily Show* by referring to viewers as “stoned slackers” (Bauder, February 4, 2010). Contrary to this, the website Salon.com has frequently criticized Stewart for not owning his own influence (Isquith, November 2, 2013) and for joking and making light of important subjects (D’Addario, January 19, 2013). Others critique *The Daily Show* for operating within the system that it critiques

and for creating apathy and cynicism among viewers (Almond, October 2012). Jon Stewart himself claims his show is comedy and fake news, and is then criticized for being both too funny and not funny enough.

This study looks deeper into the news content in *The Daily Show* in order to assess its potential role in U.S. democracy and examine the extent to which viewers could be informed on issues that can help them be educated citizens. Through an ethnographic content analysis (Altheide, 1996) of *The Daily Show*, this study investigates the extent to which the show's content can be considered to fulfill the tasks of news media, laid down in *Normative Theories of the Media* (Christians et. al, 2009). In existing research on the show, scholars disagree as to how to define the show (Baumgartner & Morris, 2006; Baym, 2005; Druick, 2009), varying in the degree to which they consider it to be news. Although the program has been studied from various viewpoints by media scholars, there is little focus on the potential newsworthiness of the content, specifically how it relates to the possible role the show plays in informing citizens and acting as a government and media watchdog, crucial factors in a democracy. This study aims to fill that void, investigating the extent to which *The Daily Show* can be considered news based on well-established normative criteria. If *The Daily Show* does indeed contain some informative and critical elements, along with humor, then it has the potential to demonstrate how critique and information can be blended and still have news value. As a comedy show, *The Daily Show* operates outside the bounds of traditional news media. If the show can be considered to present newsworthy content, while also operating outside of traditional news norms, then it is likely that the show demonstrates a different form of news. Perhaps then, an examination of the show and the way it presents newsworthy content

can demonstrate how critique can be included in news, without sacrificing the informative goal.

## CHAPTER 1: LITERATURE REVIEW

To determine the role *The Daily Show* plays in U.S. democracy, specifically looking at the program in relation to news media, this literature review will first define the purpose of news media and democracy and look at the role news media play in democracy. Second it will look at the current state of the news media environment. Finally it will look at *The Daily Show* itself to determine how we can define the program with regard to its entertainment and news content.

### **The Purpose of News**

Journalism's role in a democracy, or any political system for that matter, depends entirely on the key concepts of a particular method of government. At its most basic, democracy is based on principles of equality and liberty (Christians, Glasser, McQuail, Nordenstreng & White, 2009), two ideas that seem in tension with each other. "Equality implies identical or substantively similar opportunities to participate in the decision-making process through which people rule themselves ... Liberty denotes the right of mutual influence" (Christians et al., p. 91). Although these two concepts may seem at odds – one cannot be achieved without sacrificing the other – the balance between the two allows for a political system that combines a focus on individual freedom with an equitable influence in governmental affairs. Although equality focuses on the larger community or society and liberty focuses on individuals, together these somewhat opposing ideas form the basis for democracy: "[P]opular control based on a commitment



to political equality and individual liberty” (Christians et al., p. 91). In order for democracy to function, citizens need to be informed of their government and educated on public affairs. In the pursuit of political equality, all citizens have one vote that carries as much weight as any other and in order for that vote to matter, they need to be educated on political issues. In exercising individual liberty, citizens also need a basic understanding of government and political affairs to be sure their free choices are not outside of their own interests. Central to both equality and liberty, and therefore democracy, is an informed, educated and able citizenry.

“Information is necessary for democracy...” (Schudson, 2004, p. 59). As Schudson notes, a significant purpose of news in the United States is to inform the public so that they can be engaged citizens. Schudson continues: “... but information by itself is inert. It never was the be-all and end-all for the democratic citizen” (p. 59). From this we can understand that, although information is not the only tool necessary to be an engaged citizen, it is one of the most important and foundational tools. This understanding is important when examining the role of news in democracy. News media play an integral role in informing and engaging the public so that they can participate from an educated standpoint and have enough information to influence events should they see fit. “[M]edia control information resources” (Fox, Koloen & Sahin, 2007, p. 214) and the public are dependent on the news media to inform it on issues outside of direct experience. The average citizen does not have access, for example, to politicians and can seek to understand political reality only through the lens of media. Information gained through the news media “...may well be used as the basis for political knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors” (Fox, Koloen & Sahin, p. 214) and so the content of news media can have a

direct impact on public sentiment.

Moreover, a well functioning news media can stimulate interest in public affairs and increase participation; "... people who follow the news are also more likely to be people who vote and in other respects attend to public life. Encouraging more people to keep informed inspires more people to participate in public life" (Schudson, 2011, p. 170). Two facets come into play with regard to voting and participation; the quality of the media and the extent to which citizens consume the news. "... [T]hose nations where quality journalism is available, where public service broadcasting is still viable, and where citizens attend extensively to this media tend to have higher participation in elections" (Dahlgren, 2009, p. 47). Even outside of traditional news media, the positive effects of information exposure can be seen; some political entertainment programming that includes satire or parody, such as *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*, has been shown to encourage political participation (Hoffman & Young, 2011). Hoffman and Young researched the correlation between media use, perception of political understanding, and political participation. The researchers found shows that include satire and parody, specifically *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report*, to have an indirect effect on political participation, similar to that of traditional TV news (Hoffman & Young, 2011).

Not only do news media inform the public, helping to stimulate an interest in public life and allowing them to be educated citizens, they can also act as a "watch dog" of democracy.

One of the best known and most often invoked ideas of press performance in the United States is the notion of the press acting as a "watch dog" or even as a "fourth branch" of government that checks and balances the other three. This

ideal envisions the press keeping a skeptical eye trained on the government, guarding the public's interest and protecting it from misinformation, incompetence and corruption. (Bennett, Lawrence & Livingston, 2007, p. 184)

This watchdog function is central to U.S. democracy because, ideally, it keeps the government operating in an honest manner and holds leaders responsible to the public. Democracy relies on news media to expose situations where political equality or individual liberties are being violated. It allows the public to be informed not just of current affairs but also of the running of the government, which makes for better-educated voters.

### News and Normative Theory

Given that news should adequately, if not exceptionally, inform the public of a democracy to help the people to be engaged citizens, educated about the running of their government, how can it do that? Journalism primarily "...is the business or practice of regularly producing and disseminating information about contemporary affairs of public interest and importance" (Schudson, 2011, p. 3). However, this definition does not define exactly what or how news media achieves this, or why it is important. News media play a central role in informing the public about contemporary affairs outside of their direct experience. "Journalists regulate much of what the public gets to know about the world they inhabit, and this activity is vital to a functioning democracy" (media scholar Jostein Gripsrud, quoted in Schudson, 2011, p. 6). Since democracy heavily relies on a well-functioning news media, defining the basis for this function is imperative.

The debate on how to define news and what the role of news should be is not a new one and "there are many different opinions (public, private, and institutional) about

just what the media ought or ought not to be doing and on how well they are performing” (McQuail, 2005). In the 1940s, The Commission On Freedom Of The Press took up the task of determining the role of news media and the extent to which it fulfills these requirements (Hutchins, 1947). According to the commission’s report, news should provide

first, a truthful, comprehensive, and intelligent account of the day’s events in a context which gives them meaning; second, a forum for the exchange of comment and criticism; third, a means of projecting the opinions and attitudes of the groups in the society to one another; fourth, a method of presenting and clarifying the goals and values of sociality; and, fifth, a way of reaching every member of society by the currents of information, thought and feeling which the press supplies. (Hutchins, 1947, pp. 20-21)

These requirements are foundational to defining what news is. Above all the press must remain “private and free” (Hutchins, p. 131) but also strive to be accurate and fulfill its responsibilities. The findings of the Hutchins Commission solidified the idea of journalism as a necessary feature of democratic society and held the press to a standard of social responsibility. Although the commission understood that it might not always be possible for all five of these requirements to be met by one news organization or for it to be infallible, “the important thing is that the press ... try for it” (Hutchins, p. 131).

The ideas outlined by the Hutchins Commission began to lay a foundation for the notion of a socially responsible press, but were critiqued for the lack of accountability on the part of journalists and media outlets. Although this foundation began a conversation on the state and future of journalism, news media has changed since the 1940s and

various media scholars took up the task to expand on the work of the Hutchins Commission. Fred Siebert and his colleagues defined the press as fitting one of four theories – Authoritarian, Libertarian, Social Responsibility and Soviet Communism – in their popular book *Four Theories of the Press* (Siebert, Peterson, & Schramm, 1956), with ideas from the Hutchins Commission contributing to the Social Responsibility Theory section. Later, John Nerone and his colleagues critiqued these four theories in *Last Rights: Revising Four Theories of the Press* (Nerone, Braman, Christians, Guback, Helle, Liebovich, Berry, & Rotzol, 1995) and continued to expand on the concept of what news media should do. The expansion of the four theories continued with normative theorists Christians, Glasser, McQuail, Nordenstreng, and White (2009) taking up the task to further examine the role journalism should play in democratic societies. Normative theory examines the rights and responsibilities of the news media (McQuail, 2005), continuing what the Hutchins Commission started in considering the role of journalism in democracy. To do this, *Normative Theories of the Media* lays out three primary “tasks of the news media” (Christians et al., 2009, p. 116):

1. The task of observing and informing, primarily as a service to the public.
2. The task of participating in public life as an independent actor by way of critical comment, advice, advocacy and expression of opinion.
3. The task of providing a channel, forum or platform for extramedia voices or sources to reach a self-chosen public. (Christians et al., p. 116)

These tasks are based on fulfilling the democratic principles of equality and liberty. Although one or more of these tasks may be primary for a particular news organization, all three need to be present in some form for a media source to be

considered news. For example, a news organization could clearly fulfill these tasks by providing information, demonstrating critical thought, and allowing participation. When the primary purpose of a media organization becomes hazier and could potentially be entertainment instead of news, identifying if these tasks are fulfilled can help identify news elements in the media. For example, if *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* were to inform the public on news facts, critique those facts or advocate for a certain outcome, and provide time for outside opinions to be voiced, then the content that fulfilled these tasks could be identified as news. Christians et al. (2009) list four types of news media, which can be reductionist but can also help to classify different types of news. First, internally pluralist or secular media focuses on wide appeal and maximizing exposure. Second, externally pluralist or commercial also focuses on maximizing exposure but with regard to a specific ideology. Third, partisan media focus on a specific area of interest or group. Finally, minority media focus on diversity of fact and opinion (p. 117). These four types can help us to categorize emerging types of new media in contrast to traditional media. For example, much of the traditional media today would likely fall into the first type and historic, partisan media into the second type. Ambiguous news-entertainment sources would likely fall into the latter two types. All four types somehow fulfill the normative tasks of news media, albeit in varying ways.

These tasks and types of news media provide a basis for normative theory. Christians, Glasser, McQuail, Nordenstreng, and White (2009) also outline various other journalistic functions that can flesh out the role of news media and provide an ideal for news to attempt to live up to. These include:

- Providing surveillance of the social environment.

- Forming opinion.
- Setting the agenda of public discussion.
- Acting as a ‘watchdog’ in respect to political and economic power.
- Acting as a messenger and public informant.
- Playing an active and participant part in social life. (Christians et al., 2009, p. 119)

News organizations do not necessarily have to fill all of these listed functions to be considered news. However, one can assume that the more of these functions news can fulfill to a high standard, the better and closer to the ideal the news content will be. The tasks and functions of news media laid out in *Normative Theories of the Media* are useful to help define news in an evolving news media landscape. For example, even for ambiguous news shows like *The Daily Show*, these criteria can be used to measure the level to which content is considered news by normative standards.

### Changes in News

Determining how to define news content and developing an ideal for news can be useful in our current news environment as the face of news changes and journalism becomes more ambiguous, masked by entertainment. Technological developments have allowed the sheer quantity of news that surrounds us to increase from traditional news consisting of hour-long, nightly news broadcasts and daily newspapers to newer forms of news on 24-hour cable news networks and websites full of news content. A declining number of Americans consume traditional news (Schudson, 2011, pp. 168-169), and there is a distinct move away from conventional journalism as more options become available (Pew Research, September 2012). The number of Americans who consume

traditional news – watching it on TV, listening to it on the radio or reading it in a newspaper – has declined overall since the 1990s, while the number getting news online/through a mobile device or accessing any form of digital news has sharply risen since the early 2000s as new technologies were developed (Pew Research). Despite the fact that the amount of traditional news consumers is decreasing, there is still a need for information and, more importantly, journalism. In fact, more and more Americans continue to seek their news from alternative, non-traditional sources (Pew Research, September 2012), a trend that some find worrying and others exciting. This drop in ratings and readership for news media is seen by some in the news industry as “a sign of cultural decline” (Schudson, 2011, p. 169), projecting an attitude that traditional news media are the more valuable news media. But yet others tout the new direction of news as opening the discourse on news information to a broader public (Schudson, 2011). Can new forms of news be valuable in informing the public in the same way traditional news is, in spite of changing content choices and formats?

Media scholars often define the distinction between news through a traditional channel and news through newer channels as hard versus soft news, respectively. Implied in this definition is the concept that hard news is more legitimate than soft news. Soft news is usually classified as stories with a focus on entertainment; valuable news content such as public affairs, supposedly the mainstay of hard news, can take a back seat to sensationalized or human interest content in soft news (Baumgartner & Morris, 2006). As this tension between hard and soft news demonstrates, one of the central issues in defining news is the melding of news and entertainment. While some now claim entertainment programs with informative content, like *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*,



to have news-like elements, traditional news seem to now include entertainment elements (Hmielowski, Holbert, & Lee, 2011), so it can be difficult to determine just what hard and soft news are. “Just as research has shown that political entertainment programs like *The Daily Show* to be more substantive than once thought, so too may some news programming contain more entertainment than one would assume” (Hmielowski, Holbert, & Lee, 2011, p. 111).

To further add to that confusion between news and entertainment, news content also varies based on the bias of a news organization toward a particular political party or organization. “[T]he world of cable news is increasingly one where partisanship is a driving force. It appears to have a substantial impact on both network and program selection and one’s perception of particular stories” (Coe et al., 2008, p. 216). This partisanship in news also makes the news landscape more ambiguous, raising the question of whether or not biased news can also be considered hard news. Stories with a significant bias toward a political view leave behind the ideal of objective journalism, an ideal that, while not always the mainstay of journalism, grew prominent in U.S. journalism during the decline of the party presses (Hardt, 2004; Schudson, 2011). In fact, historically, the ideal of objectivity did not become a feature in journalism until the 1920s and 30s (Schudson, 1978). Prior to that time, “journalists did not think much about the subjectivity of perception” (p. 6); but after the First World War, journalists began to question the nature of what they reported and this gave rise to a focus on objectivity in journalism (Schudson, 1978). The belief in objectivity is

the belief that one can and should separate facts from values. Facts, in this view, are assertions about the world open to independent validation. They stand beyond

the distorting influences of any individual's personal preferences. Values, in this view, are an individual's conscious or unconscious preferences for what the world should be; they are seen as ultimately subjective and so without legitimate claim on other people. (pp. 5-6)

As objectivity became more prominent in U.S. news, "... all agreed that objectivity was at the heart of what journalism has meant in this country" (p. 10). The benefits of objectivity in news became apparent as it separated journalism from war propaganda and others who wished to shape the news with a focus on facts, or at least it seemed that way. However, this reliance on objectivity, which still persists in journalism today, can be problematic for various reasons. First, how can journalists really be objective? There are no systems in place to ensure objectivity in journalism. Unlike in other professions, such as medicine or the law "where features that guarantee objectivity ... exist or are likely to exist" (p. 9), journalists do not have a specific set of standards to determine this objectivity or mandatory formal training that educates on how objectivity is to be achieved in reporting (Schudson, 1978). Moreover, the mechanisms for journalism are not set up to be objective. "Newspapers are directly dependent on market forces. They appeal directly to popular opinion" (p. 9), which means that they do not first appeal to facts, as they should to be truly objective. Second, in focusing on objectivity, how can news be analyzed? How can the second normative task of the news media, "[t]he task of participating in public life as an independent actor by way of critical comment, advice, advocacy and expression of opinion" (Christians et al., 2009, p. 116), be achieved? This clearly strays from objectivity and yet is necessary for a source to be considered news.

This ideal of objectivity contrasts with the partisanship of some news organizations and makes it difficult at times to ascertain what content can be considered news. Given that "...programs increasingly blur the line between hard and soft news, between neutrality and partisanship" (Coe et al., 2008, p. 216), and between news and entertainment, perhaps these ideals no longer fit well in our increasingly complex news landscape (Smolkin, 2007).

### ***The Daily Show: News or Comedy?***

In examining changing news formats and content along with different types of news and how to recognize them, *The Daily Show* can be used as an example of a new, emergent, non-traditional journalism that lies on the border of hard and soft news. Extensive research has looked at the show with scholars classifying it in a variety of ways that range from comedy without any aspirations to inform or critique, to a combination of news and comedy, to alternative journalism. The content of the show is most often used to define the program because the content choices can give clues toward how newsworthy the program is and how informed its viewers will be.

#### Content of *The Daily Show*

A variety of media researchers have examined the content of *The Daily Show* to look at the information, views, and comedy presented in the program. The show often covers similar topics to mainstream news but sometimes in a different way or showing varied points of view. In examining the content of *The Daily Show*, previous research shows that much of the program is dedicated to political events and issues, public and world affairs, and critique of the mainstream news media (Brewer & Marquardt, 2007).

In this study, 52 episodes of the show were coded to determine the topic of each story covered as well as the public figures or media professionals who were shown and the news clips or sound bites shown. This allowed Brewer and Marquardt (2007) to calculate what percentage of stories focused on certain topic areas. This data demonstrates an example of common themes in content from *The Daily Show* and is helpful to consider the types of coverage.

### Current Affairs/Political Coverage

Public affairs and political coverage make up a large portion of *The Daily Show's* content (Brewer & Marquardt, 2007). To be informed citizens in a democracy, political information and knowledge is crucial. Moreover, “[s]urveys indicate that citizens use a wide variety of sources to learn about politics rather than relying solely on traditional news outlets” (Wise & Brewer, 2010, p. 130) and *The Daily Show* is listed as one of those non-traditional news options. One of the singular functions of news media should be to act as a government watchdog and, with the definition of news now expanding past the traditional news ideals, *The Daily Show* often fills this role too, holding elected officials and other influential figures accountable for their actions and speech (Baym, 2005, p. 267). This accountability often comes along with comedy, but the result is still the same: Exposing the behaviors of politicians so that viewers can be more informed citizens and hold politicians accountable from a constituent perspective as well.

The range of political information presented on the show is also noted. “... *The Daily Show* frequently referred to political figures with whom many members of the general public might not have been familiar” (Brewer & Marquardt, 2007, p. 260), which implies the program helps viewers to be aware of varied politicians that they may not

otherwise known about and so be better informed. “The show also addressed such policy subjects as gay rights, abortion, gun control, the death penalty, the Patriot Act, and the ‘right to die.’ Almost half of all stories (46%) covered world affairs in some way ...” (Brewer & Marquardt, 2007, p. 260), showing that, despite being a comedy show, the program does not shy away from the tough and controversial topics that are prevalent in current political discourse

### Media Critique

Along with coverage of current affairs, *The Daily Show* also engages in metacoverage of the press – particularly critique about the ways in which mainstream news media cover particular stories or events (Wise & Brewer, 2010). Through its coverage of the mainstream news media, *The Daily Show* “...offers critical examination of both the information provided by the real news and the agendas that lie behind or beneath it” (Baym & Jones, 2012, p. 5). Moreover, while a variety of news programs will cover ‘news about the news,’ shows like *The Daily Show* – news comedy programs – and like *The O’Reilly Factor* – political talk shows – in particular seem to engage in negative metacoverage (Wise & Brewer, 2010). Negative coverage refers to the way in which news outlets critique other news for things they think the latter are presenting incorrectly or badly. This negative coverage, while not particularly heartwarming, provides an important service when examining the role of news media in a democracy. For example, “[s]ome of *The Daily Show*’s coverage of the news media also emphasized the ways in which government actors sought to manage the news” (Brewer & Marquardt, 2007, p. 262), highlighting and even critiquing the ways politicians try to get certain messages across to the public through news media, which gives *The Daily Show* viewers an

awareness of this issue so they can then be critical themselves. Through its press metacoverage, *The Daily Show* again acts as a watchdog "... by monitoring and exposing media excess and artifice, strategically aiming its sights on the machinery of news and current affairs programming that routinely make claims on the real" (Baym & Jones, 2012, p. 12). This exposing of the inner workings of mainstream news media can be important for an informed public and can help the public consider the source of their information. Perhaps some viewers of the show recognize this and welcome the challenge to traditional sources of media given that *The Daily Show* "... encapsulates a search for truth and meaning in a time when populations have grown increasingly suspicious that traditional discourses no longer suffice" (Baym & Jones, 2012, p. 12).

Along with the basic content, the format of *The Daily Show* may allow for different information to be presented in comparison to other mainstream news media. Although the show uses a large portion of recycled news clips – using footage from other news organizations instead of original footage – the show can be seen to add to this due to a level of interpretation and critique beyond mere recycling of news (Brewer & Marquardt, 2007). The interview section of the show also offers something a little different with a more free-flowing discussion compared to mainstream news media (Baym, 2005; Becker, Xenos, & Waisanen, 2010). This can allow politicians or other influential figures to show different facets of their personality (Becker, Xenos, & Waisanen, 2010) and, again, supports the concept of *The Daily Show* as news valuable to democracy, with a focus on liberty and equality (Christians et al., 2009), allowing for various sides of an issue or person to come to light.

#### Defining *The Daily Show*

Given the wealth of informative content – regarding both current affairs/politics and metanewscoverage – that researchers have revealed in *The Daily Show*, it is clear many scholars do not write off the show as simply comedy with no news elements. However, scholars vary on how they define the show and the extent to which they consider it to be news. To define the show as a type of news, the newsworthiness of its informative elements must be studied to determine how well the show informs its viewers to be able citizens in a democracy. Although comedy and news are both prevalent in the show, often appearing simultaneously, the comedy does not necessarily negate the informative nature of the news (Baym, 2005). In fact, it can enhance it. Although critics of *The Daily Show*, especially those in the mainstream new media, claim that the show is silly and Jon Stewart does not ask serious news questions (Baumgartner & Morris, 2006), the popularity of the show and the informed nature of viewers tells a different story. “In a time when most media have turned to shallow infotainment to try to ensure ratings points, *The Daily Show* offers instead a version of *news that entertains*” (Baym, 2005, p. 273). As a testament to this fact, an extensive survey analyzing the extent to which regular viewers of 24 different media types/outlets were informed on current affairs, ranked *The Daily Show* fifth for the most informed viewers, surpassed by consumers of *The Rachel Maddow Show*, *New Yorker*-style magazines, *The Wall Street Journal*, and NPR (Pew Research, 2012). The study asked participants to respond to questions regarding current and world affairs, and to indicate which news they regularly consume. This indicates which shows have more informed viewers. This could imply that *The Daily Show* has some news elements and can inform its viewers, which leaves the problems of defining the program in journalistic terms.

Jon Stewart himself describes the program as “fake news” (Baym, 2005), and others similarly describe it as mock news. However, some scholars are more inclined to classify it more as real or alternative news - “... *The Daily Show* can be better understood not as ‘fake news’ but as an alternative journalism, one that uses satire to interrogate power, parody to critique contemporary news, and dialogue to enact a model of deliberative democracy” (Baym, 2005, p. 261). But this is not how all scholars classify the program. Some classify the show as soft news, implying a lower level of news, due to the program’s entertainment elements (Baumgartner & Morris, 2006). However, this description is not accurate enough, since other types of programming classified as soft news differ from *The Daily Show* and do not inform the public in the same way. Day time talk shows, classified as soft news, have the least informed, least critical and least educated audiences ranked against other news or informative shows (Pew Research, 2012), but *The Daily Show* ranks high in all of these categories (Pew Research). Late night talk shows are another type of program categorized as soft news, and are often grouped with *The Daily Show* as political entertainment or political comedy. These shows however, have distinct differences to *The Daily Show* in format and content choices (Hoffman & Young, 2011) with the satire and parody of the former focusing “more on issues and policy – much like (its) traditional news counterparts” (p. 165) and the latter relying “on punch-line jokes and caricatures of public figures” (p. 165). *The Daily Show* also differs from late night talk shows in the level to which their viewers are informed on current affairs because some background knowledge is necessary to understand the more complex humor of satire and parody, unlike the superficial humor in Late Night shows (Hoffman & Young, 2011). This shows that they cannot both be broadly categorized as



“soft news” or “political entertainment” and there are similarities between parody/satire humor and mainstream news media in format and effects on participation (Hoffman & Young, 2011). The satire/parody style of comedy used in the show also leads other researchers to use the title “news parody” when referring to *The Daily Show* (Druick, 2009), which can be interpreted in different ways. If the title means “parody of the news,” which, based on the context of the term’s use, is the probable explanation, then the show is described as copying the news for comedic effect. While this is somewhat accurate because the show “lampoons an official and sober discourse” (Druick, 2009, p. 306), it implies that the show is not real news, but merely a copy. Other scholars seem to disagree with this idea, focusing on the news value that comes from the parody, calling the show “alternative journalism” (Baym, 2005). In this instance, an interpretation of a title that describes *The Daily Show* is “news and parody,” because parody and satire are comedic elements used for humor, but they go alongside the informative, news-like elements of the show adding comedy-based critique.

#### Partisanship of *The Daily Show*

In classifying *The Daily Show* as a type of news, the level to which the show adheres to a certain ideological stance, whether perceived or real, must also be taken into consideration. Journalistic ideals of objectivity and balance are expected in news and viewers want neutrality (Coe et al., 2008). In fact, almost two-thirds of the general public claim to prefer news that does not have a bias toward a particular ideological or political stance (Pew Research, September 2012; Pew Research, February 2012). In spite of this desire, 67% of the public think there is a great deal or a fair amount of political bias in news (Pew Research, February 2012). Viewers do not have the same standards for

comedy when it comes to neutrality as they do for news (Coe et al., 2008), so the classifying a show as either news or comedy indicates the level of partisanship that can be considered allowable. *The Daily Show* is perceived to be non-neutral or partisan (Becker, Xenos, & Waisanen, 2010) and is perceived to have a higher level of bias than cable news outlets Fox News and CNN (Coe et al., 2008). Despite this perception, research also shows that Jon Stewart does critique both sides of the political aisle (Becker, Xenos, & Waisanen, 2010). Although the program is perceived as presenting an unbalanced view, the question of whether neutrality should be required of the show persists.

*The Daily Show* is often perceived as being biased due to the level of critique in the program, and the ideal of news as objective is not something the show's host, Jon Stewart, makes an obvious effort to adhere to (Smolkin, 2007). However, some media scholars find the critique, whether objective or not, to be unique and necessary.

Has our slavish devotion to journalism fundamentals—particularly our obsession with ‘objectivity’—so restricted news organizations that a comedian can tell the public what’s going on more effectively than a reporter? Has Stewart, whose mission is to be funny, sliced through the daily obfuscation more effectively than his media counterparts, whose mission is to inform? (Smolkin, 2007, p. 19)

This media focus on objectivity stems from the ideal of presenting all points of view so as not to discriminate or show bias toward one point of view. This is also what the professed public expectation of neutrality (Pew Research, 2012) attests to. However, presenting an issue as having two sides, and giving each side an equal voice is not necessarily an accurate depiction of reality. Smolkin (2007) quotes Hub Brown, chair of

the communication department at Syracuse University's S.I. Newhouse School of Public Communications and an associate professor of broadcast journalism, explaining the flawed nature of balance prevalent in the mainstream news media: “... The truth itself doesn't respect point of view. The truth is never balanced. ...We have to not give in to an atmosphere that's become so partisan that we're afraid of what we say every single time we say something” (p. 20). As this indicates, although there is a perception that the news should be balanced and objective, this may not be the case for all news. It is important for news to accurately represent reality. In addition, it is also important for news to act as a watchdog. To fill the watchdog function of journalism, news must question and critique society and those who hold power. But that critique cannot always be achieved in an objective way; a reliance on objectivity in every circumstance does not necessarily make good journalism. The first normative task of the news media is to observe and inform (Christians et al., 2009), which fits well with ideals of objectivity. The second normative task however requires participation including “...critical comment, advice, advocacy and expression of opinion” (Christians et al., 2009, p. 116), which cannot be objective. The critical nature of *The Daily Show* fits this second task, but it is in the contents of this task that many of the mainstream news media are currently lacking (Smolkin, 2007). Despite this necessity of critique, the perception persists that news should be objective. *The Daily Show* can overcome this obstacle because ideals of objectivity are unnecessary for comedy. In labeling itself as a “fake” news comedy show instead of legitimate news, *The Daily Show* is able to let go of the ideal of objectivity that often restricts the mainstream media from critiquing the prominent and powerful in U.S. society and act as a watchdog of government and other dominant influences (Baym 2005).

### Influence of *The Daily Show*

Determining the news quality and informative nature of *The Daily Show* implies an assumption of influence over the program's viewers; after all, there would be no point in examining the show if it had no significant impact. The show does have an impact on viewers however as it not only entertains through comedy but also has the potential to educate through information. Viewers of the show could become aware of some issues of contemporary significance that are presented on the show, such as politics and world affairs (Brewer & Marquardt, 2007), allowing them tools to be educated citizens ready to participate in democracy. Viewers can also potentially become aware – perhaps even critical – of the mainstream news media and the way it functions (Brewer & Marquardt, 2007; Baym 2005).

Those viewers are demographically different from the audiences of traditional news media. Specifically, more young people tend to gravitate most toward the comedy and information offered in *The Daily Show*. In 2012, 39% of the show's viewers were under 30 years old and 36% between 30-49 years old (Pew Research, September 2012). In fact, of 24 media types/outlets studied, *The Daily Show* ranked second for the youngest regular viewers, only falling behind another similar news-comedy show, The Colbert Report (Pew Research). Conveniently, the young age of viewers allows for study of *The Daily Show* to be particularly accurate because, given their proximity and accessibility to researchers, college students are often those studied in academia and are mostly in the same age range as the bulk of the show's audience. Viewers of *The Daily Show* also tend to be more educated and more wealthy than many traditional – mainly broadcast – news outlets with 45% of the show's regular audience comprising of college graduates and

35% earning \$75,000 or more per year (Pew Research). The show also ranks high in the percentage of regular viewers who have liberal ideology (43%) or identify as a Democrat (45%) with a small number of conservative or Republican viewers (Pew Research).

The demographics of the audience, specifically the age of regular viewers, play a role in the impact of the show. Young people are coming to watch *The Daily Show* and simultaneously also moving away from traditional news media in the highest numbers of any age group (Pew Research). This move of the youth away from the mainstream media and toward alternative news like *The Daily Show* (Baym, 2005) indicates the increasing expansion of what can be considered news (Druick, 2009) and also, potentially, “skepticism about the news proper and the authority it channels and supports” (p. 306). Often it is the entertainment and comedy elements of the show that draw in younger viewers, some of who would not otherwise be interested in news (Becker & Xenos, 2009). Whether they are interested in politics, current affairs, and critique or not, they gain that information regardless. Those viewers also then are more likely to be attentive to other news media, which they may not have paid attention to before (Becker & Xenos, 2009). This allows even those viewers who have little interest in those subjects to be better-educated citizens and be informed enough to participate in democracy, due to *The Daily Show*’s unique blend of news and comedy. Viewers also tend to have a feeling they understand the political system better due to *The Daily Show* (Baumgartner & Morris, 2006; Brewer & Marquardt, 2007), which could encourage them to participate in democracy. Moreover, the critical nature of the show’s content, toward both politics and traditional media, can be seen to increase cynicism among audience members. Although this could be perceived as negative since it may discourage participation in politics

(Baumgartner & Morris, 2006), it is also positive because it encourages viewers themselves to be critical and to question the political and media systems, which could “...translate into better citizenship, because a little skepticism toward the political system could be considered healthy for democracy” (p. 362).

### ***The Daily Show Debate***

The debate over *The Daily Show* and whether or not we can consider the program news continues. Although still considered primarily a comedian, Jon Stewart is now also regarded as a journalist by many in the news community, the academic – specifically communication – community (Tennenboim-Weinblatt, 2009), and even by the public, who ranked him the 8th most admired news figure in 2007 (Pew Research, 2007)

Stewart moved ... from being trendy to being a threat [to traditional journalism]; from being juxtaposed with other late-night comedians to being quoted alongside political sources and renowned commentators; from being a jester to being a political, media, and cultural critic; and from being an outsider to the journalistic community to having partial membership... (Tennenboim-Weinblatt, p. 433)

While members of the journalistic community admire Jon Stewart (Bloomberg, 2010), they are also aware that potential critiques could come their way if they don't perform their roles as journalists to a high standard. Brian Williams, a prominent and respected news figure and the host of NBC Nightly News, said this of *The Daily Show* host:

I consider him a branch of government ... he's become one of the people who keep you honest ... The fact that he's in the back of my mind when we almost do

something incredibly dumb or banal on the air, that's all you need to know about Jon's role in our life and society and media. (Bloomberg, 2010)

Williams alludes here to *The Daily Show's* role as a watchdog of media and government, a key facet of news media and yet another implying the journalistic value of the show.

Evidently Jon Stewart and his show receive a lot of attention for their unique place in the entertainment and news landscape. However, the show is not the only media that instigates the questioning of traditional news definitions. The news media landscape is in constant flux. Historically, the face of news in America has changed from the partisan presses to ideals of objectivity and fact-based reporting (Schudson, 2011). But as the news landscape continues to evolve, we see a new type of news: One that can meld information and entertainment, and one that helps educate democratic citizens through critique. In this changeable and fluid news environment, news can be ambiguous or hidden. Through ideals for news media set down in *Normative Theories of the Media*, with specific tasks and guidelines for evaluating journalism, we can examine newer news media to determine the level to which it lives up to news standards and fulfills the role of news media in our democracy.

This study looks specifically at *The Daily Show* with regard to how it fits into this changing news landscape. Research on *The Daily Show* is clearly still somewhat divided on the extent to which the show can be considered news. Studies of the show look at the program from a variety of viewpoints using different methods to examine it. Methodologies range from empirical to critical. Empirical research includes studies that use surveys or experiments to gauge *The Daily Show's* impact (See Coe et al., 2008;

Hoffman & Young, 2011; Hmielowski, Holbert, & Lee, 2011). For example, one study surveyed a random selection of people across an entire state to determine what predictors affect a person's decision to view political satire, including *The Daily Show* (Hmielowski, Holbert, & Lee, 2011). Other empirical methods focus on content analyses that break down the topic coverage on the show (See Brewer & Marquardt, 2007; Wise & Brewer, 2010). For example, one study by Wise and Brewer (2010) reviewed content of *The Daily Show*, *The O'Reilly Factor*, and *NBC Nightly News* to determine the amount of coverage dedicated to the news media itself and how negative that coverage is. Departing from empirical methods, some studies focus on presenting a critique of the show, analyzing its place in relation to traditional news media (See Baym 2005; Smolkin, 2007). For example, a critical study by Smolkin (2007) considered the ability of *The Daily Show* to operate without a focus on objectivity due to its place outside of traditional news media. These varying methods and analyses look at the type of comedy content, the format, and the topics covered in the content, and the effects on those who watch the show. However, previous studies do not consider the extent to which *The Daily Show* can be defined strictly as journalism, which presents a gap for this study to fill; examining the content using criteria for news can fill that niche to determine if *The Daily Show* can be considered news and what issues viewers will be informed about. Given that a well-functioning news media is necessary for an informed and participatory public, through examining the news content of *The Daily Show*, we can assess its potential value to American democracy and to citizens.

**RQ1: To what extent can *The Daily Show* with Jon Stewart be considered news based on the normative tasks of the news media?**



**RQ2: In what ways do topics covered predominantly on *The Daily Show* allow for viewers to be informed citizens in the U.S. democracy?**

## CHAPTER 2: METHOD

An in-depth, qualitative content analysis of *The Daily Show* was conducted to determine the extent to which content of the show can be classified as news, given a definition of journalism based on the normative tasks of the news media. In addition, the particular topic areas covered on the show were examined to determine the extent to which the focus areas of *The Daily Show* are supportive of democracy and an informed public. This study followed the basic guidelines for ethnographic content analysis methods of inquiry with a focus on systematic, detailed fieldnotes. The ethnographic content analysis guidelines were adapted from those on qualitative media analysis developed by David Altheide (1996). This method of content analysis allowed for flexibility and fit well with this study.

Data collection comprised of two steps: First, the collection of fieldnotes by the researcher acting as a participant observer; second, the analysis of those fieldnotes through ethnographic content analysis using flexible categories. Using fieldnotes as the method of data collection is based in traditional ethnography (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011) and allowed for the collection rich, descriptive data. This added depth to the study and allowed the researcher to act as a participant observer in the context of a viewer. In this study, the participants would be the show's viewers. Rather than observing participants, as in traditional ethnography, the researcher acted as a participant, observing the show and making detailed notes about the content. Although this deviates somewhat from

traditional ethnography because it lacks interaction with other participants, the researcher can still be considered a participant because of her active and involved role as a viewer. As a participant observer, the focus was on non-judgmental observation (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011), watching initially to engage as a viewer without “prematurely declaring the existence of a pattern” (p. 151) and making scratch notes, then rewatching sections of interest to make more detailed fieldnotes to be used as data for the study. It is important for the researcher to engage in the study as a participant because the role of a viewer is unique. Studying the content of *The Daily Show* in detail requires the researcher to consider how the content appears to a viewer. Fieldnotes collected by the researcher include thorough description of each episode with information on the topic, how the host explains it, clips played, the origin of those clips, the tone of voice and expressions of the host, and direct quotes of particular interest. The fieldnotes also contain some initial analysis with interpretations of certain areas of interest jotted down for further thought and investigation later. The manner of collecting field notes follows guidelines for traditional ethnography. However, the method deviates from traditional ethnography in that the notes provide detailed description of media content rather than a situated event in reality. Following the collection of the field notes, ethnographic content analysis allowed for content to be sorted into general categories focused on the research questions, while also allowing for additional, descriptive data to be collected. The qualitative results include categorized lists of stories and details about those stories, including the nature of the content and its presentation.

Using an ethnographic approach to content analysis contrasts with traditional quantitative content analysis approaches, which focus on the collection of “quantitative

data about predefined and usually precoded categories or variables” (Altheide, 1996, p. 15). This data are numerical as the data collection process focuses on coders who “find, record and count the ‘mentions’ for each unit of analysis” (Altheide, 1996, p. 16). With ethnographic content analysis, qualitative data are collected as the researcher “narratively describe[s] the news visuals by ‘what was shown,’ ‘who was shown’ and ‘what they were doing’” (Altheide, 1996, p. 22). This process also allows for categories to emerge during the study and for the researcher to play an interactive role in the process (Altheide, 1996), starting out with general categories into which to organize data, but allowing the researcher flexibility to alter or add additional categories. “The aim is to be systematic and analytic but not rigid. Categories and variables initially guide the study, but others are allowed and expected to emerge throughout the study” (Altheide, 1996, p. 16). This flexible method fit well with this study because, although previous research allows for some assumptions as to the content of *The Daily Show*, and how to categorize it, this study looked at the newsworthiness of the content, which previous research does not delve deeply in to. Having general, emergent categories allowed for a structured study while simultaneously allowing for the data to develop as the study progressed.

Ethnographic content analysis focuses on “collecting numerical and narrative data” (Altheide, 1996, p. 16) with the numerical data consisting of “items and topics ... counted and put into emergent categories” (Altheide, 1996, p. 17) and narrative data consisting of “good descriptive information” (Altheide, 1996, p. 17). This study fulfills both of these, with a stronger focus on the latter; stories are coded through categorization into groups, and then described in great detail to allow for analysis. In focusing more on the narrative data, this method fits the goal of this study for two reasons. First, in

determining the extent to which *The Daily Show* can be considered news based on the normative tasks of the news media and the manner in which it achieves this relies on rich description. Because these tasks have not been used to study this show before, it was unclear what would emerge through the research process and so detail was primary when studying each episode. Second, the limit of having only one researcher available to work on the study means that intercoder reliability could not be established. This was avoided by a focus on the researcher approaching the study with the role of a participant observer. This fits with ethnographic content analysis methods because the researcher is expected to be “reflexive and highly interactive” (Altheide, 1996, p. 16).

### **Content**

Data were obtained for this analysis from 32 episodes of *The Daily Show* following the November 2012 elections. This research frame for this study began after the election, which gave the opportunity for more varied and usual content than a study looking at the election alone and allowed the research to gauge a more typical look at the content of *The Daily Show*. During the time leading up to the election, many media outlets focus a great deal of coverage on the event, given its importance. This means political content could potentially take up a large portion of the show, providing data that relates to that specific event, which may be less representative of more general *Daily Show* content. The study began with the Nov. 12, 2012 episode and spanned the following eight full weeks of episodes to total 32 episodes in the study, ending Jan. 31, 2013. Four episodes air on Comedy Central each week. These episodes are from Season 18 and include episodes 23-54. Although this period of time is longer than eight weeks, the show does not air every week and took an extended break over the holiday season in

December. The range provides enough content to give a varied overview of the content of *The Daily Show* and the content falls half in 2012 and half in 2013.

Each approximately 22-minute long episode of *The Daily Show* is comprised of three parts. The first section of the show is usually presented by the host, Jon Stewart, with him covering top stories in a news-like format. The second section of the show is usually either a continuation of stories presented by Stewart or an enterprising story presented by one of the show's correspondents. The third section of the show is a celebrity interview with guests ranging from politicians to media figures to book authors to film actors. For the purpose of this study, only the first two sections of the show were analyzed, usually totaling approximately 14 minutes of each approximately 22-minute episode. The first two sections cover more general content in a more traditional, news-like manner, whereas the third section often covers information specific to the particular guest. The different formats and content would be better studied independent of each other due to the variation. The first two sections better fit with the research objectives in this study due to their more general content focus and so these were the parts of the show analyzed in this study.

### **Materials**

Episodes of *The Daily Show* are available online for free at [thedailyshow.com](http://thedailyshow.com) so the content was streamed to the research computer. If, for some reason, the content were to have become unavailable at any time during the study, then the episodes can also be purchased for \$1.99 each on iTunes. The content can be watched as many times as necessary and can be paused and rewound to allow for time and accuracy to code the content. The episodes were watched on a desktop computer with a laptop computer used

to simultaneously record the field notes. This allowed for less confusion between the recording of data and the content.

### **Procedure**

The content of the show was recorded using the ethnographic method of observation and detailed field notes (Lindlof and Taylor, 2011). Guidelines for adapting this to media content were taken from ethnographic content analysis methods (Altheide, 1996) and this was used as a general guideline. The research protocol is general due to the emergent nature of the study, which is typical of qualitative data analysis (Altheide).

To begin, the 32 episodes were viewed by the researcher, acting as a participant observer, and fieldnotes were written to reflect the observations. Upon first viewing an episode, the researcher would make scratch notes, brief notes recorded with initial thoughts and observations “in the midst of [the] participant-observation sessions” (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011, p. 156). Clips of the episode would then be rewatched based on areas of importance gleaned from the first viewing and scratch notes. Thorough fieldnotes would be recorded, with clips paused to write detailed notes, and rewound to ensure accuracy. These notes include “relevant exemplars” (Shalev & Lemish, 2011, p. 374), descriptive examples, and quotations from the show’s dialogue. Such notes are subjective to the researcher, which is allowable in ethnographic content analysis because the investigator is expected to interact with the data (Altheide, 1996). A benefit of using fieldnotes in a media context rather than to document live actions at a site, as with traditional ethnography, is that the content is not fleeting. In traditional ethnographies, “fieldnotes objectify and interpret events that are otherwise situated, ambiguous, and fleeting” (p. 157), whereas the media clips in this study can be viewed as many times as

necessary to gain further detail and inspire further interpretation. Fieldnotes are also usually completed as soon after observing an event as possible with traditional ethnography; however, with media ethnography, the notes are completed at the same time as the observation allowing for greater accuracy. As to the length of the fieldnotes, “a standard rule of thumb is 10 double-spaced pages of writing for every hour of participant observation” (p. 158). The notes of this study are slightly more detailed with 32 episodes covered in 104 double-spaced pages, giving around 3.25 pages for each approximately 14-minute episode.

Following the collection of fieldnotes, the content of each episode was coded with two separate groups of categories to collect numerical data. “Category is a covering term for an array of general phenomenon: concepts, constructs, themes and any other types of ‘bins’ in which to put items that are similar” (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011, p. 246). The first group of categories determined the extent to which content can be considered news based on the normative tasks of the news media. The second group of categories looked at the varied topics covered on the show. Given the ethnographic focus of this content analysis, the initial categories were general and subject to editing throughout the research process (Altheide, 1996). Analysis of information in these categories was then supplemented with further, narrative data, providing rich descriptions of the content and its presentation.

### **Data**

The 32 episodes were viewed in chronological order and the content described in the field notes, and then grouped for each episode using a news-comedy group of categories and a topic group of categories.



### News-Comedy Categories

The first category group used the guidelines for news media tasks laid out in Normative Theory to determine what content fills news values and what content does not. The broad categories to code for news content are adapted from Christians, Glasser, McQuail, Nordenstreng, and White's (2009) discussion of Normative Theories of the Media:

1. Content that observes and informs (Christians et al., 2009)

Note: The terms "observe" and "inform" refer to times when factual information is presented. Content was placed in this category when it answers the traditional questions of a news story – who, what, when, where and, sometimes, why? (Schudson, 2011).

2. Critique, comment, or advice (Christians et al., 2009)

Note: Content was placed in this category when it appears to stray from basic, observable facts and the host or a show correspondent voices a subjective opinion. For example, this could be analysis of news information, questioning of information, or seeking meaning behind facts.

3. Extramedia voices or sources (Christians et al., 2009)

Note: Content will be in this category when sources from outside of the news media industry are quoted. This means anyone who is not a reporter, editor, producer, pundit, news media personality, or PR representative.

4. Comedy

Note: Content will be in this category based on when the show's content sparks laughter in its audience. The expressions and tone of the show's

host and correspondents may also be signifiers of comedic content.

This categorization helped determine the extent to which the content of the show fills the role of news media outlined in *Normative Theories*, demonstrated in the first three categories, and the extent to which content strays from the definition of journalism, demonstrated in the latter category. These categories are intentionally broad and may include a range of content that fits each category. The broad nature of these categories stems from the ethnographic content analysis method, which requires some general structure to begin the study but allows for the data to emerge (Altheide, 1996) instead of being forced into pre-determined codes. The notes for each category indicate guidelines for content that will likely fit into each category. However, these guidelines are flexible and subject to revision by the researcher as the study progresses.

### Topic Categories

A second group of categories examined the topic of *The Daily Show*'s content. This grouped the content into broad topic areas, following the template of a previous study of the program by Brewer and Marquardt (2007):

1. Politics (defined as “political/governmental figures, institutions, organizations, issues and/or processes”).
2. World or international news (defined as “events in countries other than the United States”).
3. News media (defined as “news media figures, organizations and/or practices”).
4. Other – this will be labeled based on the content topic and then grouped with similar groups to develop new categories.

Content was only grouped into each of the first three categories when it fulfilled the specific criteria listed in the definition. However, these definitions were open to change during the study given the interpretive nature of the research. Any content that did not fulfill the description of the first three categories was initially put into the fourth category. Stories categorized in the “other” category were also labeled with a specific topic label. Each topic was then grouped by issue. These issue categories emerged as the research progressed and are discussed in the findings. Content could be put into more than one category as long as it fulfilled the necessary criteria. As with the previous group, these categories are broad to allow for the data to define the categories and not let the categories force the data to conform.

### **Analysis**

Results of this study were analyzed in relation to the research questions, utilizing both the fieldnotes and categorized data, along with additional viewings of content when necessary to include specific, detailed examples. Data from the first category group were analyzed to determine how much of the content fits the ideal of journalism and the extent to which *The Daily Show* adheres to norms of news rather than comedy. The amount of, type, and structure of coverage in each category was considered. This helps to illustrate the extent to which content fills the tasks of journalism and can be considered news and the extent to which it can be considered comedy. There was often an overlap between categories as an issue could be covered using comedy and also fill one or more of the news tasks. Therefore, this data also demonstrate the extent to which comedy and news exist simultaneously in the show. The extent to which the show focuses on certain journalistic tasks and less on others also emerged. Finally, these data were compared to

existing ideas about the journalistic ideals, or lack thereof, in the program.

Data from the second group of categories was analyzed to determine how the topics covered in *The Daily Show* could be helpful to inform citizens so they can be active, knowledgeable participants in democracy. The amount of stories in each category also allow for interpretation of potential topics that regular viewers of *The Daily Show* are likely to be informed on. How relevant each of these topics is to democratic participation was also considered.

The data from these two groups of categories allows for a general overview of *The Daily Show*'s content, demonstrating how much of the show fills journalistic tasks, based on normative theory, and how the show covers certain topics relevant to democracy. Themes that run through the content are then identified using additional information gained from the fieldnotes. The combination of these two types of data allow for an in-depth look at the content of the show in relation to the research questions.

## CHAPTER 3: FINDINGS

The content of *The Daily Show* studied over the research period fulfilled the normative tasks of the news media and can, therefore, be considered news by standards outlined in *Normative Theories of the Media*. A clear focus on the second task, to offer critical comment (Christians, Glasser, McQuail, Nordenstreng, & White, 2009), emerged in the study showing the program's distinct focus on critical news and less on the objectivity present in the first task. Along with demonstrating news value through the fulfilling of these tasks, the topics covered also were also shown to contribute to the newsworthiness of the content given their focus on political events, political/governmental figures, current events, and issues of public interest and importance.

During the research process, 104 double-spaced pages of field notes (see appendix for sample field notes) were made while watching the 32 episodes of *The Daily Show* in the research sample. Detailed analysis of these notes shows the extent to which the content fulfilled each task of the news media. Categorization of the field notes into topic groups also showed the topics covered on the show and the importance of those topics was considered.

**RQ1: To what extent can *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* be considered news based on the normative tasks of the news media?**

With regard to the first research question, the data was analyzed based on the

tasks of the news media, laid out in *Normative Theories of the Media* (Christians et al., 2009). All three tasks of the media were covered in some way on the show; however, the focus for *The Daily Show* was on the second task, which focused on critical content. The first task, to observe and inform (Christians et al., 2009), and the third task, the inclusion of extramedia sources (Christians et al., 2009), were used in the explanation of each particular story. The second task, expression of critical comment, made up the bulk of the show's content and combined heavily with critical comedy. In analyzing the manner in which these tasks are fulfilled by *The Daily Show*, I will first explain the way the show is structured. Second, I will explain the examples of how each task is addressed by the show within this structure. However, because this information alone does not adequately describe the way these tasks are fulfilled by the show, I will explain how the tasks are fulfilled simultaneously, with information and sources blended heavily with constant critique.

### Basic Show Structure

In analyzing the content of *The Daily Show*, a clear trend in the structure of the show and the way stories are presented emerged, and that trend seems to fit with the normative tasks. The structure commonly used in the show follows three general steps: First, the host introduces the subject to be covered. Second, a clip or mashup of several clips from traditional television media outlets are played. These clips give a basic bit of information on the subject. Third, the show's host, Jon Stewart, provides an analysis of the information from the clips, critiquing their contents. This critique varies and can be based on the media outlets/figures presenting the information in the clips, or the actual news content in the clips. Comedy is present throughout all three stages in the show's

structure and serves both critical and humorous purposes.

Task 1: Observe and inform.

The first normative task of the news media, “the task of observing and informing, primarily as a service to the public” (Christians et al., 2009, p. 116), is present in every episode of *The Daily Show* studied in this research. With its informative focus, the first task fits closely with news ideals of objectivity and so content that fulfills this task aligns more with traditional news media. Given that *The Daily Show* follows the aforementioned structure, the first normative task is most often covered in the second stage during the clips from traditional news outlets, although can also briefly be covered in the first stage during the introduction of the topic. For example, in a segment titled “Women’s War Daily” (The Daily Show, 2013, January 28), Stewart first introduces the topic in stage one:

Stewart: “As you know, in these recent years of perpetual war our military has had to address some standards issues in order to keep enlistment up. They’ve loosened their weight requirements, their educational requirements, their ‘have you committed a felony’ requirements. But now they’re dropping the biggest barrier to combat roles yet: The ‘cock and balls’ requirement.”

This fulfills the task of informing as it gives viewers a small bit of information on the topic. It is then followed in stage two by a news clip of journalist/anchor Anderson Cooper. The clip does not have a network logo to identify it but given that Cooper has a show on CNN is likely the clip is from that network.

Anderson Cooper: “Today Defense Secretary Leon Panetta announced the

military will let women serve in front-line combat units including infantry, armor, artillery, even, potentially, special forces.” (The Daily Show, 2013, January 28)

This clip continues to add more concrete detail to Stewart’s introduction, stating specifically that women can now serve on the front lines of combat and adding specific details about the change. This detail is included to inform the viewers on the topic at hand and fulfills the first normative task. The information presented in both stage one, Stewart’s intro, and stage two, the clip of Cooper, answers the traditional news questions of who, what, where, when, and why, albeit briefly and with limited detail. In this case, and others, the information is necessary to set up the story to be covered and allows viewers a brief bit of information to understand the context for the rest of the coverage.

Examples of the first normative task of the news media, to observe and inform can be seen in every episode of *The Daily Show* studied in this research. Another example can be seen during the segment “The Bungover 4” (The Daily Show, 2012, December 11), which focused on former Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi, with whom American audiences could be unfamiliar. Stewart starts the segment explaining first who the man is: “a billionaire prime minister of Italy elected three times, even though, as they say in Rome, he was corrupt” (The Daily Show, 2012, December 11). This introduces Berlusconi, providing brief information about him and also a potential critique in labeling him as “corrupt.” To corroborate this point, however, clips from a variety of news outlets are then played in succession to show evidence of Berlusconi’s corruption.

CBS: “The Italian prime minister is no stranger to scandal...”

ABC: “...charges of bribery, corruption and embezzlement...”



CNN: "...officially guilty of tax fraud..."

ABC: "...sentenced to four years in prison for tax fraud..."

ABC: "...a serial philanderer..."

ABC: "...tales of lavish orgies..."

CBS: "...notorious all-night so called "bunga bunga" parties, paying for sex with an underage prostitute..."

ABC: "...he's saying that he couldn't, I guess, have sex with 11 women so instead he has sex with eight women..." (The Daily Show, 2012, December 11).

This information presents a synopsis of various issues of scandal associated with Berlusconi and can therefore be considered to fulfill the first normative task because it informs on the issue. This information sets the stage for the rest of the segment, in which the host considers the issue of Berlusconi running for reelection in Italy, which begins to deviate from the first task and toward analysis and critique. Often times it is difficult to separate out the instances when the show is fulfilling only this first task because content jumps quickly from information to critique. However, because every segment requires at least some information and context, this task can be seen in every episode of *The Daily Show* covered in this research sample.

More examples of content that fulfills the task to inform can be seen in any episode of *The Daily Show*. In a discussion of Michigan becoming a Right-to-Work state, the first task is fulfilled in explaining how Right-to-Work legislation was passed and what the Michigan governor said on the topic (The Daily Show, 2012, December 11). In a story about how the U.S. voted not to adopt a U.N. disabilities treaty, information was

first presented on the details of the treaty, specifically how it is based on an existing U.S. disability rights law (The Daily Show, 2012, December 5). In a story about how Sen. John McCain and other Republicans wanted to block the appointment of Susan Rice to the position of Secretary of State, first information about Rice's background with the attack on the U.S. Embassy in Benghazi must be explained (The Daily Show, 2013, January 14). Although the focus on *The Daily Show* is with the second task, fulfilling the first task is most often necessary to give an informative foundation for the critique of the second task to be based on.

### Task 2: Critical Comment

The third stage of *The Daily Show*'s general structure involves critique of the news story presented in the first two stages; it takes the first normative task one a step further and applies critique, fulfilling the second normative task with "critical comment, advice, advocacy and expression of opinion" (Christians et al., 2009, p. 116). This is where the content of *The Daily Show* begins to deviate from the usual news norms of objectivity. For example, to continue with the aforementioned "Women's War Daily" segment (The Daily Show, 2013, January 28) describing how women can now serve on front lines, Stewart follows the informative section with more clips and inserts critical analysis:

Stewart: "The point is it's a major policy shift and with any major policy shift there are bound to be detractors."

ABC News clip, unnamed male: "There are certain anatomical facts about upper body strength ... you're 6'4", 240 pound marine and you're injured and you need the marine next to you to carry you back to safety, and the marine next to you is a

5'4" woman who weighs 115 pounds. It's relevant."

Stewart (high pitched voice): "You can't have women in combat because they're tiny, they're tiny. They're too delicate, I've got like eight of them in my hand ..."  
(continues to joke about how tiny women are but then says he is actually talking about how tiny mice are) "...As for the whole 'women are too weak' argument, I guess it would be a bad idea to send out the 177<sup>th</sup> Linebacker Brigade to fight side-by-side with the Pixie Regiment but, you know, to avoid that confusion maybe the military could have some kind of requirement pertaining to physical fitness, maybe a physical fitness requirement." (The Daily Show, 2013, January 28)

Here Stewart demonstrates an argument in the debate regarding whether women should serve on the front lines, that women cannot measure up to men in physical fitness levels. He then shows how this argument is flawed, sarcastically implying that the military's physical fitness requirement would stop the potential problem. Stewart also makes fun of the man in the clip with the joke about women being as tiny as mice, which serves to provide comedy along with critique of the man's statements. Stewart does not end the critique here. He continues to show other arguments against women serving on the front lines and then critically refutes them. He uses the same formula as above; first, playing clips of other arguments and then stating why they are not valid. Although this deviates from objectivity ideal – the host is clearly giving his own opinion on the matter and stating why he disagrees with the statements against women in the military – it can still be considered news because it is fulfilling the second task of the news media, staying on a topic that he has already objectively informed the audience on, albeit briefly.

This episode continues with *Daily Show* correspondent Samantha Bee presenting a follow up segment titled “Women’s War Daily – Military Brohesion” (The Daily Show, 2013, January 28). In this segment, Bee interviews both the male author of a book that claims “Women shouldn’t fight the nation’s wars,” Kingsley Browne, and a female soldier, Zoe Bedell, who is the plaintiff in a lawsuit to get the ban on women in combat lifted. Through her interviews Bee engages a pseudo-debate format with statements against the issue from Browne spliced with those that refute his points by Bedell. Throughout the segment, Bee seems to be questioning both sides equally, bringing points from both Browne and Bedell back and forth. However, at the end of the segment, she demonstrates her agreement with the female soldier:

Bee: “What would you say to all the people out there who really are stuck in another era and who really just think that women don’t belong in combat zones at all?”

Bedell: “Well, the good news is I don’t actually have to say anything because the evidence is on my side. Women have been doing this for 10 years and eventually those guys are going to die off and we’ll keep doing our thing.”

Bee: “Well said.” (The Daily Show, 2013, January 28)

In this final statement, Bee makes no attempt to seem objective; she clearly takes a side in the debate by agreeing with Bedell. Although, at this point, Bee is no longer fulfilling the first normative task given her deviation from observable facts, she is fulfilling the second normative task through her agreement with Bedell’s critical comment on the situation. Both stories on this topic by Stewart and Bee allow for critical comment and

scrutiny of the main issue with much more airtime dedicated to this critique than the introducing and explaining of the issue itself.

The majority of the episodes studied in this research sample involve a similar manner of critique, although the way the critique is presented varies on how direct it is. In some instances, such as the aforementioned examples, the critique is obvious with the host or one of the show's correspondents clearly stating that information is not factual or highlighting inaccuracies. For example, in the segment titled "Grand Theft Semi-Auto" (The Daily Show, 2013, January 17), coverage highlights statements critical of President Obama and shows how they are hyperbolic. The segment deals with executive orders signed by the president relating to his plan to curb gun violence. Clips from Fox News are played that present a dramatic and dire picture of the president's actions on guns, calling Obama "tyrannical" (The Daily Show, 2013, January 17), although it does not give details on the specifics of the actions. Stewart then asks what the president could have done to warrant such a response. Another Fox News clip is then played saying President Obama asked Congress to pass legislation to instate universal background checks and bans on high capacity magazines and assault rifles. Stewart responds to this clip saying: "OK, two things very quickly. First those measures enjoy, I believe, a majority support in the latest polls. Two, when tyrants want something done they generally don't ask their legislative bodies if that would be OK. They tend to proceed, uh, what's the word I'm looking for? Tyrannically" (The Daily Show, 2013, January 17). In this way, the host is directly highlighting the problem he has with the language used in the Fox News clips and is critiquing the way those in the clips are labeling the president a tyrant. This critique continues throughout the segment with Stewart highlighting the

hypocrisy of Sean Hannity, one of the media personalities shown in the Fox News clips, who criticizes the president's use of executive orders.

Stewart: "I guess folks like Hannity really wanna protect Americans' liberties and would stand up to any presidential overreach, even if that overreach was being done in the name of saving American lives. Like if the president, without so much as a search warrant, wanted to listen in to your private conversations. I can't imagine a guy like Hannity trying to justify that kind of executive overreach in, I don't know, 2006, roll tape." (The Daily Show, 2013, January 17)

A clip of Hannity from 2006 follows in which he justifies the signing of an executive act by President Bush. Stewart responds "looks like a tyrant is anyone sworn to protect the constitution, that you didn't vote for" (The Daily Show, 2013, January 17). This highlights how Hannity has changed his views on the issue of executive orders, seemingly based on the president who signed them. In his final statement critiquing Hannity, Stewart clearly deviates from any semblance of objectivity. He critiques Hannity, openly accusing him of having a double standard when it comes to executive orders.

Occasionally Stewart's direct critique can come in the form of an open, critical statement addressed directly at a specific group or person. These usually come after an issue has already been discussed on the show and the host has something he wants to say to those he is critiquing. These segments can often be identified by the signature phrase "...meet me at camera three," as Stewart invites a group or person to metaphorically step aside so he can candidly tell them his opinion on the situation. For example, the segment "Post-Democalyptic World - Whine Country - Employee Benefits" (The Daily Show,

2012, November 13), follows a discussion of business owners laying off employees, cutting hours or raising prices in response to President Obama's reelection.

Stewart: "Job creators, meet me at camera three....Guys I get it, providing health benefits to employees costs money and as a rule you tend to prefer things that do not cost that... but own your layoffs and your policies. Let's stop pretending that suddenly, with this election bosses have been suddenly transformed into reluctant assholes."

The segment continues in this manner with Stewart directly telling job creators, specifically the ones he covered in the preceding segment, that they should stop using this election as an excuse to cut costs and "wriggle out of the social contract" (The Daily Show, 2012, November 13). In doing this, he overtly ignores norms of objectivity that would make these kinds of statements impossible to say. Traditional news outlets focused primarily on the journalistic ideal of objectivity could not directly critique in this manner. However, because he is on a comedy show, Stewart is able to state his critique directly without the concern that he may seem too opinionated.

Direct critique is not the only way in which *The Daily Show* fulfills the second normative task of critical comment. A format that allows for more subtle critique is one in which the host plays devil's advocate, sometimes assuming the role of someone who agrees with or is confused by an issue. For example, in the segment titled "Scapegoat Hunter" (The Daily Show, 2013, January 8), Jon Stewart critiques the way opponents of gun control focus the debate on gun violence away from gun control issues and onto other topics.

Stewart: "Let's start the discussion on gun violence. Let's start it with a

discussion of gun control.”

NBC Clip, guest NRA Executive Vice President Wayne LaPierre: “Gun control, it’s not going to make any kids safer. We’ve got to get to the real problem, the real causes.”

Stewart: “Oh, I’m sorry, I just assumed that beginning a conversation on gun control meant starting with guns. But you want to talk about the non-gun causes of gun violence. Well, you know what, it’s a conversation, no bad ideas, maybe there are other factors we should look at. What other non-gun causes are we talking about here?” (The Daily Show, 2013, January 8)

The segment continues to show arguments used by LaPierre, and other people who are against increased gun regulations, to claim that guns are not to blame for gun violence. Instead of guns, violent video games, news media fear mongering, and the mental health system, are to blame for gun violence, LaPierre claims in clips that show support for each of these factors. After each clip is played Stewart agrees that the point made can be a problem, but continues to ask for more discussion. He also points out additional critiques on the manner of discussion.

Stewart (in response to LaPierre saying the country has a mental health problem):  
“We closed the mental institutions in many respects so now our mentally ill live on the streets or are in prison and it is untenable and it’s up to us to help them find compassionate, proactive care. This is what we have to address in our mental health system. I’m assuming that’s what you mean.”

LaPierre on NBC: “We have no national database of these lunatics.”



Stewart: “Or that, or that. I was going to say compassionate total care of mental illness, or (pause) lunatic database.” (The Daily Show, 2013, January 8)

In this response Stewart not only points out what is lacking in mental health care, but also showcases how it contrasts LaPierre’s argument, which implies blame is on the individuals themselves and not the system that Stewart claims is failing them. This debate-like, devil’s advocate style of presenting information allows for subtle critique. Although Stewart does not directly address LaPierre on the issues that the host disagrees with him about, Stewart is still able to present his audience with a critical analysis of the discussion on gun violence. In embracing this style of critique, Stewart can give the appearance of having a reasoned debate with an unreasonable person, discrediting the arguments made by LaPierre. This style makes it seem like Stewart is trying to keep the situation objective, allowing for LaPierre’s arguments to be presented, but Stewart is presenting this only in order to critique those arguments. The host’s tone, facial expressions, and responses, along with the way the clips are played, all imply that he is presenting this information in order to showcase the problems inherent in LaPierre’s arguments. After seeming to go along with the debate for the entirety of the segment, allowing for information on different aspects of the gun control debate to come to light, Stewart finally gives a direct critique.

Stewart: “Look we can dance around the issue all we want. We can blame movies, or video games or the mentally ill or God, and we do have to put, it’s a complex problem and all solutions have to be on the table. But, it is time we talk about guns.”

Fox News clip, anchor: “I don’t want to do this. I don’t want to do this gun

control discussion right now. There's a day, place and time for all that."

Stewart: "It's today, right now. It is absolutely the time to talk about gun control."

(The Daily Show, 2013, January 8)

This final statement shows the reasoning behind the whole segment on gun violence issues. Stewart wants to start a conversation on gun control, as he said at the beginning, and subtly critiques those, mainly NRA head Wayne LaPierre, for trying to distract from that conversation. The concept of starting a conversation through this critique fulfills one of the media functions detailed in *Normative Theories of the Media* (Christians et al., 2009). In attempting to direct the conversation on gun control, Stewart is fulfilling a function by "setting the agenda of public discussion" (Christians et al., p. 119). This could not be achieved with a focus on objectivity alone because it requires a value judgment to be made about what an important issue to discuss is, whereas objective journalism should be "more or less value free" (Christians et al., p. 119). In fact, considering the total list of functions - "providing surveillance of the social environment, forming opinion, setting the agenda of public discussion, acting as a 'watchdog' in respect to political and economic power, acting as a messenger and public informant, and playing an active and participant part in social life" (Christians et al., p. 119) - all require a somewhat critical approach to achieve them. These functions together focus on all three of the normative tasks, but the most important appears to be the second task because a critical approach to the news is necessary in the majority of them.

Another of these functions featured prominently on *The Daily Show* is the function to act "as a 'watchdog' in respect to political and economic power" (Christians et al., p.119), and this again, requires a critical focus. If news media can be a fourth

branch of government, a watchdog of politicians, then *The Daily Show* works as a watchdog from two angles: critiquing political and economic power while also holding the mainstream media accountable for their role as a watchdog. The show critiques politicians, the political system, and other arenas of power in two ways. Sometimes the host directly calls out politicians for not acting in the best interests of their constituents, such as in the direct critiques detailed earlier. Other times the critique is more indirect; the host plays a clip of a statement followed by another clip of the same person saying the opposite of their statement in the initial clip. In this way, the host does not need to directly call out the hypocrisy himself, as with the direct critique. Instead he presents facts and allows the audience to draw their own conclusions from the competing information shown.

For example, in more coverage of the gun control debate in a segment titled “Weapons of Mass Discussion – Universal Background Checks” (The Daily Show, 2013, January 31), various clips are shown of NRA head Wayne LaPierre advocating against increased gun control. In covering this debate, *The Daily Show* plays clips of LaPierre saying that he opposes universal background checks for gun purchases and that such checks will never work to curb gun violence. In the same segment the show also plays a C-SPAN clip from 1999 showing LaPierre advocating for universal background checks. This is a critique of LaPierre, showing his inconsistency on the issue of universal background checks, and perhaps encouraging the viewer to consider the worth of LaPierre’s current statements on the issue and the motivations behind such statements. Critiques such as this fulfill several of the normative functions of news media, not only to act as a watchdog of power but also to “provide surveillance of the social environment”

(Christians et al., p. 119) by showing inconsistencies in the actions/words of powerful figures, and to act “as a messenger and public informant” (p. 119) by informing viewers on aspects of power that they could not necessarily find out for themselves. These actions could not be achieved under a news organization with a sole focus on objectivity, because the ideal of objectivity prevents any analysis further than stating basic facts. As these normative ideals demonstrate, journalism needs to stray beyond just stating facts in order to adequately inform the public.

Examples of critique in *The Daily Show* are varied but, as with the first normative task, all episodes contain examples of critique and fulfillment of the second task. For example, in the segment “Spyfall - David Petraeus Resigns” (The Daily Show, 2012, November 12), Stewart refutes conspiracy theories about the resignation and scandal associated with the affair of former CIA Director David Petraeus and his biographer. Stewart systematically presents three conspiracy theories about the scandal and then shows how each is incorrect or inaccurate by presenting evidence that contradicts the conspiracies. In the segment “The Employees Strike Back – Twinkie’s End” (The Daily Show, 2012, November 27), Stewart criticizes the idea that food company Hostess went bankrupt solely because of union workers striking. He presents other things that may have also harmed the company such frequent changes in management with seven different CEOs serving over a decade, and decreased sales due to the unhealthiness of the company’s products. In both of these examples, the host is able to critique through showing information that contradicts inaccurate claims.

Whatever the manner of critique used on *The Daily Show*, all fulfill the second normative task offering critical comment in some way. This is perhaps the most

important way that *The Daily Show* departs from norms of traditional news media. In order to critique the news, the show cannot focus heavily on objectivity. Being limited by objectivity would not allow for the second task to be fulfilled and so only part of the goals of journalism according to *Normative Theories of the Media* (Christians et al., p. 119) would be achieved. In operating outside the realm of traditional news media without a focus on objectivity, *The Daily Show* is able to openly critique powerful political, business, and media entities.

### Task 3: Extramedia Voices and Sources

The third normative task allowing for “extramedia voices or sources” (Christians et al., 2009, p. 116) considers the extent to which *The Daily Show* provides a “channel, forum or platform” (Christians et al., 2009, p. 116) for voices outside of the news media to be heard. Specifically, this task relates to the idea that news media consistently present information and views from a limited group of people, which includes reporters, pundits, and prominent politicians. In order for this task to be fulfilled, minority voices and those less commonly heard in the news media need to be included in news coverage. Inherent in this task is also the concept of a “healthy public sphere” (Christians et al., 2009, p. 116) with the press providing a space for a variety of voices to be heard, and ideas and issues to be discussed. This task is fulfilled in three ways: First, through the inclusion of statements in media clips, second in correspondent interviews in original reporting segments, and third, in the interview portion of the show. With regard to the first of these, the task is fulfilled only on a basic level through the way that extramedia voices are heard in the news clips played on the show. These clips often show politicians or other public figures either speaking directly to a particular news station or in a press-conference

environment. Sometimes the clips come from C-SPAN and so this shows direct footage from politicians as they work. Examples of this can be seen in every episode of the show studied in this research sample and also in the examples already shown to demonstrate both the first and second media tasks. Anytime a news media clip is shown with someone outside of the media speaking, that content can be considered to fulfill the third task on a basic level. However, although technically this can be considered fulfilling this task as the voices heard are extramedia, it is only on a basic level as does not fully fulfill the task; the voices heard in this manner already have a platform. The clips used come from footage that has already aired on another media channel and so no new discussion is included, so there is no additional extramedia contribution to public debate.

The second way in which the third media task is fulfilled is when correspondents of *The Daily Show* complete independent reports, which often involves interviewing people outside of the news media to use as sources in the story. For example, in the segment “Consultants Without Borders” (The Daily Show, 2012, November 28), *Daily Show* correspondent Jason Jones interviews American political consultants who work overseas in times when there is no U.S. election to focus on. In the segment “Old Tokes Home” (The Daily Show, 2012, December 5), *Daily Show* correspondent Al Madrigal interview elderly people about the potential use of marijuana to help with health issues, as well as advocates for and against the use of the drug. In these examples, and the other times the show has original reporting, people relevant to the story topic outside of the news media are featured and, consequently, they have a platform from which to state their views. This can aid public discussion of an issue by adding new information and can therefore contribute to the public sphere.

Finally, the show presents extramedia voices in the interview section of the program. The interview part of the show was not covered in this study, but guests include political figures, authors, entertainers, and media figures (Brewer & Marquardt, 2007). Guests often discussed issues of importance such as politics or world affairs (Brewer & Marquardt, 2007), most of which focused on their particular area of expertise. Other than the guests who were media figures, the inclusion of extramedia voices fulfills the third task, as does the contribution of discussion on important issues to the public sphere.

### Comedy

A discussion of the content of *The Daily Show* would be incomplete without consideration of the show's humor. Despite its place on Comedy Central, as opposed to a major network, the evidence found in this study supports the notion of *The Daily Show* as a news source because it fulfills the three main tasks of the news media given in *Normative Theories of the Media* (Christians et al., 2009). The show informs viewers on an issue, provides critique of the issue and includes extramedia sources for evidence, and extramedia voices for discussion. Along with this, humor clearly plays a large role in the show and, as a result, comedy can be seen in all content. For the purpose of this study, comedy was considered content that resulted in laughter from the audience, or from the researcher as a participant observer. However, there are two main types of comedy presented on the show, one that has no bearing on the informative nature of the show and one that supports the news content. Because these two types of comedy do not have distinct labels in existing research about *The Daily Show*, I have labeled them non-news comedy and critical comedy, respectively. Non-news comedy includes gag jokes and comedy with no aspirations toward informing. Critical comedy includes satire, parody,

sarcasm, and irony, which allow for critique and fulfill the second media task.

The use of non-news comedy in *The Daily Show* appears to be present only for the entertainment of the audience and viewers. However, it usually always relates in some way to the content of the story being covered, even if it does not add any additional information. At its most basic, non-news comedy involves simple name calling, such as referring to Vice President Joe Biden as “Joey Crest-Strips” (The Daily Show, 2013, January 7) in a discussion of the fiscal cliff, a joke that refers to Biden’s white, toothy smile and not to his work to negotiate a solution to the fiscal cliff. Another example can be found in a segment titled “The Silence of Clarence” (The Daily Show, 2013, January 15), a story about Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas speaking his first words in court in seven years. First, Stewart first gives brief information on the story, explaining how the justice has never been known to speak aloud in court. Stewart then jokes about this information, adding no additional detail and simply making fun of Thomas not speaking out before. The jokes include speculation about how Ursula the Sea Witch might have stolen Thomas’s voice or how Thomas must be trying to preserve his “beautiful baritone” (The Daily Show, 2013, January 15). The comedy does not serve to add any additional, factual information to the story or critique the issue; it is merely there to garner laughs from the viewers. This style of comedy can also help provide some momentary relief from intense discussion and help the keep the show’s content from becoming too serious. For example, in a discussion of gay rights on the segment “LGBTQ Watch: Shit just got real edition” (The Daily Show, 2012, December 13), a CNN clip explaining how the Supreme Court will hear arguments to repeal the Defense of Marriage Act and California’s Prop 8 is played. Before discussing this news with his



audience, Stewart first jokes about how the newscaster from the clip is squeezing in that news report before prom in a reference to the bow tie the newscaster is wearing. Jokes like this that focus on trivial matters such as appearance, clothing, or a person's voice give some light, comic relief amid more serious discussion of pertinent topics. The host also uses profanity in this way, dropping a swear word into an otherwise serious discussion, almost as a reminder that this is a comedy show and not a traditional news broadcast. In this way, he is "adding unexpected taboo [to provide] further lighthearted relief from the tension of serious discussion" (Torosyan, 2013, p. 193). These examples of non-news comedy primarily serve the purpose of humor and are the types of jokes expected from a comedy program.

The use of critical comedy deviates from the non-news comedy and is central to much of the critique on *The Daily Show*. This comedy is more substantial than its more basic counterpart and, although the non-news comedy is usually related to the topic covered in a story, critical comedy goes a step further and contributes something to that content. As the analysis of the critical role of *The Daily Show* has already demonstrated, much of the critique on the show is combined, or even based on, critical comedy. Sometimes this comedy can be a brief sarcastic or ironic statement, meant to highlight a certain point. For example, in the segment "Grand Theft Semi-Auto – Coming For Your Guns" (The Daily Show, 2013, January 17), a guest in a news clip claims "...if African Americans had been given the right to keep and bear arms from day one of the country's founding, perhaps slavery might not have been a chapter in our history" (The Daily Show, 2013, January 17). Stewart responds "Yes, if only the Africans brought to this country in chains had been allowed to have guns" (The Daily Show, 2013, January 17),

stating the last part with a shrug and a roll of his eyes, emphasizing how he thinks that argument makes no sense. Other times comedy is used to highlight the humor already present in situations. Often times this is more complex and requires an understanding of the issue in order to get the joke. For example, on the segment “A Beacon of Hope” (The Daily Show, 2012, December 5), a clip of a press conference that includes Sens. John McCain and John Kerry is played. In the clip, McCain introduces Kerry, calling him “Mr. Secretary.” McCain is joking about the fact that Kerry will likely soon become secretary of state instead of Susan Rice, whose appointment McCain vocally opposed. Kerry then takes the microphone and thanks McCain, addressing him as “Mr. President.” This is a joke about McCain’s failed presidential run against President Obama in 2008. For viewers who have previous knowledge of both these situations, the comments from McCain and Kerry themselves can provide humor. Stewart builds on this in his response, first looking incredibly shocked by Kerry’s joke and saying “ba-bam” to highlight the impact of it. He then says “Two things. One, solid, concise joke. Two, little disproportionate. McCain teased you about a job you might get. You hit him with the failure of his life” (The Daily Show, 2012, December 5). In this, Stewart somewhat explains the humor behind the clip and also adds in his own joke, criticizing Kerry for the harsh nature of the joke.

Critical comedy is present throughout the entirety of the show with comments critiquing politicians, media figures, and other powerful entities providing both humor and critique. For example, in the segment “O Holy Fight” (The Daily Show, 2012, December 12), the “War on Christmas” perpetuated by Fox News is discussed. After playing clips from Fox News stating that atheists are bullies and intolerant, Stewart

responds with a comment that provides comedy, but also critique of the claims and the people who are making them: “They’re being bullies. What are Christians supposed to do? Turn the other cheek? Oh no, wrong Jesus my friend” (The Daily Show, 2012, December 12). This response highlights the irony that those who are claiming there is a war on Christmas are Christians, but in making arguments against other groups that don’t celebrate Christmas, they are not adhering to Christian principles. His statements are humorous but also provide a valuable criticism of those who support the war on Christmas. “*The Daily Show* uses a set of well-established devices, understood by the regular viewer, to communicate both the joke and the more serious, substantive point of particular segments” (Williams & Carpini, 2011, p. 310). This is how Stewart presents comedy in most of the critiques on the show. The only times comedy is sometimes not present during a critique is when he directly calls a person or group out on their actions, holding them accountable. However this is much less common than comedy-based critique. For example, in the segment “Scapegoat Hunter – Gun Control” (The Daily Show, 2013, January 8), Stewart responds to a statement from an opponent of gun control who likens blaming guns for gun violence to blaming cars and car manufacturers for drunk-driving accidents:

Clip of Jesse Ventura (former governor of Minnesota): “Do we go to the Ford Motor Company and tell them stop making these automobiles because people get drunk and kill people with cars?”

Stewart: “No. But we do enact stricter blood alcohol limits, raise the drinking age, ramp up enforcement and penalties, and charge bartenders who serve drunks, and launch huge public awareness campaigns to stigmatize the dangerous behavior in

question, and we do all those things because it might just help bring drunk-driving rates down, I don't know, by two thirds in two decades." (The Daily Show, 2013, January 8)

Here Stewart makes no attempt to joke about Ventura's statement, even with a goal to critique it. Instead Stewart directly addresses the statement made by Ventura, showing why the comparison between gun control and drunk driving is incorrect. This style of critical analysis deviates from Stewart's more subtle style of comedic critique. In directly pointing out the issues with Ventura's statements, or any time Stewart engages in a direct, comedy-free critique, he puts himself at risk of criticism for being preachy rather than humorous. Even back in 2004 when Stewart appeared as a guest on the CNN show *Crossfire*, he was criticized by one of the hosts for not acting like an entertainer when he tried to engage the hosts in deliberative debate (Morreale, 2009). This is perhaps why Stewart favors the subtler critique he can achieve with critical comedy.

The use of comedy, whether non-news comedy or critical comedy, serves to provide entertainment for the audience and viewers. It also helps keep the show classified as a comedy rather than news and solidifies the place of *The Daily Show* outside the realm of mainstream news media. Stewart keeps *The Daily Show* from being considered news through his use of comedy, which would not be allowed on a news show. For example, the regular use of profanity present on the show would not be allowed on a traditional news program. In avoiding the label of news, the show is able to avoid the issue of objectivity expectations and present critique without those limitations. As this analysis has shown, the show can be considered to fulfill the tasks of the news media; comedy plays a role in this because it enables the show to operate independently from

typical constraints placed on journalism and, consequently, focus on the second media task to provide critique.

### Normative Tasks of the Media and Comedy in Practice

Although, through this analysis, the instances where each of the tasks of the news media are fulfilled on *The Daily Show* are separated out, more often the tasks are combined; stories often jump back and forth between observing, critique, and source material, with comedy present in some form through most of the content as well. For example, in the segment titled “LGBTQ Watch – Shit Just Got Real Edition” (The Daily Show, 2012, December 13), Stewart focuses immediately on the comedic critique, even while introducing a story about how the Supreme Court will examine the constitutionality of two laws that stop gay marriage. He begins: “As you know, marriage is under attack.” Given the critique that comes later and his tone of voice, it’s clear that Stewart does not agree that marriage is under attack so this sarcasm highlights that right away. He continues on to explain a crucial part of the story to follow by giving details about The Defense of Marriage Act.

Stewart: “The Defense of Marriage Act protected marriage from the scourge of no-fault divorce, economic volatility and family care issues that put so much strain on married couples ... I’m kidding. It was about gay people. It protected marriage from gay people.” (The Daily Show, 2012, December 13)

He begins the sentence sounding serious but then trails off and laughs at the last part, implying that he thinks it’s laughable to need to protect marriage from gay people. This section is humorous, as it educates viewers on the fact that DOMA is about gay marriage, and includes a critique of DOMA by highlighting other problems that are more

problematic for marriage than allowing gays to marry. This statement is followed by a CNN news clip in which the anchor states that the Supreme Court will hear arguments to overturn DOMA and California's Proposition 8. Stewart clarifies what this means to his audience – "The Supreme Court's gonna rule on gay marriage" – and describes its potential impact: "It's hard to overstate how big of a deal this could be for gay marriage." The clip and his first statement are merely informative and fulfill the first normative task to inform, whereas the impact statement begins to verge into the realm of analysis and tends toward the second normative task. Stewart follows his statements with a clip mashup of news anchors agreeing that this is a big deal, one even saying that it could be the "Roe vs. Wade of gay marriage," comparing these cases to the landmark case in abortion legality. Stewart responds: "So it will be settled, who argues about abortion any more? Remember those days. Today. This afternoon." His comment critiques the statements made in the clips and the larger political discourse on issues such as gay marriage and abortion.

In another example of blending informative and critical information, along with comedy, Stewart uses a metaphor to attempt to simplify the complex issues of the fiscal cliff, which aired in the segment "Debt Race 2012" (The Daily Show, 2013, January 7):

Stewart: "The fiscal cliff is the economic catastrophe that would occur with the simultaneous expiring of the Bush tax cuts and deep across the board spending cuts that Congress scheduled to kick in January 1st, so Congress could negotiate a fiscal solution by January 1st." (The Daily Show, 2013, January)

Here Stewart gives a typical news-type description of the fiscal cliff. This fulfills the first task to inform. He recognizes the fact that the fiscal cliff can be confusing to

many people and uses a metaphor to attempt to simplify the situation:

“You’re confused? Let me put it in terms of a 21st Century analogy that can crystalize the point a bit. Pretend America is a successful railroad company that’s fallen on some hard fiscal times. There’s an argument within the company about whether to make some changes to the dining car offerings, maybe cut fares for less wealthy riders. Or, on the other side of the argument, whether trains themselves are steel beasts that Stalin invented to kill freedom and Martha Washington.” (The Daily Show, 2013, January)

In this description, Stewart metaphorically describes the two sides of the fiscal cliff debate, the left who want to continue assistance programs vs. the right who want to cut spending on such programs. Viewers could be informed by this metaphor, although they would need some previous knowledge to interpret it. In this statement, Stewart uses a fake voice to describe the train metaphor, which provides comedy. His final statement provides humor, while also critiquing one side of the fiscal cliff debate and addressing the second media task. His reference to communism and the destruction of liberty references those on the right who oppose spending on welfare programs and taxation. This shows which side of the fiscal cliff Stewart agrees with, although he is able to avoid stating it directly because of the metaphorical nature of the statement. He concludes with a final explanation of the fiscal cliff, continuing the same metaphor:

“Since this is clearly a large gap to bridge in negotiations, they added, what we call in the movie business, a ticking clock, in the form of a damsel tied to the tracks. The damsel, in this case, representing our entire economy. Yes, we tied a woman to the tracks to force us to deal with the train.” (The Daily Show, 2013,

January)

In this way, Stewart is able to explain, in a metaphorical way, what the consequences of the fiscal cliff are as well as what led up to it, fulfilling the first task. He includes some comedy, which serves to lighten up the discussion of this serious issue. The comedy also provides critique and fulfills the second task by highlighting what Stewart sees as the ridiculous nature of the situation – that Congress set a self-imposed deadline, which, if they cannot agree on a fiscal solution by, risks damage to the U.S. economy. By using comedy to mask his critique, he is able to be more subtle and not directly confront those he disagrees with. He can show that he disagrees with conservatives on this issue without stating that directly. He can show that he doesn't think Congress should have to force themselves to compromise on their differences, without having to directly say it. The comedy allows him to appear as a comedian making fun of the situation, as opposed to a journalist who informs on and critiques the current political climate. In this way, he can operate outside the realm of traditional journalism and give a critical analysis of the situation, without worrying whether he adheres to standards of journalistic objectivity.

Considering the first research question, it is clear that *The Daily Show* fulfills all three normative tasks, strongly focusing on the second task with critique, commentary, and analysis forming the bulk of each issue's coverage. Comedy is present throughout all of the three tasks but does not detract from the informative and critical nature of the show. In fact, it often adds to the critique along with providing entertainment. *The Daily Show's* "...primary aim is humorous and playful but its secondary aim is serious and critical" (Vanderheiden, 2013, p. 267).



**RQ2: In what ways do topics covered predominantly on *The Daily Show* allow for viewers to be informed citizens in the U.S. democracy?**

With regard to the second research question, topics covered on *The Daily Show* lend further support to the notion of the program as news in that it does inform viewers on topics pertinent to their role as citizens in U.S. democracy. Coverage includes political affairs, international news, metacoverage of the press, and other non-politically focused domestic affairs.

Political Coverage

The most prevalent area covered on *The Daily Show* is politics, including coverage of timely political issues and references to a variety of political figures. This coverage allows viewers to learn about, albeit in a limited capacity, current political events, and about politicians that they could potentially vote for, allowing them partial education toward being an informed citizen.

The political issues covered on the program are most often based on current public interest, political action, and other timely factors. For this study, the prominent issues that arose included:

- Post-2012 election coverage: Focused on the impact of President Obama's reelection and who would fill cabinet positions during his second term.
- Fiscal cliff: Coverage referenced the history of the fiscal cliff along with potential outcomes, pertinent political players and deals proposed from each side.

- Benghazi investigation: Featured the impact on politicians and testimony in Benghazi hearings.
- Gun control debate: Brought to the forefront of public discussion after the Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting. Involves discussion on gun violence, gun legislation, and gun control.

Those topics listed above were featured in several episodes and each spanned more than one week. Their prominence and extensive coverage on the program shows that these are considered issues of importance and are ongoing political issues during the period of this study. The content covered here all helps to educate viewers about government and the current happenings in politics. Other timely political topics were covered in a less extensive manner, such as stories more specific to time periods, for example, the affair and resignation of CIA Director David Petraeus, which was covered in two episodes around the time the scandal came to light, or the president's inauguration, also covered in two episodes directly after the event. Again this content can help viewers stay informed on current political events. Some political topics focused on a particular area of the nation, such as Hurricane Sandy coverage, and discussion of voters deciding on a bridge to be built from Detroit to Canada. These stories do not necessarily help viewers be better-informed citizens on the particular issue that is covered, unless perhaps, they live in the affected area. However, the stories can help viewers understand the workings of democratic politics. For example, in the case of the Detroit-Canada bridge (The Daily Show, 2013, January 9), the story exposed how opposition to the building of the bridge came from a wealthy man who owned the only other bridge in the area, a wealthy man who also paid sizable sums of money to buy advertisements to convince

voters to be against the bridge. For Detroit residents, this would help educate them on the topic and help inform their vote on the issue. For those outside of the Detroit area, this could potentially help viewers consider where political advertisements originate from and what motivations could be in play in the situation. Other political topics covered on the show involved larger issues of public and political conversation such as marriage equality and immigration reform. Both of these topics were covered by *The Daily Show* during the research period with reference to current political discussion: Supreme Court cases to overturn the Defense of Marriage Act and California's Proposition 8 in the case of marriage equality and discussion of immigration reform in the context of republicans losing the Hispanic vote and reaching out to immigrant voters. All of these types of political stories in some way could help to educate voters on specific issues, political topics, or overarching principals of U.S. democracy and how it works.

Viewers of *The Daily Show* can potentially be informed not only on political issues but also on government officials as well. Politicians referenced often on the program include those who are at the forefront of the public eye such as President Barack Obama and members of his cabinet, and leaders in Congress such as House Majority Leader John Boehner. Politicians who are less prominent are also featured, usually based on particular events or issues that are at the forefront of public interest, along with non-governmental figures such as lobbyists or industry leaders, for the same reason. Given the time frame of this study, from November 2012 through January 2013, the political figures mentioned on the show correspond to particular events that occurred in that time span. For example, New Jersey Governor Chris Christie is referenced many times, but usually only in relation to Hurricane Sandy and relief efforts because his state was hit particularly

hard in that natural disaster; former presidential candidate Mitt Romney is mentioned but references focus on his recent loss in the 2012 election; and NRA CEO Wayne LaPierre appears many times but only in relation to the debate on gun violence and gun control. As with political topics, the potential impact of this on viewers varies. For politicians at the national level, audiences across the country can learn directly about their leaders' decisions and actions. For politicians whose focus is regional, a governor for example, the impact would vary. Those who live in the region can learn about the actions of their local politician and this may affect their vote or other aspects of civic engagement. Those who live outside of the region can also learn from this coverage by understanding the larger picture of politics in America and the workings of the democratic system.

#### World Affairs Coverage

Political coverage on *The Daily Show* is extensive and has the potential to inform viewers on a variety of topics pertinent to their role as citizens in U.S. democracy. Although political coverage in the research period focused mainly on United States politics, some coverage also considered global affairs. Coverage of world or international news varied during the period of time studied with various regions and countries reported on. Some coverage focused on specific countries, such as bad air quality in China, and other stories focused on broader international issues, such as pacts and disagreements between countries, what Jon Stewart calls a potential World War III. Some international stories covered issues that could be pertinent for U.S. or international audiences to consider, while others less so. For example, stories focused on Great Britain involved coverage of the British phone tapping scandals in the segment "The British Evasion" (The Daily Show, 2012, November 14), and of the royal baby in the segment "Keep Calm

and Carry to Term” (The Daily Show, 2012, December 6). The former could be helpful for U.S. audiences when considering that media outlets involved have ownership ties to U.S. media outlets, of which the show’s host made viewers aware. The latter has less bearing on U.S. audiences and the story is unlikely to help them understand issues that could help them be better-informed citizens. Aside from full stories covering international issues, references would also be made to other countries while covering a U.S. story. For example, in the segment “Tyler Perry’s House of Representatives” (The Daily Show, 2012, November 28), the British Houses of Parliament were used as a humorous example when talking about how people in political situations talk and respond to one another. This coverage does not necessarily inform on a pertinent international issue, but does allow for comparison between the U.S. and other political systems and could potentially allow viewers to question alternatives to American politics. This can help support the notion of *The Daily Show* as news, especially in the context of the second task, because it could encourage critical thought, and could help viewers become aware of the way democracy works, in the U.S. and other countries.

Overall, coverage of international affairs on *The Daily Show* is not extensive enough to give viewers an accurate and complete picture of what is going on around the world. Although it does help viewers to understand some aspects of international news, the focus on the show tends heavily toward national news.

### Metacoverage of the Press

Aside from political and international news, *The Daily Show* also devotes part of their coverage to metacoverage of the press, specifically critique of U.S. media outlets and figures. Fox News features prominently in this critique, although the other two main

cable news outlets, CNN and MSNBC, do not escape criticism. This critique usually takes the form of showing content aired by a media outlet, and then showing why the information is incorrect. For example, in the segment “Grill Hill – Benghazi Soundbites” (The Daily Show, 2013, January 24), Stewart shows how Fox News takes a clip of then Secretary of State Hillary Clinton’s testimony on the Benghazi attacks out of context in order to criticize her. First a Fox News clip is played in which Clinton angrily asks, “What difference, at this point, does it make?” during the hearings. Stewart acts like he is going along with the sentiment of Fox News, asking if Clinton is implying there’s no point in investigating what caused the attacks on the embassy in Benghazi. He shows more clips from Fox News responding to the statement made by Clinton, which imply she doesn’t care what happened and doesn’t care about finding out. Stewart embodies the same sentiment and responds to Clinton’s statement claiming that it does make a difference because we need to find out what happened and make sure it doesn’t happen again. The clip of Clinton then plays again, this time including her full statement: “What difference, at this point, does it make? It is our job to figure out what happened and do everything we can to prevent it from ever happening again” (The Daily Show, 2013, January 24). In this way, *The Daily Show* highlights the way Fox News took the statement out of context, airing a short sound bite to try to discredit Clinton. These kinds of critiques are important to expose inaccuracies in mainstream media and could be helpful to viewers, allowing them to question information they hear in the media and potentially giving them a model with which to critique media themselves. This critique would be difficult to achieve for other traditional news media outlets because a focus on objectivity would limit the extent to which they could make a value judgment and claim

that another outlet is presenting incorrect information. These kinds of critiques are important and fulfill the function of news media to act as a watchdog with respect to power, which should include media power.

*The Daily Show* also engages in critique of the news media by making fun of production techniques used by television news media, especially the degree to which such techniques are used to overdramatize issues and make them more appealing to viewers. *The Daily Show* critiques these techniques through the use of parody. For example, in the segment “Cliffpocalypsemaggedonacaust – Totally Solvable Budget Problem” (The Daily Show, 2012, December 4), the topic is introduced with the hyperbolic title of “Cliffpocalypsemaggedonacaust,” likening the fiscal cliff to an apocalypse, armageddon, or holocaust. This critiques the level to which traditional TV news outlets play up the drama in their news coverage of important events. From a production aspect, the Cliffpocalypsemaggedonacaust segment begins with a video introduction that splices together footage of people jumping off cliffs. The video footage is made to look dramatic with black and white or sepia tints, and is accompanied by increasingly loud and dramatic music. The video ends with an explosion as the title appears in bold graphics. This is a critique of mainstream news media, again pointing out how hyperbolic and overly dramatized the coverage on traditional networks can be. These media critiques are usually humorous and point out the lengths traditional media will go to in order to gain viewers and make the news seem interesting. This parody of production graphics combines with critiques of specific content to examine the failings of traditional news media, albeit in a comedic context.

### Domestic, Non-Political Affairs Coverage

Along with political, international, and media coverage, other stories covered on *The Daily Show* deviate from these three main categories, studied in previous research by Brewer & Marquardt (2007). The remaining stories focus on U.S. news and most have a small political element. However, the main topic of these stories is something other than politics or media. This category emerged during the course of the research and stories were originally grouped in the fourth category labeled “other.” After all the stories had been organized into one or more of the four categories, these stories were grouped into new topics. These additional topic areas include:

1. Natural Disasters – e.g., Hurricane Sandy coverage in “Cock Block You On the Hurricane” (The Daily Show, 2013, January 7).
2. Corrections/responses – e.g., Stewarts retaliation to a critique of his trillion-dollar coin coverage in “Paul Krugman and the Trillion Dollar Coin” (The Daily Show, 2013, January 14).
3. American ideals – e.g., Fox News claims traditional American values are declining in “It Was the Best of Times, It Was the Best of Times” (The Daily Show, 2012, November 15).
4. Holidays/events – e.g., Thanksgiving consumerism in “Turkey Day” (The Daily Show, 2012, November 26).
5. Religion – e.g., Stewart appeals to God to fix problems in “God’s Priorities” (The Daily Show, 2012, November 26).
6. Business – e.g., Hostess (Twinkie) goes bankrupt in “ The Employee’s Strike Back – Twinkie’s End” (The Daily Show, 2012, November 27).



7. Drugs – e.g., Medicinal marijuana in “Old Tokes Home” (The Daily Show, 2012, December 5).
8. Sports – e.g., Lance Armstrong admits to doping in “Mr. Fibb” (The Daily Show, 2013, January 15).
9. Entertainment – e.g., Beyoncé lip-syncs at inauguration in “Beyoncé Lip-Syncing Controversy” (The Daily Show, 2013, January 22).
10. Gay rights – e.g., Boy Scouts drop gay ban in “Gaywatch – Unprecedented Penetration Edition” (The Daily Show, 2013, January 29).

Clearly these topic areas do not have as many stories per category as the main three. However, this shows that *The Daily Show* does not simply focus on politics, as would a traditional political comedy program. The show does allow for other current events to gain airtime and viewers to potentially be educated on the topic or exposed to critique about it. A trend with most of these news categories is that they all pertain to a political or civic issue or political event; even though the stories are not focused on politics, they are loosely connected to current political events and conversation.

### **Beyond the Research Questions**

The main goal of this study was to consider the extent to which *The Daily Show* can be considered news, how it does this, and what that means for its viewers. Taking the information gained from both research questions, it appears *The Daily Show* can be considered news by normative standards, and can play a role in informing citizens of U.S. democracy. It fulfills all three normative tasks of the news media, with a clear focus on the second task of critique. It also devotes a large percentage of stories to political events, political/governmental figures, current events, and issues of public interest and

importance.

During this research, other indicators that help classify the show as news emerged, which lend further support to the notion of the show as a combination of a news and comedy program. Stewart makes seemingly flippant comments that refer to his content as news or himself as a journalist. For example, the segment “Spyfall” begins with Stewart saying “let’s get to the news” (The Daily Show, 2012, November 12), which implies that the content that follows is news. He also criticizes himself for not being a good journalist in that same segment. The segment discusses the affair between former CIA director David Petraeus and his biographer Paula Broadwell and the fact that Stewart interviewed Broadwell on his show about the biography. He chastises himself for not realizing that they were having an affair saying, “In case anyone out there though I might have actual journalists instincts, I give you a quick snippet of my interview” (The Daily Show, 2012, November 12), which he follows by plays clips of the interview, joking about all the innuendos he missed. Stewart ends by saying, “I’m the worst journalist in the world” (The Daily Show, 2012, November 12), implying that, while he may be the worst, he is indeed a journalist.

Another indicator that the show can be considered news is through the inclusion of corrections. As a comedy show, *The Daily Show* is under no obligation to make a correction if there is an error in content. However, the show does offer corrections on occasion, such as Stewart’s statements in the “Apology to Jason Sudeikis” (The Daily Show, 2012, November 14) segment. In this segment, Stewart referenced a discussion with Sudeikis from the previous night’s interview. During the discussion, Sudeikis had claimed that there could have been an outcome in the recent election where Mitt Romney

became president and Joe Biden became vice president. During the interview, Stewart claimed that this was not the case and that Sudeikis was wrong but, in further research after the interview, Stewart realized that Sudeikis was correct. Stewart set the record straight the next day's episode. In presenting a correction, the show adheres to news expectations that require a correction if incorrect information is presented, which lends further support to the notion of *The Daily Show* as news. However, it is important to note that *The Daily Show* does not always run corrections when incorrect information is presented (Williams & Carpini, 2011). For example, a case is documented from August 2008 when *The Daily Show* incorrectly characterized a Virginia Congressman as flaunting the high price of gas in front of his constituents by driving a Hummer at a July 4th parade. It turned out the congressman had not ridden in a Hummer and the story had been planted by the congressman's political opponent. No correction was ever issued by *The Daily Show* for this error (Williams & Carpini, 2011). This demonstrates that, although *The Daily Show* sometimes runs corrections, it is under no obligation to do so because it operates outside of the traditional news media and therefore outside of the norms for news. However, this critique of The Daily Show does not exclude the show from being considered news. Although the program does not have to conform to the same norms that traditional media does, this does not mean the show is any less accurate than any other news show. The norms that require accuracy and corrections from traditional media are an expected standard, but not one enforced legally. This means that traditional news media could also present incorrect information without running a correction, as *The Daily Show* did in the aforementioned example. The critique of accuracy is important to

consider when judging a source of news, but in this critique, *The Daily Show* is held to no less of a legal standard than traditional news media.

Overall, an analysis of the data collected on *The Daily Show* during this study empirically confirms the labeling of the program as news by myself and other scholars. Using criteria from *Normative Theories of the Media* (Christians et al., 2009) that describe the specific tasks news should fulfill shows how the program is able to cover the news. This coverage differs from traditional news media in the sense that it is more critical – something that operating outside the bounds of traditional news without objectivity expectations allows for – but it is news nonetheless.

## CHAPTER 4: DISCUSSION

The findings of this study show a distinct trend in the content of *The Daily Show* that distinguishes the program from traditional news media and from comedy shows with no informative goals. In examining the show based on normative criteria for news media (Christians, Glasser, McQuail, Nordenstreng, & White, 2009), the data demonstrates how the program fulfills the same tasks set down for journalism. Labeling *The Daily Show* as a news source requires the consideration of three main points. First, because the program is seen as comedy show, this places it outside the realm of traditional media, which enables a focus on critique rather than objectivity. Second, there are practical limitations on the show, as it exists in reality, outside of theory, and these should be considered when labeling the show as news. These limitations include selective exposure and gatekeeping constraints, along with a reliance on traditional news media for content. Third, an examination of how the show fulfills the tasks of news media shows that there is value in the news present in *The Daily Show*. It has the potential to be helpful to viewers in understanding current events, the political system, and their role in U.S. democracy. It has the potential to encourage critical analysis in viewers, giving them the tools to critically examine the world around them, and to consider information they hear. It critiques systems of political, economic, and media power, holding those in authority accountable for their words and actions. These three points are important to examine how *The Daily Show* is able to present its unique blend of comedy and news, what constraints

the program operates within, and why the news is of value to democracy.

### **Objectivity vs. Critique in News Media**

Through analysis of *The Daily Show* in this study, the program is shown to have a heavy focus on critique. Although there is informative content in the show, it serves mainly as a foundation for critical analysis. Such critique is necessary for journalism, as the second normative task demonstrates: “[t]he task of participating in public life as an independent actor by way of critical comment, advice, advocacy and expression of opinion” (Christians et al., 2009, p. 116). However, given the American media’s focus on objectivity (Schudson, 2011), it would seem that only the first normative task is required of news media: “the task of observing and informing, primarily as a service to the public” (Christians et al., 2009, p. 116). This study demonstrates the problematic nature of an expectation of objectivity in news 100 percent of the time. Much of the critical analysis present in *The Daily Show* requires taking a position on an issue or making a value judgment, which a focus on objectivity would not allow. This shows how critical analysis is often not possible if the ideal of objectivity, as it currently manifests in modern journalism, is followed all the time. In fact, as other scholars have shown (Bennett, Lawrence & Livingston, 2007; Smolkin, 2007), the fear that they could be considered unobjective or subjective is what keeps many journalists from pursuing critical analysis of the news. Moreover, the place of news organizations within a free market economy makes objectivity nearly impossible to achieve. News media are “institutions which, as business corporations, are dedicated first of all to economic survival” (Schudson, 1978, p. 3). Achieving objectivity is not possible while also considering what and how to cover news that will attract the most viewers.

The focus only on objectivity and not critique limits journalism into only reproducing a sometimes flawed view of reality without questioning it. Critics since the 1960s have contested the prevalence of objectivity as the sole guiding rule of good journalism (Schudson, 1978). A focus on objectivity above all else in journalism can actually be detrimental to the value of news. "... [O]bjectivity in journalism, regarded as an antidote to bias, came to be looked upon as the most insidious bias of all. For 'objective' reporting reproduced a vision of social reality which refused to examine the basic structures of power and privilege" (p. 160). This focus on objectivity can lead to a reliance only on official sources (Bennett, Lawrence & Livingston, 2007), which supports the existing power structure and makes it difficult to question systems of authority and power. It also excludes any interpretation of facts other than the one presented by a given news organization. "It should be apparent that the belief in objectivity in journalism, as in their professions, is not just a claim about what kind of knowledge is reliable. It is also a moral philosophy, a declaration of what kind of thinking one should engage in, in making moral decisions" (Schudson, 1978, p. 8). As *Normative Theories of the Media* (Christians et al., 2009) demonstrates, journalism needs to stray beyond just stating facts in order to adequately inform the public. A focus on critique along with objectivity is necessary in order to fulfill the normative tasks of the media (Christians et al., 2009) and the other journalistic functions. The focus primarily on objectivity stands in contrast to the tasks and functions of news media set out in normative theory, and in contrast to high level of critique present in the news content of *The Daily Show*.

Interestingly, it is because the news in *The Daily Show* is masked by a focus on comedy that the show is able to engage in critique. The program airs on Comedy Central

and not a major network channel or cable news channel. The show's host adds to the classification of the show as a comedy, referring to it as such and acting in a way that supports this. "Stewart portrays himself as a mere clown. When he himself is interviewed, he denies that *The Daily Show* is anything but comedy or at best, political and cultural satire" (Torosyan, 2013, p. 193). As Smolkin (2007) states, the mere fact that the show is considered comedy allows it to operate outside of usual news constraints. Criteria for news from *Normative Theories of the Media* indicate that news media should operate as "an independent actor" (Christians et al., 2009, p. 116), and its self-appointed title of fake-news allows *The Daily Show* to do that. Even in an official description of the show, the idea that the program does not adhere to traditional ideals of objectivity is mentioned:

If you're tired of the stodginess of the evening newscasts and you can't bear to sit through the spinmeisters and shills on the 24-hour cable news network, don't miss *The Daily Show* with Jon Stewart, the nightly half-hour series unburdened by objectivity, journalistic integrity or even accuracy. (The Daily Show, 2013)

This description demonstrates that even the producers of the show recognize the fact that *The Daily Show* operates outside of news constraints and objectivity requirements, which allows it to be different to the evening newscasts and 24-hour cable news shows. This study demonstrates that the difference comes in the form of critique. While news with a focus on objectivity can inform, letting go of objectivity can allow for critical analysis of news and power in society. However, this description also shows how, in operating outside of traditional news constraints, the show does not have to adhere to standards of journalistic integrity or accuracy either. News norms require factual and



accurate information is presented, and corrected if an error occurs. The lack of these norms with regard to *The Daily Show* is problematic when labeling the show news because not everything on the show is always accurate and errors are not always corrected (Williams & Carpini, 2011). However, these are non-enforced norms for traditional news media and not requirements, legal or otherwise. There is no set of professional guidelines or standards that can hold news media to this standard of presenting accurate information (Schudson, 1978). In this way, *The Daily Show* is no different than traditional news media. This does not mean *The Daily Show* is not without its own limitations though and, although it can be considered news by normative standards, these limitations are important to consider.

### **Limitations of *The Daily Show* as a News Source**

The main limitations to consider when examining *The Daily Show* as a source of news are those of selective exposure and gatekeeping constraints. However, it is important to keep in mind that these constraints can also apply to traditional news media as well and so do not necessarily diminish the ability of the program to be used as a source of news.

#### Selective Exposure

The issue of selective exposure is one that affects much of the media industry. Selective exposure is "...the purposeful selection of information that matches one's predispositions" (Stroud, 2007, p. 416). It concerns the idea that people chose to seek out and view media that fits with their view of the world. This is easier in the current media climate because media options are many and varied. "As media choices increase,

individuals have additional opportunities to expose themselves to content matching their viewpoints” (Stroud, 2007, p. 429). With regard to *The Daily Show*, selective exposure could mean that viewers of the show watch it because they already have similar views to those espoused on the show. Moreover, it could mean that viewers watch the show because they are already informed on the issues the show covers, and want to view the critique and/or comedy that the show adds to the discussion.

This could be a potential limitation when considering the newsworthiness of *The Daily Show* because, if viewers are tuning in to hear about things they already know, then the show will not inform them on anything new and will have little effect. Research on this topic with regard to the program is limited and so there is no evidence to suggest that selective exposure does or does not occur with regard to *The Daily Show*. However, “... although selective exposure does occur, it does not mean that the media do not have an effect” (Stroud, 2007, p. 428). So even if selective exposure were to occur with viewers of *The Daily Show*, it is possible that they would still be affected by the content in some way.

As the analysis of the first news media task, to inform, shows, *The Daily Show* covers a variety of topics, which can be informative to viewers when considering their role in democracy. For example, they could learn about a national politician that they can vote for, a policy that will affect their lives, or the inner workings of the political process. Despite the potential existence of selective exposure with regard to the program, it is likely that viewers can still be informed from some content on the show. Considering the level to which viewers are informed is important given that some viewers, mostly young people, use the show as a news source (Pew Research, September 2012), despite it being

a self-described “fake-news” show. This means that the content of the show carries potential implications for the level to which those viewers are informed about important aspects of contemporary life. Even if they are selecting to watch *The Daily Show* because it adheres to their personal views, they still consider it a news source and so they could consider themselves to be informed by at least some of the content.

### Gatekeeping

Another limitation that can affect the extent to which *The Daily Show* is newsworthy is the extent to which gatekeeping plays a role in the production of the show. “Gatekeeping is the process of culling and crafting countless bits of information into the limited number of message that reach people each day, and it is the center of the media’s role in modern public life” (Shoemaker & Vos, 2009, p. 1). In the context of *The Daily Show*, gatekeeping refers to the content that makes it into each 22-minute show four nights per week, the choices that allow that content to be deemed worthy for the show, and the decision to not cover other issues. This also concerns the way *The Daily Show* fulfills the theoretical ideas about the tasks of news media from *Normative Theories of the Media* in practice. The show is limited by time constraints and so the amount of content must be limited to fit that. The show also does not exist in a vacuum and there are many considerations that are likely taken into account when making content choices. Although *The Daily Show* does fulfill the three tasks of the news media, content choices are not just based on an idealistic notion of informing the public and critiquing power. Economic considerations and pressure from the show’s network to keep ratings up are also considerations when determining content. Producers must keep ratings up in order to make money and for the show to continue to be produced. If ratings were to drop

significantly, then Comedy Central, the network that airs *The Daily Show*, and its parent company Viacom could consider replacing it with a program that would bring in better ratings. For the network, high ratings are fundamental to generating income, which is the primary goal of any network. Producers must, therefore, consider what content will appeal to viewers to keep ratings up. In a news context, this means picking content that is newsworthy, and in a comedy context, it means picking content that is funny; both involve the consideration of what will appeal to viewers. The way in which content is presented can also play a role because "...gatekeeping involves not only the selection and rejection of items, but also the process of changing them in ways to make them more appealing" (Shoemaker & Vos, 2009, p.12). For this reason, the way a news issue is presented on the show may only focus on the more humorous aspects and disregard more boring details in order to appeal to viewers.

In spite of the fact that gatekeeping clearly exists in *The Daily Show*, the findings of this study attest to the fact that some of these, specifically the economical concerns, are not the only factor in considering content. Many of the topics covered on the show can be helpful to viewers and can be informative to them when considering their role in democracy. Moreover, the critical content involves the host taking a side and making a value judgment. If gaining viewers were the only concern, then easier, less controversial subjects could be covered. This demonstrates that gaining viewers may not be the only concern. The same also pertains to the comedy on the show. If making the audience laugh were the only concern, then there would be no need for the critical comedy that requires more effort and information to understand and find humorous. The non-news comedy is simpler and relies less on context to understand. If ratings were the only concern, this

type of comedy could be more prevalent because it requires less existing knowledge to understand and so more people might relate to it. This shows that, although traditional gatekeeping forces play a role in the content that airs on *The Daily Show*, there are other factors that likely influence content choices, too.

### Reliance on Traditional News Media

Another limitation somewhat unique to *The Daily Show* is the program's reliance on the traditional news media that it critiques. As the data from this study has shown, much of *The Daily Show*'s content, whether informative or critical, relies on clips taken from traditional news outlets such as CNN, Fox News, and MSNBC. This means that there is limited original reporting on the show. In fact, original reporting only occurs in a few stories where the correspondents research and report on a particular issue. This means that *The Daily Show* relies on other news outlets in order to provide much of the coverage it presents on the show. This reliance makes sense for a program like *The Daily Show* that has a focus on critique over information. Moreover, the reliance on clips often stems from a critique of the traditional news outlets that *The Daily Show* relies on. However, this reliance on traditional outlets is still problematic for *The Daily Show* because original reporting is a requirement of news. Also, if those clips were to become unavailable, then the program would have to be completely redesigned to deal with the significant change. As mentioned though, *The Daily Show* does have some original reporting and, with the program's focus on critique, it is not surprising that content relies on traditional news media. The inclusion of clips from other news outlets is not completely unique to *The Daily Show*; it is the amount of clips used on the show and its heavy reliance on them that can be considered limiting for the show when considering it

to be a source of news.

### Alleviating the Limitations

Although *The Daily Show* can be considered news and does inform on pertinent topics, these limitations of the show require pause when considering the use of the show as a news source. Using it as a sole news source could be problematic. It is doubtful that, even with much of the show dedicated to news content, that it is enough to adequately educate constituents given the limited time; four 22-minute shows per week is unlikely to give enough time to cover every important issue. *The Daily Show* informs on certain issues, as this study and an earlier study by Brewer and Marquardt (2007) can attest to, but those issues will only form part of a varied news diet. For these reasons, *The Daily Show* could be a program from which some news information and critique could be gained, but should be consumed in conjunction with news media from other sources. In combining *The Daily Show* with other news sources, the potential effects of selective exposure would be lessened because the variety of news is more likely to expose the viewer to information they do not already know or agree with. The combination of *The Daily Show* with other news sources could also lessen the limitations from gatekeeping as different stories would make it through the gates of different news program, so the viewers would be exposed to a larger variety of news. These limitations of selective exposure and gatekeeping can apply to all news, not just *The Daily Show*, so having a varied news diet is important for all news consumers, whether *The Daily Show* is part of that diet or not.

## Implications

This study concludes that *The Daily Show* can be considered news because it fulfills the news media tasks set out in *Normative Theories of the Media* (Christians et al., 2009). This study adapted the tasks of the news media from *Normative Theories of the Media* (Christians et al., 2009) to create a framework from which to determine whether or not, and the extent to which, media content can be considered news. But, fulfilling the criteria alone does not make a news program. The criteria used to judge news through the framework of these tasks is broad and, although *The Daily Show* fulfills these tasks as this research has shown, that is not to say that other content could also potentially fulfill the tasks, whether it is news or not. A limitation of the news media tasks is their broad nature and Christians et al. (2009) do not include specific details as to how these tasks should be best fulfilled. Further investigation into the extent to which the three news media tasks should be fulfilled and the weight that should be placed on each task could help alleviate this limitation and allow for a more detailed framework from which to consider the news value of media content.

The framework developed in this study, and the manner in which *The Daily Show* fulfills the tasks, has shown how, with a focus on objectivity, traditional news media is limited to focusing mainly on the first task of informing, to the detriment of critique. However, the content of *The Daily Show* demonstrates how news content can combine objective facts with critique in order to inform while also questioning systems of power. The program provides valuable critique that traditional news media often do not because of the latter's focus on objectivity. *The Daily Show* provides a model for traditional media for how to include some critique in reporting. This study can demonstrate to

journalists how and why critique is an important, valuable task of the news media, and not one that contradicts the norm of objectivity. Traditional news media can use this framework to consider their own content, and to consider the extent to which it fulfills the tasks of the news media. Scholars studying journalism and news in the communication field can also utilize the findings of this study to consider the way in which *The Daily Show* combines critique and information in a way that does not have to violate norms of objectivity. This study asks news media scholars to consider the framework developed from *Normative Theories of the Media* (Christians et al., 2009) to evaluate new sources and to consider the way that news norms of objectivity unnecessarily hampering critique and, therefore, limit the fulfillment of all three tasks. *The Daily Show* demonstrates how all three news media tasks can be fulfilled. The program, and the way it fulfills the three tasks, shows that it is possible for a media source to combine critique and objective facts.

Journalists, along with communication scholars studying journalism, should consider the value of the news in content and the way it fulfills the tasks of the news media. News value can be defined in how content is helpful to viewers. Content should allow viewers to gain information and knowledge of current events, both political and non-political. It should be a tool to help viewers be educated citizens, and, in the case of the U.S., understand the democratic system that they can be a part of. The data from this study shows that topics covered in *The Daily Show* can help in this manner and so lend further support to the notion of *The Daily Show* as news, as well as comedy. News should also allow viewers to critically examine the world around them, to consider information they hear. News should act as a watchdog, exposing government and corporate problems, inadequacies and misuse of power. In its emphasis on critique, which is shown in the data



from this study, *The Daily Show* is able to do this. This demonstrates how the program does not simply fulfill the news tasks; it embodies them with content consistently focused on one of the three. Despite *The Daily Show* being widely considered a comedy show, it can be considered news as well and, in doing so, it demonstrates how content can fulfill all the tasks of the news media, not just the first.

### **Limitations and Further Research**

As with any study, this research is not without limitations. The data gained in this study is restricted to 32 episodes and so may not be representative of the show as a whole. It also relies on only one researcher, which means all interpretations are from a single viewpoint only. Future research that looks at a larger span of episodes and utilizes several researchers to interpret the media content would be beneficial in validating the findings of this study.

Further research could also be done to extend and corroborate the findings of this study. This research excluded the interview portion of *The Daily Show* from the study. It appears as though the third media task would be most prominent in this excluded section however, and so a study of the interviews to see the extent to which and the manner in which they fulfill the news tasks could add to this research. The use of the news media tasks laid out in *Normative Theories of the Media* could also be applied to other sources of news to test how well the tasks can help define and identify news. A comparison of how these tasks are fulfilled in both traditional news media and more ambiguous news sources would be interesting.

## CONCLUSION

This study looks at the concept of journalism as it relates to democracy and an informed citizenry, looking specifically at an example of news that falls outside the realm of traditional news media. It is clear that a quality news media is central to democracy in that it helps citizens be aware of information outside of their sphere of knowledge and direct experience. The knowledge of citizens is important for democracy because in order to vote and otherwise engage in their role of democratic citizens, people must have knowledge of the workings of government, politics, and economic interests. The data from this study demonstrates that *The Daily Show* presents information that could educate viewers on some pertinent issues relevant to their participation in democracy. Moreover, the level of critical thought the show potentially instigates may allow viewers to question politics, society, and their role within the U.S. power structure.

According to the Hutchins's Commission, government, the press, and the public are all responsible for the quality of news (Hutchins, 1947). As this study has explained, news media play a vital role in informing the public and, in order to have an engaged and informed citizenry, we need a well-functioning news media (Schudson, 2011). But there is also personal responsibility on the part of the citizen to have a varied diet of news and to question the legitimacy of that news, in order to be an adequately informed participant in a democratic system. While *The Daily Show* can give viewers some of the information they need to be an informed citizen, it can also potentially help viewers consider their

sources of news and be an active, critical citizen in the U.S. democratic system. *The Daily Show* can be one component of that varied news diet and can give viewers the tools to critically evaluate other news that make up the rest of their news diet. With a focus on criticality and not objectivity, *The Daily Show* can be considered a source of news; one that combines critical comedy and analysis to create an alternative to mainstream, traditional news media.

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## APPENDIX

**Sample Field Notes****TDS Episode 32**

Date: January 31, 2013

Segments:

- Weapons of Mass Discussion

Begin in congress, sought to take advantage of the small window between mass killings to sneak in a discussion on possible gun control. First, quick look at the philosophy of not enacting any gun regulations

C-Span clip: Wayne LaPierre, founding fathers put it in the constitution after King George and wanted to make sure never had to live again under tyranny

JS: Or democratic decisions they don't agree with, that's what the guns are for, protect against fascist tyranny, not present now but could happen against all systems of democratic checks and balances, what else?

C-Span: LaPierre, people fear being abandoned by their government

JS: Wait, what? fascist ... wait, I'm lost, pretends to be confused

C-Span: Lindsey Graham, find yourself in a lawless environment after a natural disaster or riot, people marauding, looting robbing raping

JS: Close your eyes, Graham does a good impression, southern accent about mauraunders, joke

### Sample Field Notes

May be a marauding gang but you have to admire their ambition, joke but also comments on the drama of what Graham said. That;s a marauding gang that's going places.

JS: So we need guns to protect us from a government on the verge of both fascism and impotence, hasn't gone either way but it could

But no ones suggested disarming the populace, just suggested banning military style weapons like we already do with tanks etc. whats the problem

C-Span: Pistol grip would make weapons banned

JS: Joke about it being a picture of a gun, but fair point there are some arbitrary aspects, maybe someone could help shape it, maybe change it about magazine sizes

Clip: Some say you don't need larger magazine sizes than to shoot a deer but unlike a deer, an intruder shoots back

JS: Joke about movie Bambo (bambi/rambo)

Standard and redundant start to this discussion, any new arguments

C-Span clip: Woman saying how AR15 is a woman's weapon of choice

JS: Looks surprised, worse JDate profile entry ever, joke

Gun activist woman has a story to tell about why ladies need assault weapons

C-Span: Woman home alone with a baby, attackers intruded and she shot one, the other fled

JS: Eating popcorn. Powerful, anecdotal but powerful, goes against what most research says that you're more likely to be hurt with a gun in the house than to use it against an assailant

### Sample Field Notes

Clip: Democrat says the woman used a shotgun that would not be banned, woman says she doesn't remember the type of weapon used

JS: Looks around shocked, you don't remember? Told a compelling story and you don't remember the only detail relevant to the hearing, the gun. Non banned weapon used, doesn't that subvert your case

Clip: women get peace of mind from holding a big gun against 3, 4, 5 intruders with her screaming children, needs a scary gun to ward off hardened, violent criminals

JS: When did it become 3, 4, 5 Jesus where does she live, the Alamo?

- Weapons of Mass Discussion - Universal Background Checks

Move away from controversial proposals, to NRA proposals, mainstream background checks

Clip: Senator, have some background checks it's just a question of how much you do it, do you do it for a family swapping guns on a Sunday?

JS: Not going to pass judgement on a culture that doesn't make sense, family gun swap day on Sunday. Any other arguments

Clip: LaPierre, background checks will never be universal because criminals will never submit to them

JS: Great idea, let's pass laws that only criminals will immediately obey, joke impressions, murders will bypass do not kill laws

Don't know who to trust, main lobbyist for gun manufacturers, let's ask someone else, joke about the wire

Clip: Baltimore police chief - background checks work

### Sample Field Notes

JS: Says you in a childish voice, puts “police chief” in air quotes to imply he is less credible in a sarcastic way

Clip: proof of it stopping guns being acquired by criminals

JS: Two sides, let’s teach the controversy, fake smile

If background checks will work, any other reason not to do them?

Clip: LaPierre, don’t think people want every gun sale to be under the thumb of the federal government

JS: Except literally almost all of them do

Text clip: 93% of Americans and 85% living in a household with a member of the NRA

In fact, I know a guy who makes a good case for universal background checks

C-Span clip from 1999 - LaPierre advocating for universal background checks

JS: Used to be supported by 100% of Waynes LaPierre, also the last time LaPierre said, we think it’s reasonable and followed it up with something actually reasonable.

- Skeet Fighter

Obama failing to gain credibility with gun owners

Clip: Obama asked in interview for New Republic if he’d ever shot a gun, yes at Camp

David, goes skeet shooting all the time

JS: All the time, can barely hear yourself think over shooting of skeet, sarcastic like he doesn't really believe it’s that frequent

First problem is that Obama is trying to reach gun owners through pages of the New Republic

Joke about how off it is, Ms. magazine and Nascar



### Sample Field Notes

Not going to work, nothing will, get this all the time

Fox clip mashup, one CNN: Don't believe it, need to prove it

JS: Why won't he release a picture (half the country is afraid of him and want a pic holding a gun?) not just fox either

Clip: CNN asking questions about a photo and why we haven't heard about it before

JS: Pretends to be the responder saying that it's a hoax to pretend to support gun rights then subvert the second amendment and abolish liberty and start socialist paradise

Since when did the ability to fire a weapon become a badge of honor, all you need is a finger, equates it to scratching your ear

Point is, why try? Nothing will get them to believe you, Joke about Dr. Seuss book "Oh the people who hate you"