

I AMUSING OURSELVES TO DEATH WITH TELEVISION NEWS:

JON STEWART, NEIL POSTMAN, AND THE
HUXLEYAN WARNING

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While *The Daily Show* is undoubtedly funny, it also provides an intriguing study of our contemporary media environment. Indeed, hidden within many of Jon Stewart's funniest jokes are implicit critiques of the way television tends to report its news and host its public discussions of important issues. For instance, Stewart's opening rundown of the news as television covers it doesn't merely ridicule the day's major players and events, but also makes fun of the way television gathers and presents the news. In this way, over-the-top graphics and music packages, attractive but superficial "Senior Correspondents," and all the other trappings of television newscasts become fodder for *The Daily Show's* writing staff. More than just a "fake news" program, *The Daily Show* offers a rare brand of humor that requires its audience to recognize a deeper, more philosophical criticism of contemporary television news.

From time to time, Stewart takes these implicit critiques of contemporary media and makes them explicit. Such was the case during his October 2004 appearance on CNN's since-cancelled *Crossfire*, when Stewart begged his hosts to "stop hurting America" with their substitution of entertaining pseudo-journalism for serious reporting and debate. Through this bold format-breaking effort, Stewart highlighted the difference between thoughtful discussion and the theater of today's rapid television punditry. As we will see, Stewart's

analysis of the present state of mass communication echoes that of the celebrated New York University media theorist Neil Postman, whose discerning insights ground some of Stewart's sharpest comic bits.

Amusing Ourselves to Death

Neil Postman's *Amusing Ourselves to Death* is a book about the many forms of human communication and how those forms influence the messages that we communicate to one another. Postman acknowledges a significant intellectual debt here to Marshall McLuhan, and sees his own thesis as something of a revised version of McLuhan's famous pronouncement that "the medium is the message."¹ However, Postman extends McLuhan's ideas in ways that are both distinctive and significant.

For example, consider Postman's discussion of smoke signals. While the medium of smoke might be an effective way to communicate relatively simple messages over intermediate distances, many other types of messages can't be transmitted this way. Philosophical arguments, for instance, would be especially difficult to conduct with smoke signals because, as Postman puts it: "Puffs of smoke are insufficiently complex to express ideas on the nature of existence [for other philosophical concepts], and even if they were not, a Cherokee philosopher would run short of either wood or blankets long before he reached his second axiom. You cannot use smoke to do philosophy. Its form excludes the content."² So, the medium of smoke has a significant influence on the kind of content it can be used to communicate. At a minimum, smoke signaling restricts both the complexity and the duration of the messages it carries. Likewise, we shall see that *The Daily Show's* comedy often reflects the restrictions placed by our contemporary electronic media (including television) upon their content.

The Huxleyan Warning

Now, as Postman sees it, *all* media influence their content, and in a multitude of different ways. He writes: "[Mine] is an argument that

fixes its attention on the forms of human conversation, and postulates that how we are obliged to conduct such conversations will have the strongest possible influence on what ideas we can conveniently express" (p. 6). This goes not only for smoke signals, but also for speech and written language, and even for the electronic media that are so important in our contemporary lives.

Of particular interest here is the ubiquitous medium of television, which Postman sees as a historic extension of such earlier media as the telegraph, photography, radio, and film.³ How does television influence its content, according to Postman? His theory is complex, but in essence it maintains that television's inherent "bias" implies a tendency to render its content — even its most important news reports, political and religious discussions, and educational lessons — more *entertaining* than they would be otherwise, and consequently less serious, less rational, less relevant, and less coherent as well (pp. 67–80, 85–98).

The fact that television provides entertainment isn't, in and of itself, a problem for Postman. He warns, however, that dire consequences can befall a culture in which the most important public discourse, conducted via television, becomes little more than irrational, irrelevant, and incoherent entertainment. Again, we shall see that this is a point often suggested by *The Daily Show's* biting satire. In a healthy democracy, the open discussion of important issues must be serious, rational, and coherent. But such discussion is often time-consuming and unpleasant, and thus incompatible with television's drive to entertain. So, it's hardly surprising to see television serving up important news analyses in sound bites surrounded by irrelevant graphics and video footage, or substituting half-minute ad spots for substantial political debates. On television, thoughtful conversations about serious issues are reserved for only the lowest-rated niche programs. Just as ventriloquism and mime don't play well on radio, "thinking does not play well on television" (p. 90).⁴ Instead, television serves as a hospitable home for the sort of "gut"-based discourse celebrated by Stephen Colbert.⁵

When we grow comfortable with the substitution of televised entertainment for serious public discourse, we begin the process of (to use Postman's words) "amusing ourselves to death." As Postman explains, this form of cultural corrosion is like that described in Aldous Huxley's classic novel *Brave New World*, in which the citizenry is

comfortably and willingly distracted by the pleasures of *soma*, Centrifugal Bumble-puppy, and the feelies (pp. vii-viii, 155-6).

Postman and Television News

Postman and the writing staff of *The Daily Show* seem to agree that television's presentation of news tends to degrade its content in significant ways. Consider Postman's explanation of the ironic title of his chapter on television news, "Now . . . This:" "There is no murder so brutal, no earthquake so devastating, no political blunder so costly — for that matter, no ball score so tantalizing or weather report so threatening — that it cannot be erased from our minds by a newscaster saying 'Now . . . this'" (p. 99). Thus, Postman maintains that the use of "Now . . . this" is a tacit admission of the incoherence of television news, and "a compact metaphor for the discontinuities in so much that passes for public discourse in present-day America" (p. 99).

Of course, Postman believes that television does more to the news than disrupt its coherence. Revisiting his general thesis about how television influences its content, Postman also claims that televised news is irrational, irrelevant, and trivial. As he explains, television presents us "not only with fragmented news but news without context, without consequences, without value, and therefore without essential seriousness; that is to say, news as pure entertainment" (p. 100). So, even weighty news subjects can become entertaining under the influence of television, as the typical American newscast showcases a company of attractive reporters skipping from dramatic local stories to dramatic international stories, to celebrity gossip, to weather forecasts, to sports scores, to a closing story about babies or puppies or kittens. Commercials are scattered throughout. Music, graphics, and captivating video footage add touches of theater to the program. Quick transitions from one segment to the next ensure that audience members don't become bored — or troubled — for long.⁶ Instead of useful and important information, then, viewers are treated to the impotent but entertaining trivia that Postman calls "disinformation," which isn't necessarily false but *misleading*, creating the *illusion of knowing* and undermining one's motivation to learn

more (p. 107). Consequently, Postman writes, "Americans are the best entertained and quite likely the least well-informed people in the Western world" (p. 106).

The Daily Show and Television News

Now, as far as I know, the writing staff of *The Daily Show* doesn't publicly acknowledge Postman's influence. It's even possible that they've never heard of Postman. Nonetheless, it's clear that these general ideas about television news, whatever their sources, can help us to see the significance of some of the program's wittiest and most inspired jokes. *The Daily Show* is often described as a "fake news" program, but in fact, it's more than that. Much of its humor rests on Postman-like insights that highlight the peculiar ways in which the medium of television itself influences the news that it conveys.

For example, most episodes of *The Daily Show* begin with Stewart's rundown of the day's headlines as reported by the major television news programs. A comedy show that only does "fake news" might simply build jokes around the content of these headlines, or perhaps report fictional news stories in a humorous way. On *The Daily Show*, though, the way in which television seems destined to render its news as entertainment often serves as the basis for these opening segments. In recent years Stewart and company have often joked about the major networks' coverage of natural disasters. In many of these cases they simply replay absurd clips of television reporters standing outside during hurricanes, sitting in cars with giant thermometers during heat waves, or paddling canoes through inch-deep "flooded" city streets. Other segments mock the way hordes of television reporters cover celebrity weddings, arrests, and criminal trials. Segments like "International Pamphlet" and "The Less You Know" contain their own jokes but also poke fun at the shallowness of typical television news coverage. Exchanges between Stewart and his Senior Correspondents parody their good-looking but sometimes ill-informed network counterparts.⁷ Even *The Daily Show's* clever graphics packages ("Mess O' Potamia," "Crises in Isratghyian-anag," and so on) offer satirical imitations of the logos, diagrams, and pictorial illustrations so essential to today's television newscasts.

Moreover, Stewart himself has attacked the way television is compelled to report "breaking news" with what at times seems to be inadequate or uncorroborated information, mere speculation, and no editing whatsoever; shortly after the Washington, DC-area sniper shootings of 2002, he joked with CNN's Howard Kurtz: "By watching the 24-hour news networks, I learned that the sniper was an olive-skinned, white-black male - men - with ties to Son of Sam, Al Qaeda, and was a military kid, playing video games, white, 17, maybe 40."⁸ In these kinds of segments, then, *The Daily Show* is clearly doing more than just "fake news." It's also offering deep satire that relies on its audience's appreciation of the substance of Postman's thesis, that television has a significant and sometimes adverse influence on the news content it reports.

At this point, one might be tempted to suggest that *The Daily Show* simply reproduces the unfortunate transformation of reporting into entertainment, as if *The Daily Show* were itself a source of news for its audience members. For instance, Bill O'Reilly (host of the Fox News program *The O'Reilly Factor*) once famously dubbed viewers of *The Daily Show* "stoned slackers" who "get their news from Jon Stewart."⁹ However, at least one prominent study by the Annenberg Public Policy Center found that viewers of *The Daily Show* were better informed about the positions and backgrounds of candidates in the 2004 US Presidential campaign than most others. Indeed, it's difficult to see how the deepest *Daily Show* jokes could be appreciated by an audience unaware of the relevant social, political, and other newsworthy issues. As Annenberg analyst Dannagal Goldthwaite Young put it in a press release announcing the Center's Election Survey results, "*The Daily Show* assumes a fairly high level of political knowledge on the part of its audience."¹⁰

Conversation and *Crossfire*

Postman's ideas about television also illuminate Stewart's infamous October 15, 2004 appearance on CNN's *Crossfire*. First aired in 1982, *Crossfire* was a long-running staple of CNN's lineup that featured curt discussion by hosts and guests supposedly representing both left-wing and right-wing positions on controversial political issues.

Co-hosting for Stewart's visit were the unsuspecting Paul Begala and Tucker Carlson, neither of whom seemed prepared for what would become an extraordinary exchange. Instead of simply participating in a typical *Crossfire*-style debate (described by more than one observer as a "shoutfest"), Stewart quickly launched into a Postman-like criticism of the rapid and partisan punditry that passes for serious discussion on programs like *Crossfire*.

In fact, this theme is one that Stewart had explored before his *Crossfire* appearance. The recurring *Daily Show* segment "Great Moments in Punditry as Read by Children" draws laughs simply by having children read from transcripts of shows like *Crossfire*. Moreover, during an interview with Bill Moyers, Stewart claimed that both *Crossfire* and its MSNBC counterpart *Hardball* were "equally dispiriting" in the way their formats degrade political discourse.¹¹ And in his interview with CNN's Howard Kurtz, Stewart foreshadowed his *Crossfire* appearance by chiding the news network for offering entertainers instead of "real journalists" and pleaded, "You're the news . . . People need you. Help us. Help us."¹²

On the *Crossfire* set, though, Stewart offered his most sustained attack against the shallow conversational style of television. Before either Begala or Carlson could catch his balance, Stewart was already begging them to "stop, stop, stop, stop hurting America" with their "partisan hackery," which he claimed serves only politicians and corporations and does nothing to help ordinary citizens make informed decisions.¹³ "We need help from the media," Stewart said, "and they're hurting us." Carlson tried to counter Stewart's charges with the allegation that Stewart himself had been too lenient during the *Daily Show* appearance of 2004 Presidential candidate John Kerry. Stewart replied that there was a fundamental difference between journalism and comedy, snapping back, "I didn't realize that . . . the news organizations look to Comedy Central for their cues on integrity." And when Begala tried to defend the *Crossfire* format by claiming that it was a "debate show," Stewart pointed to Carlson's trademark bow tie as evidence that *Crossfire* is "doing theater, when you should be doing debate." Finally, Stewart charged, "You have a responsibility to the public discourse, and you fail miserably." Because of such remarks, Stewart's *Crossfire* appearance produced a rare opportunity for reflecting about the effects of television on public discourse. Indeed, the incident sparked much additional discussion in,

for example, the *New York Times*, *Newsweek*, and countless electronic media outlets.

Once again, we can see that these are the sorts of criticisms developed by Postman in *Amusing Ourselves to Death*. His deepest discussion of such issues concerns ABC's controversial 1983 broadcast of the film *The Day After*, which depicts the bleak effects of a nuclear strike on the American Midwest. Given the film's grave subject matter, ABC decided to follow it with a roundtable discussion moderated by Ted Koppel and featuring such notable figures as Henry Kissinger, Elie Wiesel, Carl Sagan, and William F. Buckley.¹⁴ With a serious theme and a guest list of unquestionable distinction, Koppel proceeded to march his cast through a fragmented 80 minutes of "conversation" in which the participants rarely engaged one another on points of substance. Instead, they used their camera time to push whatever points they had decided to make beforehand, without regard to the contributions of their fellow participants. Postman writes:

Each of the six men was given approximately five minutes to say something about the subject. There was, however, no agreement on exactly what the subject was, and no one felt obliged to respond to anything anyone else had said. In fact, it would have been difficult to do so, since the participants were called upon seriatim, as if they were finalists in a beauty contest. (p. 89)

To put it another way, this wasn't a genuine discussion, but a *pseudo-discussion* warped by television's drive to entertain. "There were no arguments or counterarguments, no scrutiny of assumptions, no explanations, no elaborations, no definitions" (p. 90), and yet each of these elements is essential to genuine and thoughtful dialogue.

So, how did ABC go wrong? According to Postman, the root problem remains that thoughtful conversation just isn't entertaining, and thus plays poorly on television. Televised discussions about even the most serious of subjects tend to be rendered in forms that are more amusing or dramatic than reflective. On this both Postman and the writing staff of *The Daily Show* agree.¹⁵ Moreover, CNN President Jonathan Klein cited Stewart's critique when he announced the cancellation of *Crossfire* in January 2005. In an interview with the *Washington Post*, Klein said, "I think [Stewart] made a good point

about the noise level of these types of shows, which does nothing to illuminate the issues of the day."¹⁶

A Huxleyan Moment of Zen?

So, it appears that much of *The Daily Show*'s sharpest comedy requires its audience to grasp a Postmanesque criticism of television news. In addition, Stewart himself seems to offer a more general critique of today's televised public discourse that is reminiscent of Postman's in several significant ways. This isn't to say, however, that Postman and Stewart are in perfect agreement. For one thing, Postman argues that the transformation of serious discussion into entertainment is all but inevitable when this discussion takes place on television. Stewart, on the other hand, seems to believe that television can do better. As we've seen, he has even appeared on CNN and used the news network's own programs to issue his call for reform. Postman and Stewart might also disagree about the suitability of television as a vehicle for sophisticated media criticism. Postman writes, for example, that any televised critique of television would likely be "co-opted" by the medium, and thus rendered in the typical fashion as mere entertainment (pp. 161-2).¹⁷ In his eyes, television is simply incapable of carrying serious public discourse, including serious public discourse about mass communication itself. That Stewart has appeared on *Crossfire* and other such programs to address this issue suggests that he believes otherwise. No doubt this is a question worth further consideration, and through any medium capable of giving it a thoughtful hearing.

Notes

- 1 Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1964); see especially pp. 7-21.
- 2 Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business* (New York: Penguin, 1985), p. 7. Subsequent citations will be made parenthetically in-text.
- 3 Postman develops his sweeping history of American media in chapter 5 of *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, "The Peek-a-Boo World" (pp. 64-80).

4 Postman acknowledges that, in other parts of the world (pp. 85-6) or in non-commercial contexts (pp. 105-6), television may serve different purposes. However, as he sees it, this does nothing to change the way that television most typically functions in contemporary American society.

5 Colbert explained the importance of one's gut in the search for truth during his April 2006 White House Correspondents' Association Dinner performance: "Every night on my show, *The Colbert Report*, I speak straight from the gut, OK? I give people the truth, unfiltered by rational argument." On this point Colbert also compared himself to President George W. Bush, who sat at the head table just a few feet away from Colbert's podium:

We're not so different, he and I. We both get it. Guys like us, we're not some brainiacs on the nerd patrol. We're not members of the Facinista. We go straight from the gut; right sir? That's where the truth lies, right down here in the gut.

Do you know you have more nerve endings in your gut than you have in your head? You can look it up. Now I know some of you are going to say, "I did look it up, and that's not true." That's because you looked it up in a book. Next time, look it up in your gut. I did. My gut tells me that's how our nervous system works.

6 As Postman writes, "While brevity does not always suggest triviality, in this case it surely does. It is simply not possible to convey a sense of seriousness about any event if its implications are exhausted in less than one minute's time" (p. 103).

7 See also "Stephen Colbert's Guide to Dressing and Expressing Like a TV Journalist" in Jon Stewart, Ben Karlin, and David Javerbaum, *America (The Book): A Citizen's Guide to Democracy Inaction* (New York: Warner Books, 2004), pp. 142-3.

8 *Reliable Sources*, CNN (November 2, 2002).

9 *The O'Reilly Factor*, Fox News (September 17, 2004).

10 "National Annenberg Election Survey" (press release), *Annenberg Public Policy Center* (September 21, 2004), p. 2.

11 *Now*, PBS (July 11, 2003).

12 *Reliable Sources*, CNN (November 2, 2002).

13 *Crossfire*, CNN (October 15, 2004). All quotes below are from CNN's rush transcript of this episode.

14 Postman actually cites Buckley's own legendary program *Firing Line* as a rare example of television as a "carrier of coherent language and thought in process" that "occasionally shows people in the act of thinking but who also happen to have television cameras pointed at them" (p. 91).

Firing Line never received high ratings, though, and spent most of its 33 years on public television.

15 Postman's son Andrew sums all of this up nicely in his "Introduction" to the 20th Anniversary Edition of *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, writing: "When Jon Stewart, host of Comedy Central's *The Daily Show*, went on CNN's *Crossfire* to make this very point - that serious news and show business ought to be distinguishable, for the sake of public discourse and the republic - the hosts seemed incapable of even understanding the words coming out of his mouth" (pp. xiii-xiv).

16 Howard Kurtz, "Carlson & 'Crossfire': Exit Stage Left & Right," *Washington Post* (January 6, 2005), C1.

17 In the final chapter of *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, Postman describes a then-hypothetical but subversive anti-television television program that's eerily similar to *The Daily Show*. According to Postman, this program would serve an important educational purpose by demonstrating how television recreates and degrades news, political debate, religious thought, and so on. He writes: "I imagine such demonstrations would of necessity take the form of parodies, along the lines of 'Saturday Night Live' and 'Monty Python,' the idea being to induce a national horse laugh over television's control of the public discourse" (pp. 161-2). In the end, Postman rejects the idea of such a show as "nonsense," since he thinks that serious and intelligent televised discussion could never attract an audience large enough to make a difference.