No Laughing Matter: The Power of Cyberspace to Subvert Conventional Media Gatekeepers

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This article uses Jon Stewart's October 15, 2004, appearance on the U.S. program Crossfire and Stephen Colbert's April 29, 2006, speech at the White House Correspondents' Dinner to illustrate how the diffused nature of cyberspace enables Internet users to promulgate news stories. This allows users to drive mainstream media gatekeepers to engage in what is described as "forced reflexivity," covering critiques of their own complicity in media hegemony. In each case, a prominent comedian offered an in-person critique of members of the mainstream media in a newsworthy context, arguing that the media had been complicit in the machinations of Washington politicians. And in each case, subsequent Internet dissemination of video clips of these appearances circumvented traditional media gatekeepers while forcing them to cover those critiques.

Keywords: Cyberspace, media hegemony, gatekeeping, Internet media, Jon Stewart, Stephen Colbert

Introduction

On October 15, 2004, the comedian Jon Stewart appeared on the U.S. news analysis program *Crossfire* for the ostensible purpose of plugging his national best-seller, *America (The Book): A Citizen's Guide to Democracy Inaction*. Rather than using his appearance to promote the book, however, Stewart critiqued *Crossfire* and its ilk for replacing political analysis with partisan bombast. Fewer than 150,000 television viewers likely saw Stewart's confrontation on October 15 (Jarvis, 2005).

On Saturday, April 29, 2006, comedian Stephen Colbert delivered the final speech at the annual White House Correspondents' Dinner (WHCD). Facing a captive audience that included most of the Washington, DC, press corps and President Bush, Colbert used a traditional forum for the lighthearted "roasting" of political elites to criticize the traditional news media for their complicity with the White House. The television audience for Colbert's performance was limited to those few intrepid political junkies watching C-Span—the government affairs cable television station—late on a Saturday night.

While both Stewart and Colbert are well-known critics of the U.S. political system (Baym, 2005, 2007) and the press (Brewer & Marquardt, 2007), these events were of academic interest for two reasons. First, they were among the earliest of these comedians' efforts to step outside their own nightly comedy programs to personally critique members of the press in unusual and newsworthy contexts. Second, the subsequent cyberspatial dissemination of these appearances not only circumvented the gatekeepers who had traditionally controlled access to conventional media space—typically newspapers and television news—but also helped users amplify the critiques raised by Stewart and Colbert such that mainstream press outlets were forced to reluctantly cover them.

This article offers an analysis of the content, context, and subsequent media treatment of these two events in both cyberspace and traditional media space to trace a specific moment of change in the processes of media hegemony. In an era of WikiLeaks and overnight meme sensations, we are now familiar with the myriad ways that the Internet enables users to choose what is newsworthy. In 2004 and 2006, however, the potential of blogs, YouTube, and Internet users to "grow" a story was still newsworthy in itself. And as once-monolithic gatekeepers have lost their monopoly over the news cycle, scholars have traced the ways the Internet has been used to shape the content of traditional television and newspaper journalism (Messner & DiStaso, 2008; Messner & Terilli, 2007; Williams & Delli Carpini, 2004).

While Stewart's and Colbert's appearances differ substantially, they share several important similarities that amplify their historic and theoretical significance. In both cases, two popular satirists used unconventional and thus newsworthy spaces as platforms for delivering in-person critiques of the mainstream press. In both cases, new media sources and Internet users spread these comedians' critiques far beyond their original audiences. In both cases, the massive growth of an online audience was treated as newsworthy by many mainstream media outlets. And in both cases, this newsworthiness forced mainstream media gatekeepers to cover critiques of their own complicity with the political status quo. By rapidly and massively circulating stories critical of conventional media providers, Internet users drove those providers to engage in "forced reflexivity"—defined here as the sometimes unwilling coverage of events and critiques that expose and challenge their role in maintaining media hegemony. Faced with the unchecked spread of such stories, traditional media outlets had to either cover them as newsworthy or face the risk of being rendered irrelevant to news consumers. In the case of Stewart's *Crossfire* appearance, online dissemination contributed to CNN's decision to cancel the program ("Exit, snarling," 2005; Stanley, 2005). Likewise, digital circulation of Colbert's White House Correspondents' dinner appearance forced the mainstream news media to cover an event that was newsworthy because it harshly criticized them (Argetsinger & Roberts, 2006; N. Cohen, 2006b; de Morales, 2006).

Media Gatekeepers, the Internet, and the Potential for Counterhegemonic Resistance

This article is premised on the proposition that the media participate in maintaining a political and economic hegemony that can and should be challenged. As first articulated by Antonio Gramsci, hegemony represents an interlinked set of values, meanings, and discourses by which "commonsense" understandings of the world are articulated and the possibilities for action and change are proscribed (Laclau, 1990). While Gramsci developed this concept within the Marxist context of class-based struggle, subsequent post-Marxist and poststructuralist theorists such as Laclau and Mouffe (1985) have extended

it to explain the role of ideology in maintaining adherence to the existing social, economic, and political orders. Although not universally accepted by media scholars (Altheide, 1984; Carragee, 1993; Mumby, 1997), a large, compelling, and well-supported literature has adopted the concept of hegemony to explain the interrelationships between the media and broader dynamics of power (Artz & Kamalipour, 2003; Carragee & Roefs, 2004; Giroux & McLaren, 1992; King & deYoung, 2008). This literature uses the term "media hegemony" to describe the role the media play in maintaining power structures through the "active work of selecting and presenting, of structuring and shaping; not merely the transmitting of an already-existing meaning, but the more active labor of making things mean" (Hall, 1982, p. 64). There is not, however, just one set of messages, meanings, or stories that is permissible under any given media hegemony. Rather, the media establish a range of permissible opinions and perspectives, rendering certain types of views and events newsworthy and denying exposure to others (Artz & Murphy, 2000). Moreover, the boundaries of permissible expression are not static. Rather, the media serve as fora for those working within the media—such as Stewart and Colbert—and those outside the media to challenge, disrupt, and alter hegemony (Condit, 1994; King & deYoung, 2008).

One of the primary ways the mainstream news media—including television, radio, and print—have maintained hegemony is through agenda setting. First documented in McCombs and Shaw's work on the 1968 U.S. presidential campaign (1972), this theory explains the dynamics by which the media are able to influence and even drive those issues the public deems to be important (McCombs & Shaw, 1993; Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007; Walgrave & Aelst, 2006). In turn, one of the primary mechanisms through which the mainstream media have influenced the public agenda is gatekeeping. Representing the process by which certain stories, issues, and ideas are either allowed to enter or prevented from entering traditional media space (Clayman & Reisner, 1998; Livingston & Bennett, 2003), gatekeeping determines the range of legitimate social concerns, issues, and solutions (Carpentier, 2005; Dispensa & Brulle, 2003; King & deYoung, 2008). As Dispensa and Brulle (2003) argue, "The media help to define social reality through . . . a systematic sorting and encoding of selected events. This active construction results in some events presented as meaningful, and others are ignored or marginalized" (p. 79).

New digital communication tools have, however, undermined the once-dominant role of conventional gatekeepers. The atomized nature of the Internet allows users to circumvent television and print media and thus subvert their role in setting the scope of social, political, and economic discussion (Levinson, 1999; Meikle, 2002; P. Walsh, 2003). Other emergent communication technologies—including smart phones, social media sites, information services such as Twitter, and Internet-enabled news consolidation portals such as Huffington Post—have also impacted conventional journalism beyond simply providing alternate news outlets or siphoning off readers, viewers, and listeners. Moving beyond new media/old media dichotomies, a number of researchers are tracing how the distribution of information via digital media has impacted mainstream media gatekeepers. For example, Livingston and Bennett (2003) have traced how videophones and other emergent communication technologies have led television news to increasingly feature event-driven stories. Singer (2001) has investigated how news gatekeepers evaluate competing stories, arguing that online editions of local newspapers tend to demonstrate a greater emphasis on local news than print-only editions. Likewise, Poor (2006) argues that savvy newsmakers can pick and choose among media outlets, allowing them to use the Internet to both circumvent and influence traditional gatekeepers. Perhaps the strongest case for the capacity of cyberspace to undermine

conventional gatekeepers has been asserted by research on political agenda setting. For example, Williams and Delli Carpini (2004) have argued that alternative media providers such as the Drudge Report and radio personality Don Imus now have the capacity to drive the mainstream news cycle, rendering much traditional gatekeeping obsolete. Likewise, Messner and Terilli (2007) and Lee et al. (2005) have traced how weblogs and online discussion boards, respectively, have influenced and even driven mainstream coverage of elections in the United States and South Korea. Thus, Baym (2005) has argued that the comedic metacritique offered by Jon Stewart is a product, in part, of the blurring of boundaries between cyberspace and traditional media space and of audiences' increasing awareness and acceptance of a more multidimensional news environment.

While traditional media can no longer claim a monopoly on news gatekeeping, neither the mainstream media nor the gatekeeping process can be dismissed as unimportant (Poor, 2006). Conventional media outlets remain essential in setting the news agenda in areas as diverse as foreign policy (Wanta, Golan, & Lee, 2004), national politics (Son & Weaver, 2005; Walgrave, Soroka, & Nuytemans, 2008), and state politics (Kiousis, Mitrook, Wu, & Seltzer, 2006). Likewise, mainstream media impacts the news content in such new media forums as weblogs (Messner & DiStaso, 2008). Accordingly, gatekeeping must be understood as a function that might be found almost anywhere in an increasingly atomized media environment. For example, Barzilai-Nahon (2009) argues that any contemporary understanding of how information is controlled and distributed must consider, among other things "the dynamism of gatekeepers" as well as the power of, and relationships between both gatekeepers and recipients of information—whom she refers to as "the gated" (Barzilai-Nahon, 2009, p. 33). Similarly, Bruns (2003) describes a new era of online "gatewatching," by which a variety of information consumers and providers combine traditional gatekeeper journalism with culling and providing links to additional resources in the manner of a reference librarian, free from the space and time limitations that have traditionally driven the choice of what is "fit to print." Under Bruns' model, bloggers and other Internet users have the capacity to aggregate existing media and link it within a library-like network of information. "In other words, gatewatchers fundamentally publicize news (by pointing to sources) rather than publish it (by compiling an apparently complete report from the available sources)" (Bruns, 2003, p. 34).

This research points to the need for further work examining both the potential of the gated to serve as gatekeepers/gatewatchers and the use of cyberspace to force conventional news outlets to address perspectives and events that challenge their role in maintaining media hegemony. The Stewart and Colbert appearances are important data sources for this analysis, given their simultaneous status as insiders to, and critics of, media hegemony. Both comedians have long been the topic of academic analysis, whether in the context of the impact of comedy on U.S. political discourse (Bennett, 2007; Hart & Hartelius, 2007), their role in providing political news and opinion to young viewers (Baumgartner & Morris, 2008), or the power of satire to expose otherwise uncomfortable racial truths (Rossing, 2012). Moreover, the *Crossfire* and WHCD appearances have occasioned their own literatures. Researchers have analyzed Stewart's rhetorical tropes (Jordan, 2008; Waisanen, 2009) and his interplay between humor and earnestness (Colletta, 2009). Similarly, Colbert's WHCD appearance has been analyzed for its rhetorical interplay of silence and humor (Wilson, 2008); its moral and political content (Peterson, 2008); and its interplay between satire, morality, and liberal democracy (Colletta, 2009; Willett, 2008). Even so,

little attention has been paid to the very aspects of those appearances that rendered them especially newsworthy at the time—namely, their afterlife on the Internet. Thus, this article is offered in hopes of sparking further investigations into the intersections between information consumers, counterhegemonic messages, and both conventional and digital media outlets.

The following analysis is based on both mainstream and online daily news media sources. In addition to video and transcripts of the two events, I searched the 20 U.S. newspapers with the highest circulation figures for 2004 and 2006. These are the most common sources for syndicated news, are representative of the content in smaller papers, and offer a window into the daily print sources available to a large slice of the U.S. population—serving almost 14 million readers daily in 2006 (Burrelles Luce, 2006). I also gathered sources from mainstream television, the Associated Press, and popular Internet blogs and news sources to round out my analysis. I then used an open coding process combined with a time line of media coverage to draw out the discourses emerging around the events and the order in which they emerged. After recognizing the pattern that I later described as "forced reflexivity," I began a secondary analysis pursuant to Jasinski'smethod of theory-driven textual analysis by which a theoretical framework is used as a means of asking specific questions of the data toward the goal of critical theorizing (Jasinski, 2001).

Jon Stewart and the Crossfire over *Crossfire*

On October 15, 2004, right before the U.S. presidential elections, Jon Stewart appeared as a guest on cable news juggernaut CNN's nationally syndicated news punditry television show *Crossfire*, a program that *The New York Times* described as "specializ[ing] in encouraging midlevel political types to yell slogans at each other" ("Exit, snarling," 2005). Like much of the news analysis in mainstream media, *Crossfire* was explicitly structured around presenting conventional news items within binary debates between conventionally defined liberal and conservative perspectives, an approach that both reinforces existing ideological biases and reduces the scope of public discourse (ADT Research, 2002; Herman & Chomsky, 2002; McChesney, 2000). While introducing Stewart, host Paul Begala acknowledged that *Crossfire* intentionally promotes such binaries, stating "our show is about all left vs. right, black vs. white, paper vs. plastic, Red Sox against the Yankees. That's why every day, we have two guests with their own unique perspective on the news" (CNN, 2004).[1] The ostensible purpose of Stewart's appearance was to promote his *America (The Book)* project. Almost immediately after Stewart sat down to talk with Begala and co-host Tucker Carlson, however, it became clear that he would not be following the typical book author/talk show guest format.

Instead, Stewart proceeded to critique the premise of *Crossfire*, using his appearance to both subvert the program's hegemonic agenda-setting role and offer a broader critique of the mainstream news media. Even though Carlson had introduced Stewart's appearance as "a break from campaign politics, sort of," Stewart immediately began deconstructing the commentators' positions on the upcoming election as representatives of traditional "liberal" (Begala) and "conservative" (Carlson) political perspectives, jokingly

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[1] All quotes from CNN's online transcript of the October 15, 2004, episode. Cross talk has been edited out to improve coherence. Video is available at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aFQFB5YpDZE

asking each to say something "nice" about the other's favored candidate. Stewart then shifted the discussion to how programs like *Crossfire* were covering the campaign itself:

> STEWART: I made a special effort to come on the show today, because I have privately—amongst my friends and also in occasional newspapers and television shows—mentioned this show as being . . . bad.
>
> BEGALA: We have noticed.
>
> STEWART: And I wanted to—I felt that that wasn't fair and I should come here and tell you that I don't—it's not so much that it's bad, as it's hurting America.
>
> [Cross talk]
>
> STEWART: Here's just what I wanted to tell you guys.
>
> CARLSON: Yes.
>
> STEWART: Stop. Stop, stop, stop, and stop hurting America.

Stewart then criticized programs such as *Crossfire* for "helping the politicians and the corporations" through "partisan hackery." Stewart was specifically critical of the tendency of *Crossfire* and its ilk to reduce complex issues to shallow, "black and white" debates.

> BEGALA: Let me get this straight. If the indictment is—if the indictment is—and I have seen you say this—that *Crossfire* reduces everything, as I said in the intro, to left, right, black, white.
>
> STEWART: Yes.
>
> BEGALA: Well, it's because, see, we're a debate show.
>
> . . . .
>
> STEWART: I would love to see a debate show.
>
> BEGALA: We're 30 minutes in a 24-hour day where we have each side on, as best we can get them, and have them fight it out.
>
> STEWART: No, no, no, no, that would be great. To do a debate would be great. But that's like saying pro wrestling is a show about athletic competition.

For the remainder of his appearance, Stewart continued to hammer at the format of *Crossfire*, arguing, "You're doing theater, when you should be doing debate, which would be great." Notwithstanding the vigorous efforts of his hosts—and particularly Carlson—to get Stewart to move on, he continued to stress the failure of the mainstream media to "hold [politicians'] feet to the fire" and force them to provide honest answers to hard questions.

At the time, Stewart's appearance on *Crossfire* was remarkable for several reasons. A well-known comedian appearing on a prominent news analysis program to personally critique its hosts was entirely unprecedented.[2] Likewise, Stewart's frank and sometimes combative metacritique of the state of news analysis was a powerful contrast to the very type of binary, party-based debate dominating much of conventional media space (McChesney, 2004). By the end of the October 15 *Crossfire* episode, however, it was unclear what impact Stewart's effort to reform CNN would have, given the estimated 150,000-person audience of the original broadcast (Jarvis, 2005).

By the following week, Stewart's *Crossfire* appearance had developed a life in cyberspace that was every bit as extraordinary as his effort to subvert conventional U.S. news media. Whether through blogs or e-mailed links to video-sharing websites, Internet users circumvented conventional gatekeepers to spread word of Stewart's critique. By Monday, October 18, "a dozen Stewart 'Crossfire' stories were among the most popular stories on the Internet [and on] www.ifilm.com, a 'Crossfire' excerpt was viewed by 400,000 people" (Ryan, 2004). Within the first week, there had been at least 1.5 million downloads of the *Crossfire* clip on one website alone (Sternbergh, 2004). Another news report estimated a "fairly liberal estimate of about 2.5 million downloads" per day, based on the availability of the clip from approximately 4,000 different sources through BitTorrent with an average of 260 people downloading the clip from each source. A little over a month after the original broadcast, the site iFilm reported having provided approximately 3.2 million downloads, with a total of 3.7 million downloads by August 1, 2006 (iFilm.com, 2006), eclipsing the roughly 1.1 million viewers Stewart was attracting to his nightly *Daily Show* broadcasts the previous year (Romano, 2004). This figure likewise dwarfed the typical online promulgation of normal *Daily Show* clips. For example, as of February 2012, the most watched segment of the October 7, 2004, broadcast of *The Daily Show*—the last program before the *Crossfire* appearance—had only been viewed online at the Comedy Central site about 39,000 times (Comedy Central, 2012). Beyond the sheer volume of online views, the content of Stewart's appearance became a major topic for discussion, with an overwhelming majority of comments approving his underlying critique (Boller, 2006). This online consensus was typified by Salon.com's description of the *Crossfire* appearance as being "as concise a demonstration of the triviality of the media you could hope for" and a "public service" (Taylor, 2006).

In turn, the online popularity of the Stewart *Crossfire* clip was treated by the mass media as a newsworthy event in and of itself. Thirteen of the 20 highest circulation newspapers in the United States (Burrelles Luce, 2004) ran some form of article or commentary addressing Stewart's appearance. Of those, over half, including *The New York Times*, the *Los Angeles Times*, the *Chicago Tribune*, the *New York Post*, the *Houston Chronicle*, and the *San Francisco Chronicle*, addressed Internet traffic in the *Crossfire* clip as either newsworthy in itself or reflecting popular support for Stewart's critique (Garofoli, 2004; Kaplan, 2004; Ryan, 2004; Silverman, 2004; Smith, 2004; Stanley, 2004). The *Los Angeles Times* observed,

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[2] While *Crossfire*—like much of CNN's programming—had fallen behind competition from Fox News by late 2004 (Steinberg, 2005), it was a mainstay of CNN's prime-time lineup for much of its 23-year run and was still considered a "hit" for the network at the time of Stewart's appearance (Hines, 2004).

> Instant Internet buzz about the extraordinary 13 minutes of television universally hailed
> Stewart as a refreshing and clear-eyed critic of an increasingly trivial television news
> media and skyrocketed him to a new rank in his comedic career—from wry commentator
> to serious provocateur. (Smith, 2004)

And as the creator of *Entertainment Weekly* magazine noted, "[w]hat's fascinating about the Jon Stewart takedown of 'Crossfire' is not just what he said, but how his message got distributed" (Hines, 2004).

Internet users' gatekeeping had a double multiplier effect on Stewart's message. The spread of online clips exponentially increased the penetration of Stewart's exchange with Begala and Carlson. In turn, mainstream media coverage of the unprecedented online demand for the clip re-presented the underlying story to mainstream audiences, further multiplying its impact.

This reciprocal promulgation between conventional media and Internet media spaces was not without effect. Acknowledging the role of Internet users in spreading Stewart's critique, while trying to downplay his underlying message, CNN's public relations director commented,

> It's not surprising that a sharp, even heated exchange between our Crossfire hosts and
> Jon Stewart has become such a hit on the Web. People watch people, whether on the
> Web or on TV, and these are two very smart, often funny men talking about issues that
> obviously resonate. (Hines, 2004)

In perhaps the ultimate example of forced reflexivity, Jonathan Klein, the president of CNN, announced early in January 2005 that he "agreed wholeheartedly" with Stewart's critique of *Crossfire*, and thus had decided to cancel the program ("Exit, snarling," 2005; Stanley, 2005).[3] While it is impossible to determine exactly how much effect the cyberspatial magnification of Stewart's message contributed to Klein's decision, CNN clearly recognized that it had resonated for many. It is hard to imagine a major news network like CNN simply canceling a popular news program in response to one comedian's complaints absent a major media furor. Thus, it appears highly likely that the rapid promulgation of the clip signaled a widespread approval of Stewart's message, encouraging a leading conventional news provider to reflect upon that critique and acquiesce to the pressure of cyberspace. As such, Internet users must be considered vital gatekeepers for Jon Stewart's effort to disrupt *Crossfire*'s role in maintaining media hegemony.

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[3] While Carlson's decision to leave *Crossfire* the previous April may have encouraged CNN to cancel the program, Klein asserted that "the decisions to part company with Mr. Carlson and to end 'Crossfire' were not specifically related" (Carter 2005).

The Colbert Effect

On Saturday, April 29, 2006, Stephen Colbert gave the final speech at the annual White House Correspondents' Dinner.[4] Traditionally a forum for congenial roasting of Washington beltway insiders and U.S. political elites, the Correspondents' Dinner typically features speeches by notable Capitol Hill personalities, concluding with a "headlining" professional comedian. A variety of media and political figures attended the 2006 dinner, including Jesse Jackson, Supreme Court Justice Antonin Scalia, John McCain, and President George Bush, who was seated next to the presenter's podium. While the event was attended by an estimated 2,600 people, including much of the Washington press (de Morales, 2006), the only televised coverage was on C-Span, the federal government affairs channel.

Colbert—a Jon Stewart protégé who had leveraged a supporting role on *The Daily Show* into his own popular spin-off faux news program—aimed much of his speech the Bush administration.[5] Colbert lampooned such contemporary White House crises as the uproar over secret military prisons, the National Security Administration wiretapping scandal, and ongoing resistance to the U.S. presence in Iraq. Much of what made Colbert's performance noteworthy, however, was where it took place—among a concentration of political and media insiders and in the immediate physical presence of the prime target of his direct, personal, and aggressive comedic criticism. Visibly irritated, and at times angered ("Bush, aides," 2006), the sight of President Bush just feet away from Colbert was extraordinary in light of the president's well-documented efforts to insulate himself from outside criticism (Bumiller, 2006a; Kitfield, 2003; VandeHei & Fletcher, 2006).

This sense of "truth-to-power" was heightened by the presence of Colbert's secondary target, the Washington media. Focusing much of his humor upon the failure of the White House press corps to hold the administration accountable, Colbert aggressively critiqued his hosts. Directly addressing the press, Colbert sarcastically argued that:

> Over the last five years you people were so good—over tax cuts, WMD intelligence, the effect of global warming. We Americans didn't want to know, and you had the courtesy not to try to find out. Those were good times . . . as far as we knew.

> But, listen, let's review the rules. Here's how it works: the president makes decisions. He's the Decider. The press secretary announces those decisions, and you people of the press type those decisions down. Make. Announce. Type. Just put 'em through a spell check and go home. Get to know your family again. Make love to your wife. Write that novel you got kicking around in your head. You know, the one about the intrepid Washington reporter with the courage to stand up to the administration. You know—fiction!

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[4] Video is available at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6MoGi4AHpn0

[5] By the WHCD appearance, Colbert was an established media figure, with *The Colbert Report* averaging 1.2 million viewers during its opening week in October 2005 (Amter 2005).

This critique invoked a growing popular consensus that the Washington press corps, like much of the mainstream media, had failed to sufficiently hold the Bush administration accountable for its actions (Klein, 2007; Preston, 2002), particularly during the lead-up to the Iraq War (Moyers & Hughes, 2007; Schechter, 2006). As Bennett has argued, Colbert's cynically articulated comedic broadside powerfully "reveal[ed] underlying truths by mirroring them back at cynical actors" (2007, p. 280)—namely, the Washington press.

The immediate public impact of Colbert's comments, however, appeared to be limited. Beyond those few dedicated souls watching C-Span on a Saturday night, popular exposure to Colbert's speech was largely a function of mainstream media coverage, which was almost nonexistent. Perhaps reflecting the Washington press corps' resentment—or worse, a fear among reporters that favorable coverage would lead to being further frozen out by a hostile White House—news reports of the WHCD on Sunday, April 30, either downplayed or ignored Colbert's speech. For example, Elizabeth White's report for the Associated Press—and thus the most common story reprinted in U.S. newspapers—led with a glowing 13-sentence description of the president's own performance alongside Steve Bridges, a professional Bush impersonator who "translated" what the president was saying (White, 2006). In contrast, Colbert's performance merited 3 sentences in the middle of the piece. *The New York Times*' front-page coverage focused entirely on Bush's comedic success with Bridges, failing to mention Colbert at all (Bumiller, 2006b). Likewise, *The Washington Post*'s piece on April 30 devoted only 1 of its 30 paragraphs to Colbert's performance, focusing instead on the president's performance and the social intermingling of Washington's power elite with celebrities and news personalities (Wiltz, 2006). *The Washington Times*' May 1 coverage led with the byline "Bush comedy act wows 'em at press dinner" and focused on Bush's presentation, dismissing Colbert as "start[ing] with a strong first line or two, and end[ing] with a dud and a whimper" (Toto, 2006). Of the remaining 20 daily U.S. newspapers with the highest circulations for 2006 (Burrelles Luce, 2006), two ran some version of White's AP story (*Chicago Tribune*, Newark *Star-Ledger*), three ran pieces celebrating Bridges' impersonation while downplaying or ignoring Colbert (*USA Today* [Keck, 2006]; *New York Daily News* [Lemire, 2006]; *Chicago Sun-Times* [Sweet, 2006]), and the remainder simply ignored the story during the next few days. The only exception to this pattern was an enthusiastic op-ed on the *San Francisco Chronicle* culture blog titled "Stephen Colbert Has Brass Cojones" (Morford, 2006).

The initial print media silence was reinforced by the three major television news networks and CNN, which all played clips from Bush's performance with Bridges, without mentioning Colbert's performance (MediaMatters.Org, 2006c). Likewise, on MSNBC's *Hardball*, host Chris Matthews praised Bush's performance before he and *Time* magazine White House correspondent Mike Allen briefly analyzed why Colbert "was so bad" (MediaMatters.Org, 2006b). ABC's *Good Morning America* ran pieces celebrating Bush's and Bridges' appearance for three mornings in a row after the Correspondents' Dinner while not once mentioning Colbert (MediaMatters.Org, 2006a).

Notwithstanding this print and television news silence, Internet users rapidly spread the word of Colbert's performance. Downloads of Colbert's performance caught fire the following week, with YouTube reporting 2.8 million views in less than 48 hours (Metzler, 2006). Again, this eclipsed the typical Web-based promulgation of *The Colbert Report*, with only 44,000 online views of the most popular clip from his April 27 broadcast as of February 2012 (Comedy Central, 2006). Discussion in the blogosphere was

equally intense, with the number of blog postings including the word "Colbert" soaring from an average of approximately 250 per day to more than 4,000 per day after the Correspondents' Dinner (Technorati.com, 2006).
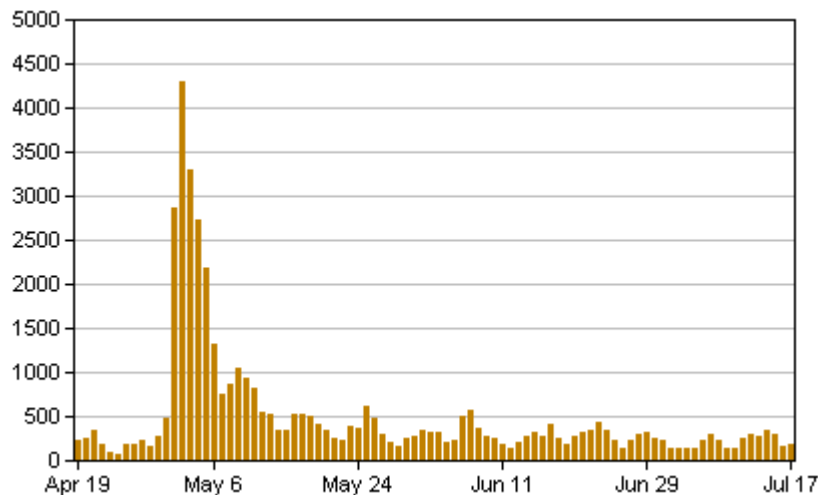

Figure 1. Blog posts containing the word "Colbert" from April 19 to July 17, 2006.
Gathered from www.technorati.com

Much of the discussion on the Internet addressed not only the substance of Colbert's performance but also the failure of the mainstream media to cover it. For example, the Gawker political blog introduced an opinion poll on the WHCD speech with an editorial noting that:

> for some reason, the majority of articles covering this event are ignoring this very bold public challenge and are instead focusing primarily on the Bush look-alike with whom the president exchanged hackneyed, G-rated shtick revolving around the malapropisms the Right tries to pretend makes him lovable instead of simple-minded and depressingly mediocre. (Gawker.com, 2006b)

In turn, over 75% of poll respondents agreed that Colbert's appearance made him a "great patriot" rather than being "not funny" (Gawker.com, 2006a). Media Matters.org ran an analysis confirming that Colbert had been snubbed by the televised news media, and comparing that silence with the abundant television coverage of Don Imus' appearance at the 1996 Correspondents' Dinner, where he took aim at President Clinton with often uncomfortable jokes about the Lewinsky scandal and the Whitewater investigation (MediaMatters.Org, 2006c). Likewise, after experiencing record traffic on its page linking a clip of the Colbert appearance, Salon.com attributed the mainstream news blackout to a shamed press. "Intimidated, coddled, fearful of violating propriety, the press corps that for years dutifully repeated

Bush talking points was stunned and horrified when someone dared to reveal that the media emperor had no clothes" (J. Walsh, 2006).

Notwithstanding C-Span's successful May 4 request that YouTube and iFilm remove clips of the Colbert speech (N. Cohen, 2006a; Metzler, 2006), Internet users' continued discussion and distribution of links to alternate portals transformed the Correspondents' Dinner into a forced reflexivity event. For example, after a series of letters to the editor questioning its failure to cover Colbert's speech, *The New York Times* published a story on C-Span's efforts to regain control of online distribution of the clip. Ignoring its own previous failure to cover the Colbert speech, the *Times* conceded that Internet users had prompted a media-wide reevaluation of its conventional newsworthiness by alluding to "rumblings on left-wing sites that someone was trying to silence a man who dared to speak truth to power" (N. Cohen, 2006a). This was followed by an online concession by the *Times* that it should have published "a separate story that anticipated the reaction the routine generated and explained its political significance, rather than waiting to capture it after the fact" (N. Cohen, 2006b). In a May 22 piece discussing online sales of the speech, *The New York Times* finally acknowledged in hard copy that conventional gatekeepers' reconsideration of the controversy was driven by "many commentators, writing online and off, who charged that the mainstream press ignored [Colbert's] performance because it was so mocking of the president and of the Washington media" (N. Cohen, 2006b). In a final irony, iconic *Times* columnist Frank Rich argued 6 months later that the WHCD appearance was the "defining moment" of the 2006 campaign, noting that while his,

> performance was judged a bomb by the Washington press corps . . . millions of Americans watching C-Span and the Web did get Mr. Colbert's routine. They recognized that the Beltway establishment sitting stone-faced in his audience was the butt of his jokes, especially the very news media that had parroted Bush administration fictions leading America into the quagmire of Iraq. (Rich, 2006)

Similarly, the *Washington Post* was prompted to repeatedly cover the Colbert piece due to the continuing online furor. The *Post* followed its initial coverage with two editorials defending its decision to downplay the speech because the "cutting satire fell flat," and it was "stupid" for Colbert to deliver a "stingingly satirical speech about President Bush and those who cover him" (Argetsinger & Roberts, 2006; de Morales, 2006). In one of the most explicit moments of self-critique exhibited by the *Post,* washingtonpost.com published another editorial, addressing the way that mainstream gatekeepers—ostensibly including the *Washington Post*—had shifted from silence to "Colbert just wasn't funny," because of a "wave of indignation from the liberal side of the blogosphere over what some considered a willful disregard of the bigger story" (Froomkin, 2006). Reinforcing the sense that the Colbert appearance had been buried precisely because it offered a stinging indictment of the Washington press, the *Post* published a fourth editorial, on May 4, arguing "that Colbert was not just a failure as a comedian but rude" (R. Cohen, 2006).

Despite such dismissals, online interest in the Colbert clip impacted both conventional and new media. The week after the Correspondents' Dinner, Colbert's viewership on Comedy Central jumped 37% (Lauria, 2006). Likewise, downloads of Colbert's speech remained vigorous. It was the number-1

download at Apple's iTunes store three weeks after its original delivery and had become one of the most popular Google videos after C-Span again granted permission for free downloads (N. Cohen, 2006b). And several of the 20 largest U.S. newspapers ended up running pieces either addressing how the Internet coverage of Colbert's appearance made it newsworthy in itself (*USA Today* [Johnson, 2006]; *New York Post* [Lauria, 2006]; *Philadelphia Inquirer* [Satullo, 2006]; *Chicago Sun-Times* [Elfman, 2006]) or treating Colbert's critique as background for subsequent criticisms of Bush's policies (Newark *Star-Ledger* [Scott, 2006]; *The Boston Globe* [Vennochi, 2006]).

The Colbert controversy is important for several reasons. First, it offers another example of the power of Internet users to both consume and distribute information in ways that drive conventional gatekeepers' agendas. It also demonstrates how this new distributed gatekeeping can cause mainstream media to cover stories and critiques that are critical of their own role in maintaining media hegemony. Notwithstanding institutional resistance to such forced reflexivity—as graphically illustrated by *The Washington Post*'s grudging yet prolonged coverage—users' widespread Internet diffusion of the Colbert speech left conventional media with little choice but to address and readdress the original event, in turn increasing online interest in the story. As *Time* magazine later recognized, "[t]he ensuing debate (Was he funny? Was he rude? Was the press corps out of touch?) kept [Colbert's] critique in the news for days" (Poniewozik, 2006).

Conclusion

I offer these two case studies of "funny" media appearances to illustrate a number of serious points. First, cyberspace has the potential to enable users to both access a variety of alternative views and to spread potent counterhegemonic critiques of mainstream media. Because regular broadcasts of *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report* do not see the same level of Internet promulgation, it is a mistake to dismiss the exponential spread of the *Crossfire* and White House Correspondents' Dinner clips either as a matter of the promulgation of conventional entertainment by new means or as the sole product of Stewart's and Colbert's complex status as media critics, pseudo-journalists (Baym, 2005, 2007), and media gatekeepers (Feldman & Young, 2008). Rather, there is a powerful inference that explosive online distribution reflected a combination of user approval of Stewart's and Colbert's critiques and the unprecedented spectacle value of face-to-face confrontations with the president and members of the press in settings where they are usually unchallenged.

Second, the online lives of these appearances demonstrate that in cyberspace, when acting in large numbers, the gated have a powerful ability to act as gatekeepers to spread stories that would otherwise receive limited exposure in traditional media. And while new gatewatchers (Bruns, 2003) such as the Huffington Post and other blogs played an essential role in promoting the Stewart and Colbert stories (Johnson, 2006), they did not do so alone. Rather, it was the vast mass of Internet users that created these two moments of forced reflexivity by deciding to download, watch, forward, recommend, and rewatch clips from *Crossfire* and the WHCD. And by creating such a huge amount of traffic in both the clips and metacriticisms of the mainstream media, Internet users inadvertently forced the hands of such powerful media players as CNN, *The New York Times*, and *The Washington Post* to either cover the stories or abandon their claim to newsworthiness.

Third, these case studies demonstrate how Internet users can at least partially drive mainstream gatekeepers' choices, potentially leading to moments of forced reflexivity. This is not to say that this disruption is total or will lead to drastically different gatekeeping approaches among mainstream media. Rather, the Internet doesn't just enable users to spread, and thus signal, their approval of messages critical of existing media hegemonies. It also allows them to bring those criticisms back into conventional media spaces, however briefly. With both of these case studies, the resulting forced reflexivity moments challenged and altered the subsequent range of hegemonic media opinion. In the case of the Colbert appearance, leading newspapers were forced to grudgingly and publicly revisit their own efforts to gatekeep the Colbert story out of existence—ultimately leading Frank Rich to treat as widely accepted the critique that the big Washington bureaus (ostensibly including *The New York Times*) "had parroted Bush administration fictions." Even more dramatically, the Stewart appearance seems to have forced CNN to not only confront but act upon Stewart's complaint that *Crossfire*'s superficial punditry had harmed American political debate—by pulling the program from the air.

Moreover, as evidenced by more recent instances of forced reflexivity, the appearances of October 2004 and April 2006 represented the start of what has now become a sporadic but important undercurrent in media agenda setting by which users are often able to upend media hegemony. Among these examples one should include the role of FreeRepublic.com, the DrudgeReport.com, and other right-wing blogs in compelling CBS to retract claims about President Bush's allegedly forged Vietnam-era Texas Air National Guard records and the ability of Occupy Wall Street activists to use new media to force mainstream coverage of its critiques of traditional gatekeepers' bias when reporting on the movement. And Internet users continue to play a major role in giving both comedians' extraordinary critiques of the media a second life online, including Colbert's satirical 2012 presidential campaign and Stewart's in-person criticism of *Mad Money* host Jim Cramer during the March 12, 2009, *Daily Show*.

While the subsequent lives of the Colbert and Stewart appearances expand our understandings of the capacity of cyberspace to drive the news agenda in conventional media space, there are limitations to these studies that indicate the need for further research. In both cases, Stewart's and Colbert's status as celebrity comedians could have provided their appearances with a momentum online that critiques by less-well-known or less-appealing personalities could not replicate. Thus, further work testing the extent and limits of users' capacity to act as gatekeepers is clearly needed. Likewise, more research into the role—if any—that Internet users' gatekeeping decisions play in the daily decision-making processes of mainstream gatekeepers—potentially including interview or ethnographic research among news professionals—could help substantiate the causal link between the online spread of counterhegemonic stories and forced reflexivity among mainstream media. And given the increasing overlap between news media, entertainment media, and Internet content, more research is needed addressing subsequent instances of forced reflexivity. Indeed, the many questions that must be left unanswered by a narrow study such as this suggest the value of further inquiry into the tendency of gatekeeping to diffuse throughout both online and offline networks, as well as the impact of that diffusion upon both the location and functioning of media hegemony.

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