



The Rhetoric of Political Comedy: A Tragedy?

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See the companion work to this article
"Parodying the Protest Paradigm? How Political Satire
Complicates the Empirical Study of Traditional News Frames"
by Dannagal G. Young in this Special Section

This essay wades into the controversy surrounding Jon Stewart's *The Daily Show*. Although some scholars have pointed up its constructive impact, others find it a harbinger of cynicism, superficiality, and excessive partisanship. This study offers a content analysis of *Daily Show* transcripts focused on social protest, and of a philosophical interview with Jon Stewart conducted by *Rolling Stone* magazine. Results show Stewart avoiding traditional forms of ideology, featuring desultory politics, stressing personal over group interactions, and embracing several dialectical choices—ideas vs. behavior, politicians vs. the electorate, and comedians vs. reporters. When the data are viewed as a whole, Stewart's all-seeing, all-knowing rhetoric is identified as problematic, as is his lonely model of public life. Both make it hard to hold out hope for political solutions and that seems especially true for young people. While none of the foregoing claims can be considered definitive, they present new questions about *The Daily Show's* impact on our life and times.

Jon Stewart, impresario of *The Daily Show*, has surely caught the attention of the academic community. Amber Day (2011) describes Stewart as "the everyman's stand-in," one who "is able to act as the viewer's surrogate," thereby giving the American people "vicarious pleasure in hearing [their] own opinions aired on national television" (p. 75). While some of Stewart's "interview segments are fluffier than others," says Day, "many offer a more in-depth and transparent discussion of topical issues than can be found on many of the straight news programs" (p. 67). The overall result? Jon Stewart can create "incremental shifts" (p. 21) in public debate and mobilize political communities.

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Day is not alone in her appreciation of *The Daily Show*. Jeffrey Jones (2010) argues that much of Stewart's influence results from the redacted videos he so brilliantly creates. "It is here," says Jones, where Stewart "changes the conversation from accommodation and spectacle to confrontation and accountability" (p. 117). "Perhaps the postmodern notion that the 'fake' is more real than the 'real,'" Jones continues, "is not such an unsettling notion when it comes to citizens looking for truth in contemporary political communication on television" (p. 168).

Jon Stewart's rhetoric is his calling card, a topsy-turvy, self-interrupting cascade of irreverence and outrageousness delivered nightly. Satire, says Geoffrey Baym (2005), "is a discourse of inquiry, a rhetoric of challenge that seeks through the asking of unanswered questions to clarify the underlying morality of a situation" (p. 267). In other words, Stewart is far more than a comedian. As Terrance MacMullan (2007), argues, *The Daily Show* "delivers the undeniably philosophical message of just how important earnestness, honesty, and integrity are in the political sphere" (p. 102). Stewart is cynical when doing so, but, for MacMullan (2007), "the cynic's form of humor" is often "democracy's best friend" (p. 102). Satire calls attention to powerful but unspeakable truths and then deliciously upsets the applecart, removing the powerful and unprincipled from their lofty perch. So say a great many researchers, both quantitative and qualitative.

A smaller band of scholars disagrees. On the empirical side, Jody Baumgartner and Jonathan Morris have conducted a series of studies that continually finds *The Daily Show* (*TDS*) wanting. They have found, for example, that there is little support for "the popular assumption that *TDS* is creating new legions of super-citizens among adults" but, instead, that "those who rely on *TDS* more than other sources of news may have an over-inflated sense of political intelligence" (Baumgartner & Morris, 2011, p. 64). They also find that habitual watching of *TDS* lowers people's trust in legacy news organizations and that such viewers not only become more cynical as a result of watching Stewart but also become *more confident* that they understand politics when, in fact, they do not (Baumgartner & Morris, 2006). And even though using *Daily Show* materials in the classroom "is clearly more engaging and interesting for the students" (Baumgartner & Morris, 2008, p. 169), doing so neither enhances the learning process nor increases students' test scores.

Approaching *TDS* more philosophically, Hart and Hartelius (2007) argue that Stewart makes "cynicism atmospheric, a mist that hovers over us each day" (p. 264), thereby sapping people's sense of political possibility. By deploying a smarmy, if hilarious, brand of rhetoric, he becomes what Malherbe (1977) has called a "prophet of indifference" (p. 115) in effect making people feel good about feeling bad about politics. When doing so, say Hart and Hartelius, Stewart accesses several durable realities: (1) that cynicism is an easy language to speak, a language that can be taught and practiced and shared; (2) that cynicism has a zealous, evangelical quality that trades in stock themes—human depravity, failed quests, inconstant lovers—thereby appealing to the popular imagination (rather like soap operas); (3) that cynicism counteracts people's free-floating anxieties by making them feel momentarily in charge of something; (4) that cynicism temporarily frees people from their enduring entanglements and frustrating commitments; and (5) that cynicism lets people avoid the hard work of politics, with its endless negotiations and compromises.

My hope is that this essay will add to the data already collected about *TDS* and will raise new questions for debate and discussion. Accordingly, I will offer speculations about Stewart's rhetorical logic, his theory of communication, and his implicit model of politics—how he thinks the world works and what he believes is worth doing. Operationally, and as a counterpart to Dannagal Young's essay in this issue, I will examine a dozen or so transcripts from *TDS* featuring the rhetoric of protest.¹ My goal is to see what happens when an ersatz activist (like Stewart) comments on the work of existentially committed activists, thereby contrasting the simulacrum of protest to the crucible of protest.

To supplement that analysis, I will also examine a lengthy interview between Stewart and Eric Bates (2011) published in *Rolling Stone* magazine. The Bates interview is a reflective piece in which Stewart discusses the nature of contemporary politics and the media engines driving it. By analyzing the remarks Stewart made in two such different settings, I hope to understand his rhetoric in new ways.

The Late-Night Controversy

Before considering such matters, however, we should examine what is at stake in the Stewart contretemps. A fair-minded review of the literature surrounding *TDS* finds five main questions being asked:

1. *Does late-night comedy reliably inform us?* In an important series of studies, Danna Young finds that *TDS* viewers consume more news than do nonviewers (Young & Tisinger, 2006) and pay more attention to political campaigns (Feldman & Young, 2008). *TDS* viewers also feel more "efficacious" as a result (or as a corollary) of watching the show (Hoffman & Young, 2011). Other researchers contend that late-night comedy increases voters' appetites for watching political debates (Landreville, Holbert, & LaMarre, 2010), while yet others (Gaines, 2007) report that *TDS* is especially informative for those lacking a historical perspective about public affairs.

Other scholars argue to the contrary. Davies (2009) claims that "dependency on media for entertainment purposes leads to voting decisions that have a superficial basis" (p. 160). Kim and Vishak (2008) contend that popular entertainment is ineffective in transmitting reliable factual information, particularly that related to political issues and procedural matters. Ross and York (2007) make a more specific charge: that *TDS* and other programs of its kind are often xenophobic, treating "orthodox assumptions of American normativity" (p. 351) as universal values and perspectives. Fox, Koloen, and Sahin (2007) studied *TDS* transcripts and found them to be lacking in "substance," although they found that to be true of conventional broadcast news as well. Still other researchers are more equivocal, with Cao (2010) and Baek and Wojcieszak (2009) arguing that *TDS* performs well for inattentive viewers (at least on "easy" political items) but not for the politically sophisticated, and with Hollander (2005) concluding that late-night viewing helps with recognition tasks but not with actual recall.

2. *Does late-night comedy increase critical thinking?* This is a sharply debated point and often turns on definitional matters. For some, "critical thinking" is thought to be coterminous with

¹ The transcripts were made from MP3 files downloaded from <http://www.thedailyshow.com>.

disestablishmentarianism, characterized by distrust of overweening oligarchies like government, religion, corporations, and Big Media. To resist such hegemonic forces is to “think critically,” a goal to which Jon Stewart is surely committed. On this matter, Waisanen (2009), Beavers (2011), Baym (2009), and Morreale (2009) sing in chorus; they do so from a variety of perspectives, having studied quite different *TDS* clips and transcripts.

It is also fair to ask, however, if such scholars might be operating on patently liberal assumptions, thereby distorting conventional notions of critical thinking. One does not regularly see, for example, Stewart poking fun at leftist pomposities or finding fault with progressive tracts. Morris (2009) argues that case with empirical data about *TDS*, and Rosen (2005) makes a larger point—that the “age of egocasting,” often on display in popular entertainment texts, leads to a “fetishization,” a “vast cultural impatience,” and, ultimately, to “the triumph of individual choice over all critical standards” (p. 72). In other words, a brand of critical thinking incapable of self-doubt or deconstruction may not be critical at all. Too, one wonders if the traditional principles of critical thinking—evidentiary integrity, analytic reasoning, and inferential logic—could possibly be taught by any late-night comedian, even one as savvy as Jon Stewart.

3. *Does late-night comedy provide a corrective to traditional journalism?* A great many scholars have argued convincingly that this is Jon Stewart’s greatest contribution. Feldman (2007) shows how young audiences are made to question traditional news norms by watching *TDS*, while Painter and Hodges (2010) argue that this is true for adult viewers as well. Baym (2009) makes this case with special force, concluding that Stewart’s trenchant critiques of standard broadcast interviews calls into question the “high-modernist assumptions” (p. 73) of news objectivity so jealously advertised by elite reporters. Via Stewart’s clever send-ups of failed instances of TV reportage, he keeps news personnel honest (Brewer & Marquardt, 2007).

Again, though, not all agree. Borden and Tew (2007) argue that neither Jon Stewart nor his sidekick, Stephen Colbert, share journalists’ ethical commitments and hence constantly mislead the citizenry. Zukas (2012) makes a stronger claim—that even though *TDS* breaks with many of the conventions of “real news” by emphasizing responsibility and morality frames versus here’s-what-happened frames—such narrative choices also keep a cynical worldview front and center. Moreover, says Burton (2010), the “satirist’s shield” protecting Stewart and his comrades allows serious people to dismiss his charges out of hand—it’s all comedy, after all—thereby keeping in place the standard news narrative produced by standard news organizations.

4. *Does late-night comedy act as a gateway to greater political involvement?* In many ways, this is the most important question of all, and strong opinions are held on both sides. Warner (2007) says that Stewart “jams the seamless transmission of the dominant brand,” thereby opening “up space for questioning and critique” (p. 17). Hoffman and Thompson (2009) and Hoffman and Young (2011) make a less theoretical point—that late-night TV has a positive and significant effect on civic participation itself (especially for those who have a high sense of political efficacy). And even politically unengaged voters, says Baum (2005), can be opened up to political change by popular entertainment.

Prior (2003) disagrees and finds only minor cognitive effects attributable to soft news, a point with which Baumgartner and Morris (2011) especially agree. Matthes, Rauchfleisch, and Kohler (2011) also find only marginal effects produced by late-night parodies and, even then, only for those high in political knowledge. Coe and his colleagues (2008) expand the matter, arguing that much popular political commentary—including that produced by *TDS*—is ultimately dismissed as “mere partisanship” (p. 201) by a good percentage of the American people. Such “cognitive filters,” says Meder (2011, p. 117), mitigate the stimulative effect of political satire, as do people’s preconceived political biases (Hmielowski, Holbert, & Lee, 2011), their relative political sophistication (Moy, Xenos, & Hess, 2005), and their long-standing mental associations (Xenos, Moy, & Becker, 2011).

5. *Does late-night comedy put a check on those in power?* This is a crucial question for those committed to a robust democracy, and Megan Boler is one of Stewart’s greatest defenders in this regard, arguing that he offers a “touchstone of sanity” (Boler & Turpin, 2008, p. 383) in a crazy world. He speaks “truth to power” (ibid.) by satisfying people’s “deep affective longings for truthfulness” and helping them “navigate the complexities [of their] complicity with spectacular society” (Boler & Turpin, 2008, p. 399). By attacking institutional authority so fulsomely, Boler (2007) argues, Stewart calls into question haughty political institutions while also producing counterpublics via the blogosphere and the digital media, which constantly redistribute clips from *TDS*.

Popular though it is, however, *TDS* is still a show—on television—and so one must ask whether it can possibly produce counterhegemonic effects. It is, after all, a commercial product distributed through a commercial medium. Too, television can be a prime source of innervation and contentedness (Hart, 1994), a point with which Guggenheim, Kwak, and Campbell (2011), Johnson, Del Rio, and Kemmitt (2010), and Scheufele and Nisbet (2002) agree (although each for a different reason). Courtney Martin (2006) goes even further: “When was the last time,” she asks, that “you performed a political act more public than sending a link to the *Onion*’s funniest podcast to your old college roommate” (para. 3) as a result of watching *TDS*? In other words, television can give people the sense of activity without the physics of activity.

Perhaps the most balanced approach to these questions is that of Baum (2005), who concludes that late-night comedy may provide a “gateway” to political knowledge by stimulating a robust search for political information. But if that is true, how are such feats accomplished? What does Jon Stewart say, what does Jon Stewart do, that makes him a potentially powerful social force? What does Stewart’s oeuvre reveal about him, about us, and about the times in which we live? To answer such questions, I provide here a limited empirical description of his texts and, then, a deeper read of their provocations. Any science I provide will be small science, and my readings will be frankly phenomenological, but they may open up the Stewart controversy in fresh ways. After providing such descriptions, I will conclude with a series of questions that might profitably be pursued.

Stewart as Text

Few of Jon Stewart's fans complain when he attacks mainstream politicians (especially Republicans). But all that changed in 2011, when Stewart commented on the uproar in Wisconsin over Governor Scott Walker's attempts to throttle public employees' unions and on the Occupy Wall Street protests erupting on September 17, 2011, in New York City's financial district. Between February 22, 2011, and August 4, 2012, eight or so episodes of *TDS* commented on these protests; other shows discussed Chick-fil-A's stand on gay marriage, the American Atheists' concerns about the Ground Zero memorial's religious symbolism, and the viral video created by Invisible Children, Inc. declaiming Ugandan strongman Joseph Kony.

Stewart aside, media coverage of social protests has never been especially generous. McLeod and Hertog (1992) report that news reports typically emphasize the "conflict story" between protest groups and the Establishment rather than the substance of their disagreements. Other studies (Chan & Lee, 1984; McLeod & Detenber, 1999) find the press featuring protestors' personalities and their physical appearances instead of their formal complaints. For reasons such as these, say Donohue, Tichenor, and Olien (1995), the media are more a "guard dog" than a "watch dog" of establishment forces. Would things turn out differently in the hands of Jon Stewart? That is the question I focused upon when examining *TDS*.

Transcripts of the selected episodes were examined, including remarks made both by Stewart and by his interviewers-on-the-street. The transcripts were not extensive: 4,540 total words, with 1,290 unique words. Similarly, the *Rolling Stone* interview amounted to 4,264 words, 1,125 of which were unique. In analyzing the texts, I used two approaches: one global and one specialized. In both cases, however, Stewart's individual word choices were my focus. Deconstructing a text in this way is especially valuable when dealing with a gifted wordsmith like Stewart for two reasons: (1) virtually no one, including Jon Stewart, can monitor or control his or her lexicons, and that is especially true when one speaks (versus writes); (2) when examined collectively—and out of context—individual word choices reveal a speaker's basic epistemic habits and, sometimes, their axiological preferences.

To get an overall sense of the shows' rhetorical structures, the passages were processed by DICTION (www.dictionsoftware.com), a popular computer-assisted text analysis program that parses a text via a 10,000-word search engine and then reports 40 individual scores and 5 master scores—Certainty, Realism, Optimism, Activity, and Commonality (see Hart, 2000; Hart, Childers, & Lind, 2013).² Although DICTION is normally used to process large amounts of text, the program was useful here

² Operational definitions for these five dimensions are as follows: *Certainty*: words indicating resoluteness, inflexibility, and completeness and a tendency to speak *ex cathedra*; *Realism*: language describing tangible, immediate, recognizable matters that affect people's everyday lives; *Optimism*: language endorsing some person, group, concept, or event or highlighting their positive entailments; *Activity*: language featuring movement, change, the implementation of ideas, and the avoidance of inertia; *Commonality*: language highlighting the agreed-upon values of a group and rejecting idiosyncratic modes of engagement. For further details, see Hart (2000).

because of its normative databank. That databank, composed of some three dozen genres, enabled me to triangulate Stewart's transcripts and assess their distinctiveness.

The advantage of using preset categories like this is also its disadvantage: The program only knows what it knows and hence cannot be "surprised" by the texts it processes. Too, such an approach produces, rather than emerges from, hypotheses, thereby making the method seem somewhat opportunistic. In a research era accustomed to manipulating variables while holding others constant, basic textual description like this can also seem primitive. But even a moment's reflection reminds us that the most basic scientific maneuver of all is raw, empirical description. Natural language processing keeps us close to the phenomena being studied, microscopically close. A fact, after all, is little more than (1) coincidental observation (2) repeated over time (3) in diverse circumstances (4) by different individuals (5) using congenial technologies. That is exactly the kind of data DICTION provides.

Figures 1 and 2 give us an overall idea of the *TDS* transcripts by comparing them to standard television fare and to a large database of 30,000 other language samples, including corporate reports, political speeches, press coverage, literary and historical documents, and scientific reports.³ These normative data are built into DICTION, allowing users to get a quick sense of the texts being analyzed. As we see in Figure 1 (which reports *z* scores with a constant of 50 added), *TDS* does not issue clarion calls for change (low Certainty), which is not surprising for a comedy show. Instead, the show drifts from topic to topic looking for a laugh, often surprising, and sometimes confusing, the viewer. In so doing, *TDS* stands for nothing, which is exactly what viewers are looking for late at night. Thus, those who accuse Stewart of being "ideological" in traditionally partisan ways are off the mark. His *TDS* segments are more than a standard deviation away from DICTION's mean for Certainty.

³ Quantitative results of the word searches provided here are obviously provisional. For several reasons (a small *N*, the absence of truly comparative data, etc.), no tests of statistical significance were run. With the exception of the variables selected for discussion here, the Stewart texts fell within the normative range for DICTION's other master variables.

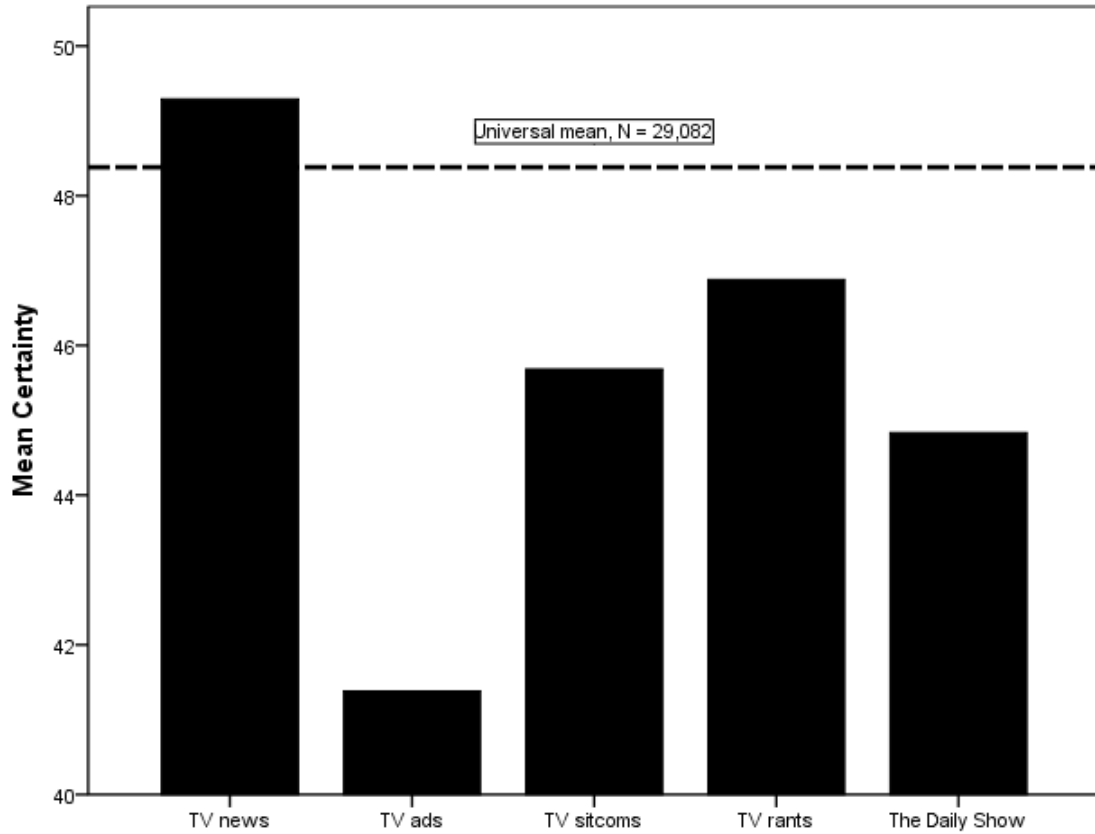


Figure 1. Genre Comparisons for The Daily Show: Certainty.

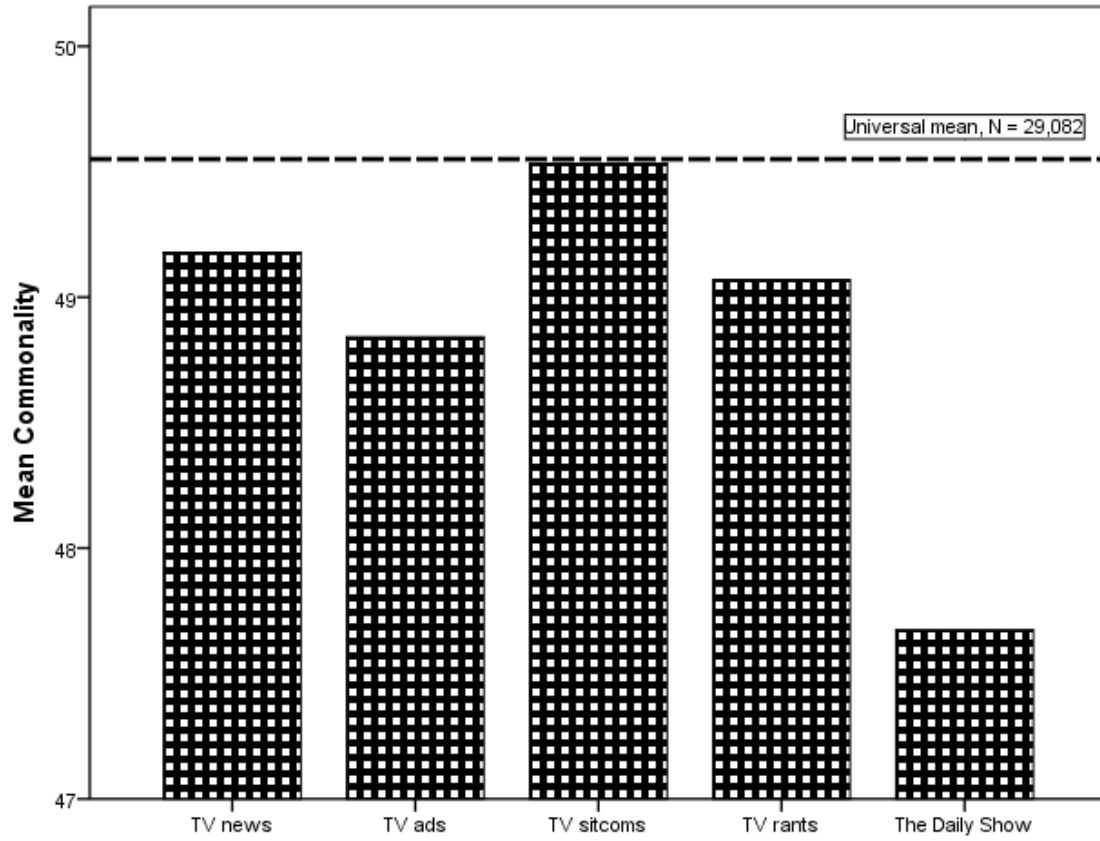


Figure 2. Genre Comparisons for The Daily Show: Commonality.

Stewart is not hortatory in the conventional sense, then. Instead, he produces an inveigling, constantly shifting, brand of chatter. For example, Stewart once observed that the Wisconsin protests constituted a “satellite delay to the sixties” and that Madison was becoming the “Tunisia of American politics” (*TDS*, February 22, 2011). Wisconsin’s state capital “has taken on the odor of hundreds of people sleeping there,” Stewart reports, thereby representing “the elegance of democracy in its purest form” (*TDS*, February 28, 2011). Satellites, Tunisia, dirty protestors, human waste—hardly a medley conducive to clear, linear argument. Hence the low Certainty scores. Ratcheting up the irony of protest coverage further, Stewart concludes his segment of February 29, 2011, with a clever visual contrast: a cheese head juxtaposed against a tricorner hat from the Federalist era. All of this silliness made it hard to remember that the Wisconsin protests dealt with state workers’ needs for gainful employment so they could feed their families.

Figure 2 presents a kind of metairony: Even though the *TDS* shows selected for analysis dealt with *group* protest and the right to bargain *collectively*, they are a standard deviation below the mean on Commonality. That is, the social dimensions of social movements are effaced by Stewart. In their place, one finds a focus on *individual* peculiarities. Stewart’s show of September 12, 2011, provides an example of this when it deconstructs the Obama jobs bill. “Campaigning Obama” is so much cooler than “governing Obama,” says Stewart, implying that the president has lost his moral compass. The president, says Stewart, is proving that the nation’s greatest resource is its “campaign-driven drive!” spewing out of a “hand-cranked, corporately financed bullshit machine” (*TDS*, September 12, 2011). The hundreds of thousands of people the president is trying to help—teachers, veterans, cops, construction workers—become, for Stewart, “the village people of a double dip recession.” And what happens when Obama goes on the hustings? We find “Obama the transformer” comingled with “hundreds of his closest props” (*TDS*, September 12, 2011).

Much-needed legislation becomes “Kabuki theatre” for Stewart, heartfelt utterances become “scripts,” and protestors are reduced to their peculiarities. One interview featured a protestor with a sign containing a backward swastika, thereby stressing form over function. When defending his artwork, the protestor observed that Scott Walker was “not acting like he lives in a democracy” (*TDS*, February 22, 2011), that he was an autocrat. Not to be thrown off course, Stewart’s interviewer returns to the protestor’s piece of bungled art. Focusing on people’s idiosyncrasies in this manner is not surprising since human foibles have been the bedrock of satire from Chaucer to Swift and from George Carlin to Bill Maher. But it is ironic that Stewart eradicates the *social* aspects of social movements. Stewart’s low levels of Certainty and Commonality make it unlikely that his viewers will storm the barricades anytime soon.

As shown in Figures 3, 4, and 5, these same themes are repeated in the *Rolling Stone* interview. Again, I compared Stewart’s interview to somewhat parallel genres (celebrity profiles, newspaper editorials, and philosophical essays) to discover what was distinctive about it. Although the interview contains a number of trenchant observations (“I understand that what we do is inherently annoying”; “once politicians understand how to utilize a medium, they’re going to utilize it for propaganda”; “CNN

feels like an opportunity squandered . . . whatever else FOX is, it is joyful" [Bates, 2011, para. 34]), Stewart wanders in so many directions that he never makes a forceful case for much of anything. Stewart understands, however, that his job is not to produce high Certainty scores:

But that's the difference between being a revolutionary and being a satirist. The key is to remember who you are. Because when you're standing at a rally and there's 100,000 people there—boy, you realize how it happens. There is that incredible urge to go, "I have the answer! Follow me!" I can understand the frustration of people who would be in that audience and think, "You've been complaining for 12 years—this is your chance to stop whining and do something." I understood that people were annoyed that I didn't take that shot [in the Restore Sanity march]. (Bates, 2011, para. 21)

As with *TDS*, Stewart features people, not groups, in the *Rolling Stone* interview. He shifts among Ron Paul ("he's been consistent over the years" [para. 12]), Roger Ailes ("an incredibly relentless and powerful force" [para. 32]), Bill Clinton ("deny, deny, deny" [para. 37]), Michelle Bachmann ("would you submit to your husband?" [para. 78]), and Barack Obama ("he's maintained an even keel" [para. 49]). When doing so, Stewart is relentlessly thoughtful, a big-picture thinker. He discusses the nature of satire ("at heart it's impotent" [para. 18]), television rivalries ("FOX News and our show have a tremendous amount in common" [para. 28]), the U.S. military ("they are surprisingly flexible for a group that is stereotypically rigid" [para. 46]), and macroeconomics ("raising the debt ceiling is just to pay for shit you've already bought" [para. 72]). The interview depicts an agile, frequently scatological, Stewart who seems to care about politics but who is loath to say what he believes in the large.

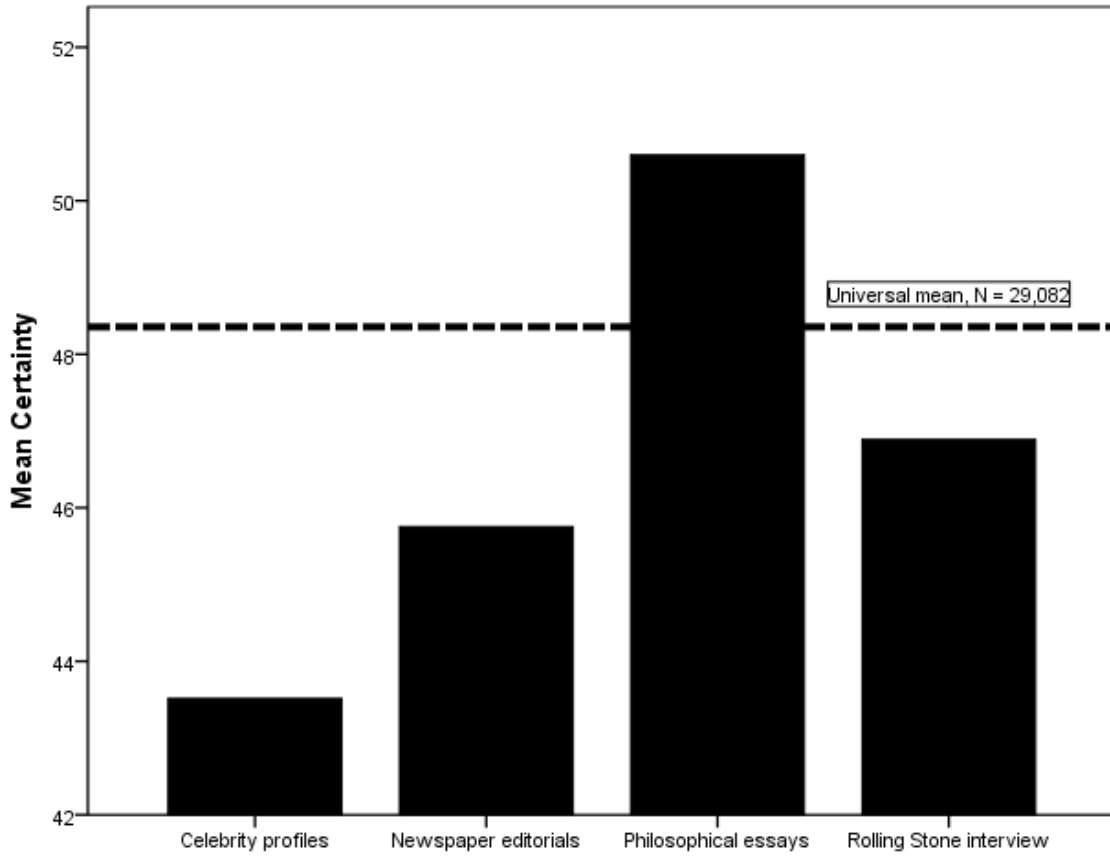


Figure 3. Genre Comparisons for Rolling Stone Interview: Certainty.

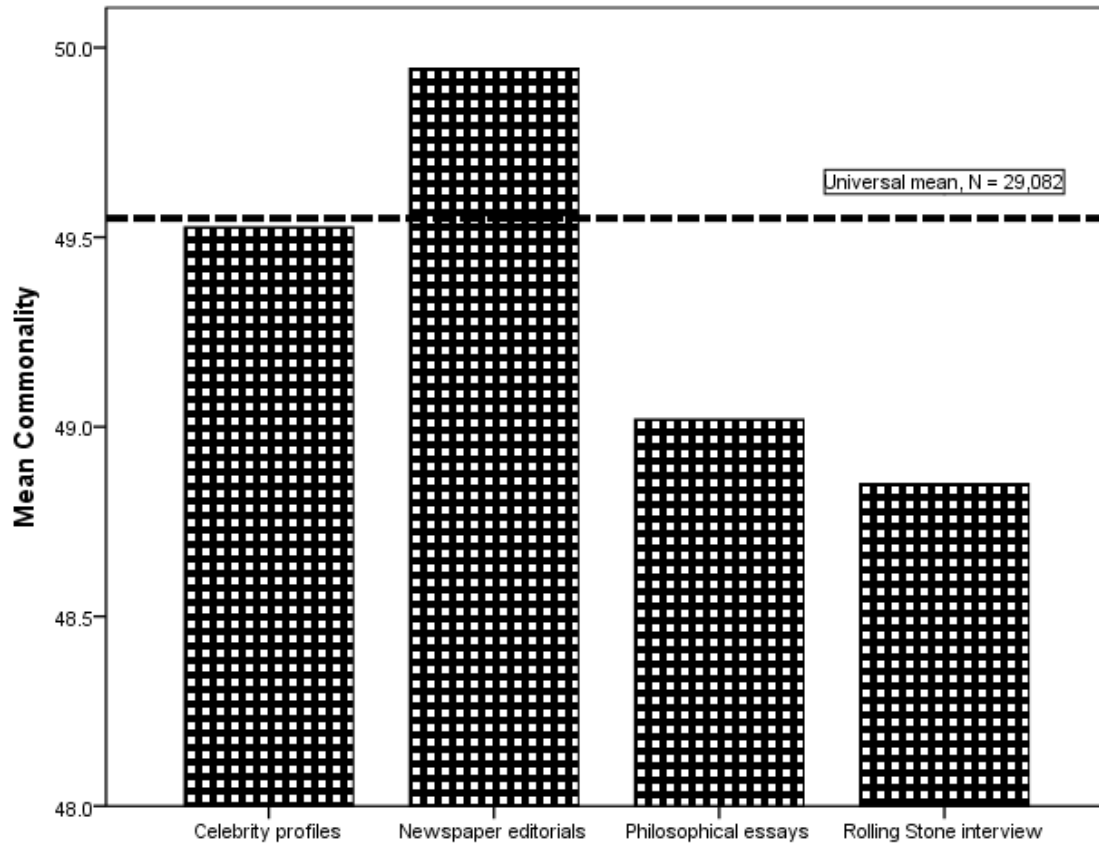


Figure 4. Genre Comparisons for Rolling Stone Interview: Commonality.

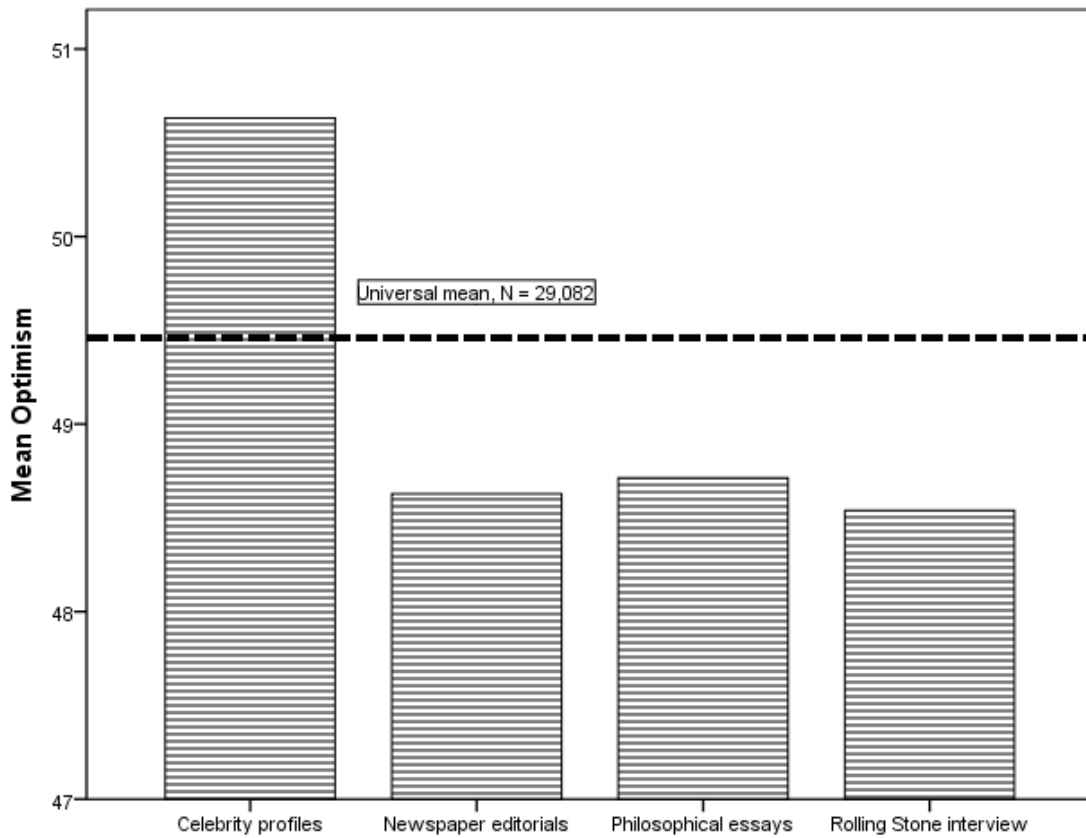


Figure 5. Genre Comparisons for Rolling Stone Interview: Optimism.

As shown in Figure 5, Stewart is also not very cheery in the *Rolling Stone* interview. He speaks of the “parlor tricks” (Bates, 2011, para. 36) of politics, the press’s “fun house mirrors” (para. 23) that distract the populace, the president’s “lack of direction” (para. 54), and the Tea Partiers who “took Congress hostage” (para. 59). The attorney general is “full of shit” (para. 36); nobody is “fucking listening” (para. 75) to Rick Santorum; and the media are producing “Newzak” instead of real journalism (para. 23). When observing that civility is not one of his core values, Stewart understates the case. But he also says why that must be true: His shows are ephemeral. “They exist in that moment,” says Stewart, “and then they sort of disappear” (para. 85). Because he remakes the world each day, Stewart need not

worry about buoying people up as he would if he represented a group of people having names, faces, and a common destiny.

DICTION provides a big picture of the rhetoric in question, but it is also useful for examining things more specifically. Accordingly, the Stewart texts were reprocessed with WordSmith software (<http://www.lexically.net/wordsmith>), a program that efficiently produces language concordances. Combining these two approaches enables us to add detail to the trends already noted.

In *TDS* transcripts, 873 of the words used were nouns or verbs appearing two or more times (19.2% of all words used); 685 of the words found in the *Rolling Stone* interview were nouns or verbs appearing two or more times (16.1% of all words used). After subdividing these word lists into the elementary categories shown in Table 1, we find that Stewart's nouns broke fairly cleanly between human agents and more abstract entities. That was true for both *TDS* and the *Rolling Stone* interview. With no norms to guide us in these matters, it is hard to know whether these breakdowns are uniquely Stewart's or if they represent general trends.

As shown in Table 1, Stewart's is a tripartite world containing politicians, citizens, and media personnel. There is a fine stability to Stewart's cast of characters, permitting a different fight each night between leader and led: politicians pander, the people retreat; politicians flag, the people flail. There is also a self-reflexive quality to Stewart's characters, with people like him—fake reporters—receiving just as much air time as real reporters.

Juxtaposed against these dramatic personae is the real world—money, places, and objects—which become backdrops for people's actions. So, for example, real-life protestors are depicted as penned in and then pepper-sprayed by police. From this scene, we are whisked to one in which a fictitious cop (Tony Baloney) attacks everyone on the sidewalks of New York with an unknown mist (*TDS*, September 29, 2011). Elsewhere, clips of Wall Street protests turn into a new Bonnaroo festival, and Gandhi's starvation protest is juxtaposed with Chick-fil-A's campaign to eat all you can for traditional marriage (*TDS*, August 2, 2012).

Table 1 reports that ideas per se never figure prominently in Stewart's meanderings. They mostly stand to the side to add intellectual dignity to his wanderings. Illiteracy, charismatic leadership, human rights, and media hegemonies vie for attention in his scripts with protestors' bathroom habits and, then, dog videos. In the midst of such mayhem, it is hard to remember that root political issues were at stake in the social protests being mocked. Stewart would describe such a charge as fustian: "I do nighttime humor. If you want something serious, go see your archbishop." With Jon Stewart, the "satirist's shield" (Burton, 2010, p. ii) always provides a stout defense.

Table 1. Agents Deployed in Jon Stewart's Texts.

Human Agents	Exemplars	The Daily Show		Rolling Stone Interview	
		N	%	N	%
Politicians	Obama, government, Congress, union, democrats	115	22.2	82	22.5
Citizens	people, guys, husband, group, military, ladies, escort	105	20.3	86	23.6
Media	audience, CNN, news, Hannity, reporters, network, FOX	73	14.1	26	7.1
Subtotal		293	56.6	194	53.2
Other Agents					
Money	markets, dollars, budget, tax, check, economy, financial	57	11.0	4	1.1
Places	country, territory, local, national, native, path, downtown	62	11.9	40	10.9
Objects	fire, water, ground, head, hundred, crop, bags, hand	51	9.8	61	16.7
Ideas	ability, issue, cause, choice, method, minds, analogy	19	3.7	39	10.7
Time	years, hours, day, night, today, month, daily, week	36	7.0	27	7.4
Subtotal		225	43.4	171	46.8
Total		518	100.0	365	100.0

Table 2 opens up Stewart's world a bit further by examining the actions described in the transcripts studied. As can be seen, an overall symmetry develops: actions occur and feelings are felt; time marches on, but some people sit and wait; people have their desires, but they chatter more often. This starting and stopping makes for a leisurely show, a far different feeling than one gets when watching the frenzy of activity depicted on conventional news programs. In contrast to them, Stewart sits under the banyan tree, watching the world go by and occasionally reflecting on it.

Table 2. Actions Described in Jon Stewart's Texts.

		<i>The Daily Show</i>		<i>Rolling Stone Interview</i>	
		<i>N</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>%</i>
External Actions	Exemplars				
Productive	get, make, done, elected, pay, construct, cook, start, try	70	19.7	59	18.4
Transitional	going, continue, grew, follow, pull, came, walk, send, turn	64	18.0	55	17.2
Cooperative	deal, bargain, join, give, play, agreement, connection	14	3.9	4	1.3
Communicative	said, heard, show, call, debates, mention, question	44	12.4	71	22.2
Subtotal		192	54.0	189	59.1
Internal Actions					
Cognitive	know, think, understand, identify, evaluate, guess, reason	72	20.3	70	21.8
Sensory/emotional	feel, see, believe, seems, looks, watch, sensed, appears	32	9.0	35	10.9
Volitional	believe, might, try, wanted, could, may, wish, desire	24	6.8	4	1.3
Dilatory	sit, wait, hold, based, park, postpone, stand, delay	35	9.9	22	6.9
Subtotal		163	46.0	131	40.9
Total		355	100.0	320	100.0

Ironically, though, people do not *work together* in Stewart's world. That seems manifestly odd since the shows examined here dealt with social movements, a primitive form of human association. In the few cases where interpersonal cooperation was featured (during one of the Wisconsin protests), the protestors were lampooned for their gentility. "We're all human beings," says one of the protestors when asked to comment on his opponents, "we're all like each other." Stewart's interviewer responds by turning to the camera and saying, "This mob is gradually deteriorating." He then addresses the protestors directly: "Stop smiling; stop smiling" (*TDS*, February 22, 2011). All of this is great fun, but what was it, exactly, that the protestors were protesting?

I have examined only a small set of texts here and used only rudimentary tools when studying them. But the rough balance between human and nonhuman agents shown in Table 1, and between empirical and nonempirical actions shown in Table 2, indicate that Stewart's world is dialectical to the core. That is not surprising since Stewart is in the comedy business, which is itself a subset of dramaturgy: good versus evil, high versus low. Sharp contrasts like these entertain us, and, in drawing them, Stewart does nobody a grand violence. But when lampooning social protestors as he does, Stewart risks making civic participation seem daft. By skewering politicians so savagely, he also risks making politics appear feckless. Indeed, he may be feeding a larger political malaise. I shall now explain why.

Stewart as Actor

Anyone critiquing popular comedy runs the risk of being thought a prig. That is especially true for an academic since Jon Stewart is the darling of all right-thinking (which is to say left-thinking) scholars. Gainsaying Stewart is a lonely business, but one occasionally finds an ally in people like columnist Steve Almond. "Our high-tech jesters," says Almond (2011), "serve as smirking adjuncts to the dysfunctional institutions of modern media and politics, from which all their routines derive" (para. 2). Stewart's Occupy Wall Street segments, for example, "trivialized the movement by playing to right-wing stereotypes of protesters as self-indulgent neo-hippies" (para. 14). "It's a lot easier, and more fun," Almond (2011) continues, to experience war in the Middle East "as a passive form of entertainment than as a source of moral distress requiring citizen activism" (para. 21). Almond (2011) also makes a rather Marxian point: that Stewart's interviews are "cozy affairs, promotional vehicles for whatever commodity his guest happens to be pimping" (para. 18). The result? Stewart's "clever brand of pseudo-subversion guarantees a jolt of righteous mirth to the viewer" (para. 52), a feeling that evaporates the moment his show ends.

My critique of Stewart takes two forms: I believe that he offers (1) a sad model for human communication and (2) a dangerous model for politics. Each night, he teaches people how to position themselves as social beings. That he does so with special facility among young people lies at the core of my distress.⁴ But what worries me most is this: Stewart's cleverness wards off his naysayers. Like some sort of giant insect, Stewart deploys chemistry, coloration, mimicry, and camouflage to make himself seem innocent. "Take me seriously," he warns, "and you're the fool." "Fail to take me seriously," he warns again, "and you're the double fool." How does he instantiate such contradictory beliefs in his viewers?

For one thing, Stewart offers to bring young people under his wing and teach them the tricks of the trade. His political model is Oz-like, with Stewart becoming a new Dorothy, throwing back the curtain on serial deceptions. His heavy use of cognitive and communicative verbs and his focus on financial matters depict a world where unseen forces use chicanery to pick our pockets. This up-against-the-Man approach instinctively appeals to the young, those still trying to figure out a world whose rules of the road are often subtle and conflicting.

⁴ I say this as one who started the Annette Strauss Institute for Civic Life on my campus a dozen years ago to combat the cynicism and alienation affecting today's youth. See www.annettestrauss.org.

The September 12, 2011, installment of *TDS* provides an example. It is perfectly clear, says Stewart, that a well-meaning fellow like Barack Obama cannot succeed by simply doing the right thing, so we must “give up the pipe dream once and for all that an inspirational leader can challenge the status quo, remake Washington and govern successfully.” Instead, Stewart suggests, we need to remake the national economy by centering it on “campaign-based drivel.” We are “number one in aspiring political leaders telling us how great we are,” Stewart continues, so we should have monthly political conventions in every state, thereby “injecting billions into the balloon-drop, straw-hat, and dead escort-removal industries” (*TDS*, September 12, 2011).

Who would not feel hipper and more clever when consuming such stuff each night? By concentrating on political strategy, says St. Clair (2012), Stewart lowers our trust in government generally. That effect is doubled when Stewart features political motive, an entity that cannot be observed, that has no empirical standing. Those qualities make motive an ideal focus for Stewart since he can never be proven wrong: “You say you want to be an honest politician,” he implies, “but why should we believe you?” Once again, because the world has not yet unfolded for young people, they are suspicious of anything that cannot be seen. So when Stewart wryly observes that Governor Scott Walker is not trying “to strip the union of its power” but “just looking for savings” (*TDS*, February 22, 2011), his audience instantly completes the enthymeme: Walker is a politician; therefore, Walker is underhanded.

When deconstructing politics, Stewart’s persona is remarkably consistent. It consists of four parts:

(1) *Stewart is all-seeing*. Via mash-ups of video segments, Stewart can make any sort of reality appear, and, because these elements are visual, they contain a kind of existential authority—who can deny their own eyes? His snippets, of course, are completely reordered in time, making Stewart the impresario of pastiche. With their words and images thus rearranged, any politician can be made to seem incompetent or churlish. It is reasonable to assume that these decontextualizations, in turn, might lead to desocialization and dehumanization, two effects that democratic governance can ill afford.

(2) *Stewart is all-knowing*. One must wait patiently to hear Jon Stewart admit error or to apologize for something he has said or done. One must also wait patiently to find him surprised, genuinely surprised, by something he has just learned. When mentioning these matters to my graduate students, the Stewart lovers among them (which is to say most of them) immediately hit *TDS* archives looking for some instance—any instance—to prove me wrong. Perhaps they will succeed someday. If they do, I will then ask them why they have worked so hard in Stewart’s defense and what it would have meant to them if they had failed.

(3) *Stewart is anomic*. Jon Stewart gets angry at just about everything but never loses control. Instead, he fulminates at great volume and then breaks for a commercial. He uses emotion for dramatic purposes, which is not to say he is emotional. Similarly, Stewart doesn’t really listen to his interviewees but just waits for his time to talk again. There appears to be no interpersonal risk in Stewart, no possibility of his changing his mind. He becomes an electronic Janus—full of venom when attacking politicians, fully comedic when defending his attacks.

(4) *Stewart is everyman*. Jon Stewart is alleged to make some \$20 million per year, but he comes across as an average bloke, distressed that his nation has gone to the dogs:

You know what? If the people who were supposed to fix our financial system had actually done it, the people who have no idea how to solve these problems wouldn't be getting shit for not offering solutions. And while we all fight, the real victims, as always, continue to suffer. (*TDS*, October 6, 2011)

Jon Stewart, the Eugene Debs of late-night television. Although he himself sits atop the food chain (and even though he continued to appear on TV when his writers were on strike), Stewart sounds the siren call of rebellion: "You're the president. You're asking us to call Congress? I mean, sure. I'll call the Congress. Why don't you come here and mow my fucking lawn?" (*TDS*, July 26, 2011). Jon Stewart, a fellow who cuts his own grass.

Stewart's rhetoric embodies these four aspects of persona. But it is Stewart's *model of politics* that is especially concerning. It is one thing, after all, to believe in this or that policy or to prefer one candidate over another. It is quite another thing to embrace a hard-bitten and consistent worldview and to know ahead of time how things will turn out—who will inevitably win, who will inevitably lose. Stewart's model of politics has these features:

- *An iconoclastic politics*: Jon Stewart seems to stand for little but himself. There is nothing wrong with that except that Stewart also presents himself as democracy's savior (e.g., his famous Rally for Sanity in Washington, DC). That is why his admirers were so distressed when he suddenly turned on the social activists involved in the Wisconsin and Wall Street protests. His viewers had believed, wrongly as it turned out, that they could ride the Stewart tiger without being consumed by it. Alas, when a seven share is at stake, all bets are off and everything becomes eligible for *TDS's* maw.
- *A jejune politics*: *TDS* is an entertainment vehicle. It wears away the cares of the day. It appeals to the child within us, encouraging us to laugh at our betters, to see their foibles. In so doing, the show may be therapeutic for some, but its view of politics seems wrongheaded: It seeks out simplicity—the failed public servant, the easy legislative fix—when real politics is inevitably complex. By decrying political nuance, Stewart denounces the essential flexibility needed in a large and diverse nation.
- *An impatient politics*: The endless negotiations and half-measures of politics are anathema to Stewart. They are also anathema to many Americans who seem to manage their own affairs with ease and who therefore cannot understand why the nation's capital so often seems a bollix. Stewart encapsulates these sentiments in the *Rolling Stone* interview, where he admits to being surprised at "how much [Obama] deferred to

the legislative process” and how he [Stewart] “would have preferred to see something a little bit more transformative” (Bates, 2011, para. 43). Stewart notwithstanding, it must be remembered that the legislative process is what makes a democracy a democracy.

- *An inert politics*: Jon Stewart stands against standing somewhere. Nobody is heroic on *TDS*; nobody transcends. All are caught in the mire and muck, as seen in the equivalence between “doing” and “observing” verbs in his transcripts. Stewart offers the people bread and circuses, but no roads are paved on his show and no jobs secured. “The great art of life is sensation,” says Lord Byron, “to feel that we exist, even in pain.” Yes, but not on *TDS*.
- *A lonely politics*: Like many satirists, Stewart features distinct personalities. Collectivities Congress and unions, churches and political parties—bore him. Because these broad interconnections are hard to get a bead on comically, he settles for individuals, once describing Michael Moore as a “green-capped Michigan warbler” (*TDS*, September 30, 2011) and a New York City police officer as a “human crop duster” (*TDS*, September 29, 2011). People’s lives flatten out in Stewart’s world. He emerges as the Lone Ranger, but also as a lonely ranger resistant to networks and memberships. The best Jon Stewart can offer is a crusade of one.

In a rather confessional moment, Stewart once opined: “If you’re a guy who grew up in the back of a comedy club, you don’t believe in your ability to do anything” (para. 32). In contrast, says Stewart, Roger Ailes, creator of the FOX network, is “a guy who was sitting in the White House” and hence believed in his “power to effectively create social change” (para. 30). So maybe the difference between him and Ailes, Stewart concludes, “is confidence” (para. 30). There are other differences as well: Ailes knows that politics requires a core set of beliefs, a patient and resilient worldview, a proclivity to act, and a willingness to join with others to fix what is wrong. In private life, Jon Stewart may believe these things, but on *TDS* he has little patience for the complexities of everyday politics.

Stewart as Interrogative

The worries I have about *TDS* may be overblown. After all, many writers have detailed the social utilities of irony, including its ability to comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable. Scholars report that the ironic understandings offered by Stewart and others can help young people cope with a large and conflicting world (Calavita, 2004), build associations with those of like mind (Druick, 2009), clarify their intellectual options (Boyer & Yurchak, 2010), and identify a counterforce to lazy and conventional reportage (Hess, 2011). By contrasting reality to the appearance of reality, says Colletta (2009), Stewart becomes a prosocial force of considerable merit.

But there is also this: by concentrating so heavily on the stratagems of politics rather than its substance, late-night comedy can escalate cynicism (Elenbaas & de Vreese, 2008; Fu, 2008), reduce systemic loyalties (Cao & Brewer, 2009), and produce political mistrust in societies that can ill afford it

(Guggenheim et al., 2011). My own reading of Stewart tends in that direction largely because I embrace a traditional set of normative assumptions—that direct political involvement is worthy of emulation; that representative government is a magisterial good; that those who administer to the citizenry deserve both our respect and our scrutiny; that political critique is essential to good governance but that self-serving critique is tawdry; and that democratic institutions are the products of human ingenuity and extraordinary labor and hence essential to a large, comingled polity. Jon Stewart’s work often flies in the face of these assumptions.

Or so I fear. But what is really needed are more, and more serious, studies of political entertainment, the kinds of thoughtful scholarship represented elsewhere in this colloquy. If people, especially young people, are getting their news from places like *TDS*, we need to know what it is doing to them. Some of the questions to be answered are philosophical in nature and some empirical. Still others are phenomenological, and they especially intrigue me. Here are a few such questions:

- Why are we so interested in political motives, especially when they are so well hidden? Would our time be better spent attending to the practical consequences of our leaders’ actions and to the constraints under which they operate?
- Why does Jon Stewart have such disciplinary power? Why is liking Stewart important to young people, and what would it cost them to join a more optimistic cadre? What deep cravings make *TDS* a habit for so many?
- What political humor persists and what fades away? Why are adultery, drug abuse, and financial irregularities often the source of humor, while ethnic and religious jokes make people uncomfortable? Why is U.S. political comedy less acidic than that found in England? Does humor reliably point to a nation’s sociological soft spots?
- Does political comedy give us special “frames” for viewing the world? If Jon Stewart is a new “common sense” (Duffy, 2012), what sort of sense is it? Does *TDS* make the political enterprise clearer or more confusing for viewers? Are other forms of popular entertainment more encouraging about the work of government officials? (See Besley & Diels, 2009.)
- What sort of political entertainment is not entertaining? Why did jokes about the young Chelsea Clinton or the young Amy Carter backfire, and why are President Obama’s children off-limits as well? Why do Republicans have such a hard time being funny? Is humor an inherently liberal thing?
- Why is the political sphere so attractive to comedians? What openings for their imaginations does it provide? What is it about the nation’s longings, its sociology and traditions, that make political jokes appropriate on television but verboten at the neighborhood cocktail party?

- What sort of political humor travels well on the Web but poorly on television? Which jokes demand anonymous sources, and what does that say about the nation's unresolved issues? (See Weaver, 2010.) Which jokes are best shared on social media versus the watercooler versus *The Rush Limbaugh Show*?

A strong case can be made that *TDS* keeps politics on the national agenda. By discussing the issues of the day as he does—relentlessly, athletically—Stewart may well stimulate important conversations among those who would otherwise be contemplating their navels. At the same time, there is a Seinfeldian quality to Stewart's work, a wandering-around followed by a not-much-happening.⁵ And so one wonders whether Jon Stewart is serving us well. With political cynicism reliably linked to normlessness and estrangement (Pattyn, Van Hiel, Dhont, & Onraet, in press) and with politicians already suffering considerable opprobrium, sometimes for reasons not of their making (Blow, 2011; Saad, 2011), we must ask whether *TDS* is a luxury we can afford.

Conclusion

Especially needed in the future are civic modeling studies, which ask (1) who is teaching young people about citizenship, (2) what their curriculum is, and (3) whether their students are succeeding. How is Jon Stewart doing as a teacher? Is he making cynicism so attractive that young people now have no option but to rally around their collective despair? To be sure, Stewart's clever deconstructions make people feel they are in on the game, but this is also true: Democracy is not a game; it is a grand enterprise, and it needs all hands on deck.⁶

Talented as he is, there is little doubt that Jon Stewart could achieve more. Sometimes he does. For example, Figures 6, 7, and 8 show a DICTION-based overview of the progressions found in his *Rolling Stone* interview. One should pay special attention to the interview's concluding segment, where Stewart becomes particularly thoughtful. Although the figures show that he ends on a sour note (low Optimism), he also makes a strong case (high Certainty) for the nation's harmonies (high Commonality).

⁵ For more on a Seinfeldian take on politics, see an insightful essay by Olbrys (2005).

⁶ Some scholars argue that the popularity of political celebrities like Stewart results from such factors as "the move from hierarchies to networks, the hollowing out of the state, the fluidity of identity, the increased importance of media and so on" (Street, 2012, p. 350). See also Marsh, 't Hart, and Tindall (2010).

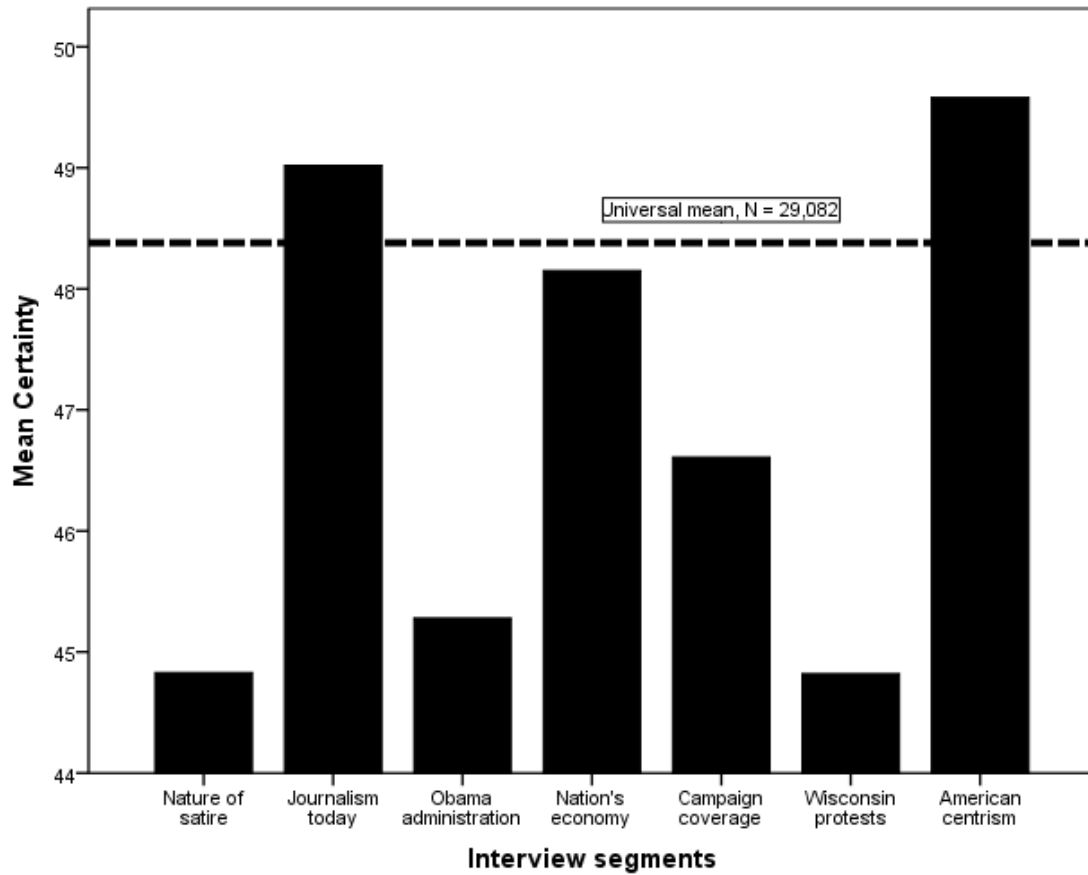


Figure 6. Topical Progression for Rolling Stone Interview: Certainty.

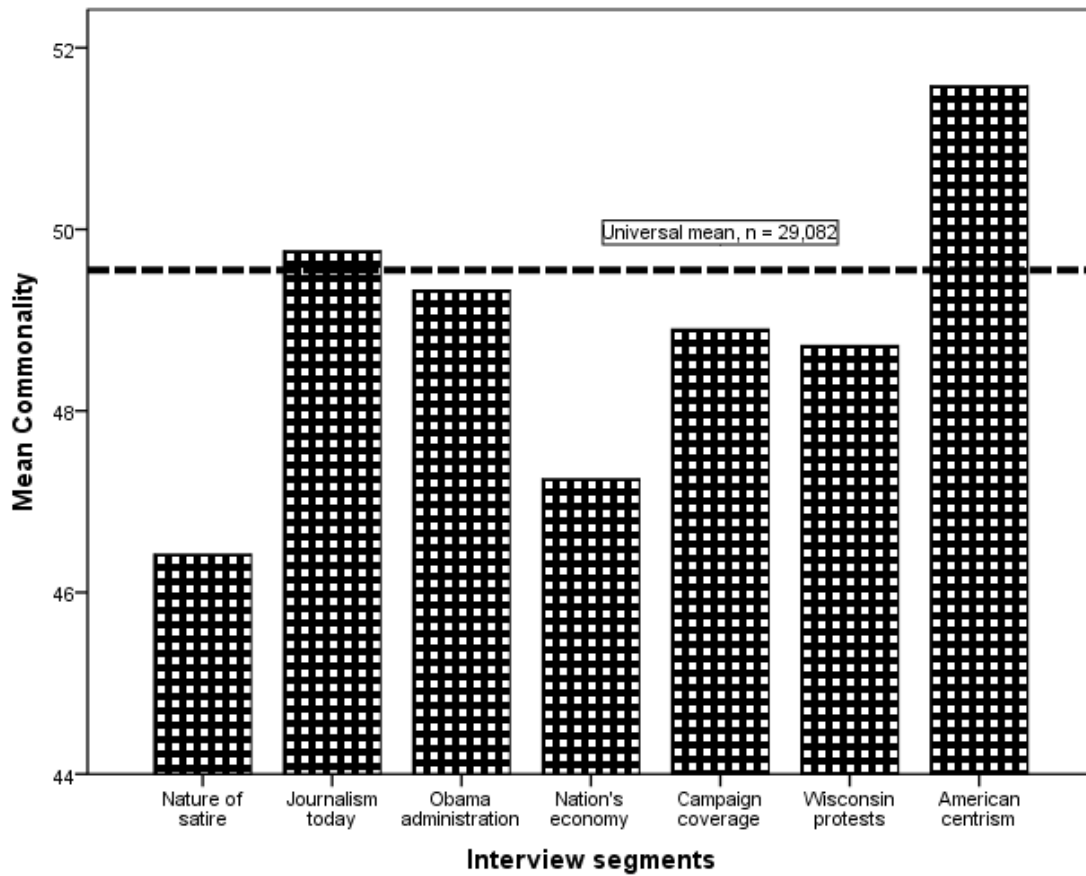


Figure 7. Topical Progression for Rolling Stone Interview: Commonality.

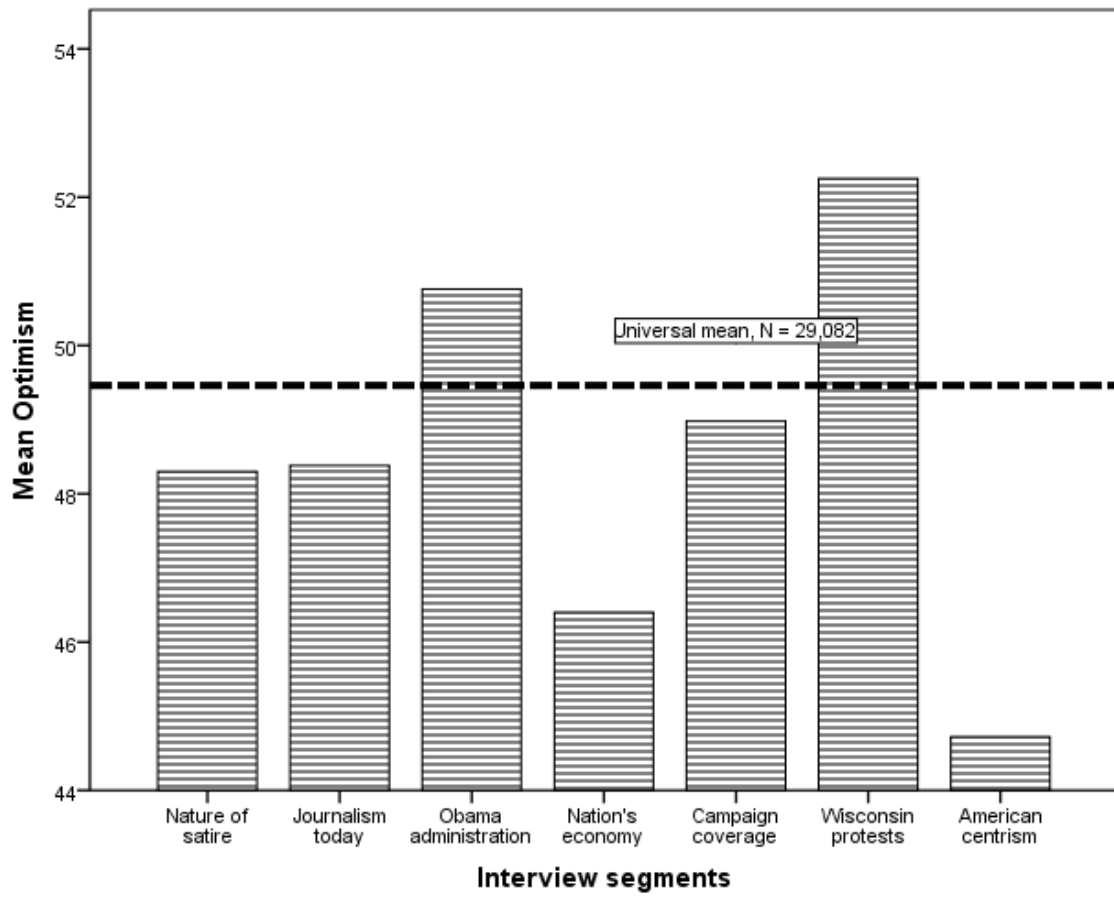


Figure 8. Topical Progression for Rolling Stone Interview: Optimism.

At the end of the interview, Stewart reminds us that not long ago in American history, "a guy on the floor of the Senate once beat another senator with a cane" (Bates, 2011, para. 98). "The country began in a revolution," Stewart contends, and

grew through a removal of a native people, enslaved a whole other group of people and now our big culture battle is whether or not gay people can marry. That is a remarkable achievement as a society. If that doesn't speak of the progress of a nation, I don't know what does. (para. 98)

"There's a lot of shitty stuff going on," Stewart continues, "and there are a lot of people who are not as cooperative in the legislative process as you would like" (para. 99). "The thing that I still believe," Stewart opines, "is that the overwhelming majority of the country is not this conflict-driven, identity-laden group of ideologues. It just isn't, and that ultimately always wins out" (para. 100). He then offers a salty benediction:

No matter what, the guy with the NRA bumper sticker and the DON'T TREAD ON ME flag is still going to pull over when he sees an accident and the "No Nukes" guy and vice versa. Like with the World Trade Center. Nineteen guys can knock it down, but hundreds and hundreds are still going to rush to it to fucking pull people out. That's just the way it is. So I'm always of the mindset that any asshole victory is short-lived. It just is. They lose. Assholes lose. (para. 100)

The bits of data I have assembled here show this to be an atypical Jon Stewart. But hearing sentiments like this could do wonders for a weary and dispirited people, not to mention young adults still fashioning their political selves. Given the size of Stewart's audience, it would be nice to hear more such refrains from him. It would cost little to provide them: less arch of the eyebrow, fewer sardonic smiles, perhaps a video editor with a more generous view of human nature. For some bizarre, poststructural reason, the possibility of leadership has been thrust upon Jon Stewart. It would be nice to see him lead.

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