

Jester, Fake Journalist, or the New Walter Lippman?: Recognition Processes of Jon Stewart by the U.S. Journalistic Community

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How does the journalistic community negotiate its identity, boundaries, and authority in relation to individuals and cultural forms that challenge the definitions of who is a journalist and what constitutes journalism? And how does it do so against the background of a growing academic validation of these alternative news venues? This study focuses on the figure of Jon Stewart, host of Comedy Central's *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*, and on the stages and strategies by which Stewart was embedded into mainstream journalistic discourse, and in which journalists negotiated Stewart's definition, authority, and position vis-à-vis the U.S. journalistic community. By examining the journalistic discourse over a period of nine years and adopting a cultural, inter-textual, process-oriented approach, the paper seeks to go beyond the framework of "paradigm repair," attempting to account for journalism's changing identity and boundaries, while paying particular attention to the ways in which those boundaries are shaped by a complex interplay among different players within, on, and outside the margins of the journalistic community. The paper also suggests that Stewart's relatively successful co-optation was due to a fit between the normative and epistemological assumptions of three central players — the journalistic community, political communication scholars, and Stewart himself.

Introduction

Recent years have seen a proliferation of studies on late-night comedy as a source of political information or as an alternative mode of journalism, with a growing emphasis on so-called "fake news shows," and particularly on Comedy Central's *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* (e.g., Baym, 2005;

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Feldman, 2007; Fox, Koloen, & Sahin, 2007; Hollander, 2005; Jones, 2005, 2007; Mutz, 2004; Young, 2004; Young & Tisinger, 2006). The incorporation of *The Daily Show* into the social scientific discourse on news and journalism is reflected not only in the wealth of studies on the topic, but also in phenomena such as academic forums and panels dedicated to Jon Stewart, and by the inclusion of Comedy Central's shows in measures and reports of news consumption.

For example, the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press published a report in 2007 suggesting that viewers of political satire shows on Comedy Central (*The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report*) had higher levels of political knowledge than audiences of other news outlets, such as cable news channels, the network evening news, and daily newspapers (Pew Research Center for the People & the Press, 2007). While those findings followed previously reported trends (e.g., National Annenberg Election Survey, 2004), the Pew report represented another stage in the growing validation of satire/fake news programs, most significantly by explicitly referring to these shows as "news sources" in both the report and the survey questions.¹

A forum dedicated to Stewart in *Critical Studies in Media Communication* is another example of his infusion into the contemporary academic discourse. The critical forum, reproducing a plenary session at the 2006 annual convention of the National Communication Association, tried Stewart for "heresy against democracy" (see Lule, 2007, p. 262). The prosecution accused Stewart of "unbridled political cynicism" (Hart & Hartelius, 2007, p. 263), whereas the defense argued that the cynicism was to be found "in the political class, in mainstream journalism, and even perhaps among scholars in political communication" (Hariman, 2007, p. 273), with Stewart being "one of the few effective antidotes" to this cynical culture (p. 275).

Other scholars explicitly positioned *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* as a new form of political journalism, one which better met the needs and characteristics of contemporary citizens, and which compensated for some of the flaws of mainstream journalism. Mutz (2004) called on journalists and journalism schools to take their cues from programs like *The Daily Show*; Baym (2005) suggested that, while the show itself should not become the news of record, "it has much to teach us about the possibilities of political journalism in the 21st century" (p. 259); and Jones (2005, 2007) presented *The Daily Show* as a new form of political television, one which provides "quality information that citizens can use in making informed decisions about electoral politics" (2007, p. 143).

¹ The term "news sources" was employed not only in the report, but also in the survey question itself. The question was phrased: "I'd like to know how often you watch, listen to, or read some different news sources," and one of the options was "shows like *The Colbert Report* or *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*" (Pew Research Center for the People & the Press, 2007, p. 30). It should be noted that the report does not suggest that viewers get all their political knowledge from what it calls "comedy news shows," but that audiences for these shows are, on average, more educated and more interested in politics, and they tend to get their news from a larger number of news outlets. However, as the report notes, even after taking into account their overall news gathering habits and their political and demographic characteristics, audiences for the comedy shows still have significantly higher knowledge scores than the average (p. 14).

Largely missing from the proliferating academic discourse on Stewart has been the perspective of mainstream journalists themselves. How does the journalistic community treat individuals and cultural forms that challenge the definition of who is a journalist and what constitutes journalism, and how does it negotiate its boundaries, authority, and identity in relation to these "other" players? This study examines the stages and strategies by which Stewart was embedded into mainstream journalistic discourse, and by which journalists negotiated Stewart's definition, authority, and position vis-à-vis the U.S. journalistic community. By examining the journalistic discourse on Stewart since he first started hosting *The Daily Show* in 1999, and by adopting a cultural, inter-textual, process-oriented approach, this paper seeks to go beyond the framework of "paradigm repair" (e.g., Berkowitz, 2000; Cecil, 2002; Reese, 1990) and attempts to account for journalism's changing identity and boundaries, paying particular attention to the ways in which those boundaries are shaped by a complex interplay among different players within, on, and outside the margins of the journalistic community.

The article begins with a short review of the roots, contours, and limitations of the work on *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* within the field of political communication. It moves to consider the relevant literature on the culture and boundaries of journalism, points to this study's potential contribution to this strand of inquiry, and then turns to a detailed analysis of five different stages in the positioning and recognition of Stewart by mainstream journalists. It concludes by considering the implications of this analysis on the study of the changing boundaries of journalism and the complex interactions and inter-textual relations among different players that shape the contemporary media culture.

***The Daily Show* in Political Communication Scholarship**

Studies of alternative forms of journalism have usually originated in culturally-oriented scholarship, which tended to migrate "to those dimensions of journalism that were most distanced from its pronounced sense of self" (Zelizer, 2004a, p. 185). Interestingly, however (and for reasons that will be discussed below), much of the research on late-night comedy and *The Daily Show* has been conducted by political communication scholars, who began to acknowledge the untenability of the distinction between news and entertainment and sought to expand the definition of political communication beyond traditional news (see Delli Carpini & Williams, 2001, forthcoming).

In turning some of their attention to alternative media sources that could inform the public and influence various political variables, political communication scholars have tended to rely on the same theoretical, methodological, and normative frameworks that guided their studies of mainstream journalism. Thus, for example, Hollander (2005) examined the effects of late-night comedy on different types of political knowledge; Young (2004) examined the effects of exposure to late-night comedy programs on trait ratings of candidates in the 2000 Presidential election; Baumgartner and Morris (2006) conducted an experiment that examined the effects of *The Daily Show* on candidate evaluations, efficacy, and cynicism; and Fox et al. (2007) compared the amount of political substance in the coverage of the 2004 presidential election on network television and on *The Daily Show*. These studies were accompanied by widely cited surveys that established the growing popularity of *The Daily Show* as a source of political information, the knowledgeability of its audience, and the declining audience for traditional news outlets

(National Annenberg Election Survey, 2004; Pew Research Center for the People & the Press, 2004a, 2004b, 2007).

While this strand of research produced mixed findings regarding the effects of *The Daily Show*, it subjected the program to the same normative standards of traditional journalism, and gradually separated it from — and elevated it above — the networks' late-night shows, such as *The Tonight Show with Jay Leno* or *Late Show with David Letterman*. To a certain degree, the interest of political communication scholars in *The Daily Show*, and the tendency to impose on it their longstanding normative and theoretical frameworks, can be attributed to Stewart's own adherence to traditional democratic values. Jones (2005) describes Stewart's persona as one built upon a tension between the cynic and the idealist, and between the postmodern and the modern. On the one hand, the show is a postmodern product which defies conventional boundaries and dichotomies. On the other hand, Stewart passes as a political idealist who represents the disappointed citizen and believes in the ultimate responsibility of political and media institutions to tell the truth, inform citizens, and promote public deliberation. While scholars often refer to Stewart's alternative presentation of political content, I would argue that it is precisely Stewart's modernist rhetoric and political idealism that appeal to political scientists and allow them to accommodate Stewart in their interpretive community. In other words, Stewart articulates the values and concerns that underlie much of the research in political communication (as well as the self-presentations of journalists), thereby rendering himself a suitable object for political analysis.

The quantitative investigations of the effects and contents of *The Daily Show* have provided important insights into the political qualities of the show and its effects on outcomes such as political knowledge, cynicism, political opinions, or the criteria by which political figures are judged and evaluated. However, in their tendency to isolate the unique effects and contents of *The Daily Show*, these studies failed to address both the interactions between *The Daily Show* and other forms of journalism and the complex inter-media dynamics that constantly shape and change the news environment. As Young conceded in the conclusion to her article:

One of the most important, albeit discouraging, lessons to be learned through this exercise is how the complexity of the campaign environment complicates the analysis of late-night humor's effects. Even including exposure to late-night programming in a model with extensive control variables leaves one wondering, "What is left?" (...) Hasn't one lost the very synergy that might make them [the effects] interesting? (2004, p. 19)

In-depth qualitative analyses of the contents, rhetoric, and discursive strategies of *The Daily Show* have enriched our understanding of many of the elements used to construct the show: the various ways in which Stewart uses the mainstream news in the show (McKain, 2005); the hybrid character of the show, which draws on techniques from the genres of news, comedy, and television talk (Baym, 2005); and the actual types of political information and "truths" that are offered by the *Daily Show*, in comparison with news reports on CNN (Jones, 2007). However, questions remain regarding the other side of the equation. That is, how "traditional" journalism has reacted to the phenomenon of *The Daily Show*, how the show has been incorporated into mainstream journalistic discourse, and what effect the show and the discourses that surround it have had on the ways in which the U.S. journalistic community defines itself.

A first step in this direction was taken by Feldman (2007), who examined the journalistic discourse about *The Daily Show* from January 1999 to March 2004. Feldman showed how journalists used *The Daily Show* as an occasion to reconsider the distinction between news and entertainment, as well as the professional ideology of objectivity. This paper extends Feldman's study in several ways: It examines a longer time period (ending in December 2007); it adopts a processual perspective and identifies different stages in the journalistic response to Stewart; and it focuses more closely on the news and editorial sections of the newspapers, on the positioning of Stewart in relation to the mainstream journalistic community, and on the roles played by different actors within and outside the journalistic community in this complex recognition process.

The Culture, Identity, and Boundaries of Journalism

Viewing journalism as a culture, or as a form of popular culture, offers a particularly useful framework for thinking about the changing boundaries of journalism, the role of "outliers" in shaping these boundaries, and the strategies by which journalists strive to maintain their discursive control over the definition of who is a journalist and what constitutes journalism (Dahlgren, 1992; Zelizer, 2005). By "reading journalism against its own grain while giving that grain extended attention" (Zelizer, 2004a, p. 176), and by "suspending the conventional, taken-for-granted definitions and boundaries which prevail within journalism" (Dahlgren, 1992, p. 1), a cultural analysis of journalism can account for the complexity, broadness, and flux of the journalistic environment, while not losing sight of journalists' own interpretive frameworks.

Like other social groups and communities, journalists define their identity in relation to, and by the exclusion of, certain others (cf. Hall, 1996a). Indeed, investigating the construction and affirmation of journalists' identities in relation to certain excluded others has been a productive avenue in cultural analyses of journalism. This body of literature can be divided into two broad categories determined by the position of the other in relation to whom the community's identity and borders were defined. One set of studies focused on deviant insiders; that is, individuals from within the journalistic community, who violated the norms and ethical conventions of the community. This category includes Eason's (1986) pioneer study on the journalistic discourse surrounding the Janet Cooke scandal — when a young black reporter for *The Washington Post* was fired after admitting she had fabricated a Pulitzer Prize-winning story; Reese's (1990) analysis of the journalistic community's repair work following a revelation that a reporter for *The Wall Street Journal* had been an active socialist; Hindman's (2005) study on *The New York Times'* attempts to repair its image and the journalistic paradigm following the Jayson Blair scandal; or Cecil's (2002) study on the "paradigm overhaul" undertaken by news analysts in reaction to unreliable reports on CNN and in *TIME* magazine. In all of these cases, the journalistic community established boundaries between itself and the "deviant" individuals, thereby repairing the breach and reinstating its ideal self-identity and its collective knowledge of what constitutes good journalism.

A second set of studies refers to cultural/journalistic forms that are positioned *outside* mainstream journalism. This includes some initial work on the relationship between mainstream journalism and news Web sites/blogs (Ruggiero, 2004; Singer, 2003, 2007), but the most developed

scholarship in this area has focused on the relationship between mainstream journalism and the tabloid press/television — or what Langer (1998) has called “the other news.” While tabloids and the “serious press” can be viewed as different positions on a “storytelling continuum,” rather than as dichotomous entities (Bird, 1992), scholars have demonstrated how mainstream journalists had gone to great lengths to define tabloids as the antithesis of professional and “good” journalism. For example, Bishop (1999) and Berkowitz (2000) analyzed the journalistic discourse following the death of Princess Diana, and showed how journalists worked to separate themselves from tabloid journalists, who were presented as unethical, unprofessional, and solely responsible for Diana’s death. Pauly analyzed journalists’ portrayals of Rupert Murdoch and demonstrated how, time and again, journalists portrayed Murdoch as “the dark Other, a vulgar Prince of Darkness, the Antichrist of Professional Journalism” (1988, p. 249). Pauly suggested that Murdoch provided journalists “with someone to be normal against” (p. 247), and argued that the demonization of Murdoch was due, to a large degree, to his refusal to honor “the canons of professionalism,” while still asserting that his newspapers were “every bit journalistic” (p. 252).

Stewart constitutes a different type of other than deviant insiders or tabloid journalists. First, as suggested above, while Stewart may offer an alternative form of journalism and new interpretations of journalistic conventions, he also stands as one of the foremost advocates of traditional journalistic values and roles. Second, unlike other excluded actors, Stewart does not claim membership in the journalistic community (at least not explicitly). In all his public appearances, he insists that he is only a comedian, and that his show is fake news and not, in any manner, the news itself. What complicates matters is the fact that certain parts of the public and the academy do treat Stewart as a source of news, thereby “forcing” the journalistic community to consider Stewart’s membership, despite his apparent reluctance to be a member of the club. Finally, many of the dichotomies that underlie the constructed opposition between mainstream journalism and the “other news” do not hold in Stewart’s case. Stewart’s show, which focuses on the political and the public, rather than the private and the “soft,” cannot be easily contrasted with “serious,” “hard” journalism. Furthermore, the demographic data on the audience for Stewart’s show challenge the stratified class- and education-level distinctions that characterize the constructed dichotomy between serious, high-brow journalism and other forms of news. To a large extent, Stewart’s audience is also the “imagined audience” of *The New York Times* or other elite news outlets.

All of this suggests that the processes of negotiating Stewart’s position vis-à-vis the journalistic community may be more complicated than some of the other cases mentioned above. It also suggests that focusing on journalists’ reactions to Stewart may allow us to go beyond exclusion and affirmation-of-boundaries narratives.

Most of the abovementioned studies tell a similar story — a story of exclusion, reinstatement of the dominant journalistic paradigm, and reestablishment of the existing boundaries between mainstream journalism and other media players. This can be attributed, in part, to the types of “others” that these studies focus on, but also to the framework of “paradigm repair” that underlies much of this research (e.g., Berkowitz, 2000; Cecil, 2002; Reese, 1990; Ruggiero, 2004). The framework of paradigm repair does not assume that the boundaries of journalism and its epistemological basis are stable; indeed, it acknowledges that they require continuous maintenance. Its focus, however, by definition, is on repair strategies rather than strategies of expansion or transformation. According to this perspective, the news

paradigm, whose major feature is the idea of objectivity, has a hegemonic function (Reese, 1990), and paradigm repair activities attempt to “restore faith in the paradigm of objectivity by isolating the people or organizations that stray from the rest of the news media institution” (Berkowitz, 2000). As such, this perspective does not leave much room for expanding and changing the boundaries of the journalistic community. In other words, while this strand of research uses the sensitivities, terminology, and questions of cultural approaches to journalism, it often tends to fall into the trap of defining the default setting of journalism too narrowly (see Dahlgren, 1992) while not fully accounting for either journalism’s “changing, often contradictory dimensions” (Zelizer, 2005, p. 198), or for the ways in which other forms of journalism continually reshape the journalistic world.

Another feature that distinguishes this study from prior research in this area is its focus on a relatively long period of time and its adoption of a process-oriented approach. Previous studies have tended to focus on certain disruptive events which generated a wealth of journalistic discourse. While such critical incidents (like the Kennedy assassination, Watergate, or severe professional breaches) are extremely useful in examining journalists’ boundary work and negotiations over journalistic practices (see Zelizer, 1993), when the purpose is to identify gradual processes and explore changes in the positioning of certain “outliers” in relation to the journalistic community, it is useful to look at discursive patterns over a long period of time in various discursive contexts.

Method

In order to explore the processes by which the journalistic community negotiated Stewart’s position, I examined journalistic texts that referred to Jon Stewart over a period of nine years, from January 1999, when Stewart began hosting *The Daily Show* on Comedy Central, to December 2007. My focus has been on texts from the news and editorial sections of two widely recognized newspapers of record — *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* — under the assumption that these outlets and sections represent the “hard core” of high-quality, professional journalism (in its traditional, idealized portrayals), and that the discourse generated by these newspapers has a significant role in the symbolic construction of the boundaries and identity of the mainstream journalistic community in the United States. A LexisNexis search for references to Jon Stewart in *The New York Times* (Section A and *Week in Review*) and *The Washington Post* (Section A and the editorial section)² from 1999 to 2007 yielded a total of 176 items (after cleaning the data for duplicates and irrelevant items). 112 items were from *The New York Times* and 64 were from *The Washington Post*.³

In addition to items from the two daily newspapers, the study included texts from two major trade magazines — *Columbia Journalism Review (CJR)* and *American Journalism Review (AJR)* — and a

² The “editorial section” of *The Washington Post* includes editorials/op-eds in both Section A and other sections of the newspaper.

³ A search for “Jon Stewart” in all of the newspapers’ sections yielded 799 items in *The New York Times* and 465 in *The Washington Post*. This suggests that the studied texts constitute about 14% of the total references to Stewart in both *The Times* and *The Post*.

sample of television interviews with Jon Stewart. The search for references to Stewart in the two trade magazines⁴ yielded a total of 22 items, of which 9 were from *CJR* and 13 from *AJR*. Similarly to *The Times* and *The Post*, references to Stewart in the two trade magazines ranged from passing references to substantial discussions. The interview sample⁵ is composed of 28 interviews with Stewart on ABC, CBS, PBS, Fox News, and CNN, and is not intended to be a representative sample of Stewart's interviews on U.S. television. Its purpose is to enrich and contextualize the analysis, and to account for some of the key moments in Stewart's relationship with the journalistic community, moments which have been frequently referenced in the journalistic discourse (like the *Crossfire* incident, or the interviews with Ted Koppel and Bill O'Reilly in 2004).

The analysis focused on patterns and points of change, and it used a combination of content and discourse analysis methods. I examined dimensions such as labels, descriptions, and evaluations of Stewart; the contexts in which he was mentioned; the identity of the journalists who referred to him; the individuals/groups in relation to whom he was defined/referred to; journalistic concepts, assumptions, and practices that were invoked in relation to Stewart; the type of discursive authority that was granted to him; his function in the journalistic texts that referred to him; and various dimensions of interactional positioning (see Wortham, 2001) in the interviews with Stewart.

The analysis revealed five major stages in the reception of Stewart by the mainstream journalistic community, made manifest in the ways in which he was embedded into the journalistic discourse. I call them *Stewart as Invisible* (1999); *Stewart as an Outsider* (2000–2002); *Stewart as a Source of Political Commentary* (2003–June 2004); *Stewart as an Interloper* (July 2004–June 2005); and *Stewart as a Cultural Authority* (July 2005–2007). The following analysis presents the five stages, as well as the central patterns and discursive features that marked each stage. Notwithstanding the structured presentation, the five categories should not be construed as entirely discrete, linear stages; nor should they be read as a teleological narrative. Rather, they should be viewed as representing the dominant patterns in each time period, and as offering a heuristic framework for thinking about different dynamics and positions that come into play in negotiating the status of a new cultural player vis-à-vis the journalistic community.

⁴ The search for items from the *Columbia Journalism Review* was conducted using the *Proquest* database, and items in *American Journalism Review* were retrieved from the magazine's Web site (<http://www.ajr.org/>)

⁵ Television interviews with Jon Stewart were retrieved through a combination of a *LexisNexis* search (with search terms such as "interview with Jon Stewart" or "guest: Jon Stewart"), and specific searches for major interviews that were referenced by the daily newspapers. The 28 interviews include 18 interviews on CNN; 4 on Fox News; 3 on ABC; 1 on CBS; and 2 on PBS.

First Stage – Stewart as Invisible

In his first year as host of *The Daily Show* (1999), Jon Stewart was absent from the news and editorial sphere, as well as the domain of professional discourse. With zero references in the examined trade magazines and the examined sections of *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post*, Stewart can be seen as far removed from the mainstream journalistic discourse at this early stage.

Invisibility is often the first stage in the representation (or lack thereof) of minority groups and “deviant” individuals in the mass media (cf. Gross, 2001). As a comedian, actor, and host of a relatively successful television show, Stewart was by no means culturally invisible or unrepresented in the media field of 1999. However, he was not considered a relevant player in the journalistic field, and was invisible vis-à-vis the journalistic community and the culture of journalism. Like other groups’ and individuals’ journeys from invisibility, Stewart’s increasing visibility within the journalistic sphere in the years to come was uneven, fraught with ambiguity, and marked by dialectic processes of incorporation and exclusion. However, Stewart also moved far beyond the “segregated visibility” (Hall, 1996b, p. 468) that often characterizes the treatment of “deviants” and marginalized groups, and which is the mark of the second stage in the reception of Stewart by the mainstream journalistic community.

Second Stage – Stewart as an Outsider

This stage began in 2000, with *The Daily Show’s* coverage of the presidential election (*Indecision 2000*), and ended toward the close of 2002. At this stage, Stewart had permeated the mainstream journalistic discourse, but his role was confined to that of a late-night comedian, along with long-established late-night hosts, such as Jay Leno, David Letterman, and Conan O’Brien. Of the 22 items that referred to Stewart during this period in *The Times* and *The Post*, 15 mentioned him in conjunction with other late-night hosts or, in a few cases, talk-radio hosts like Don Imus. Most of the texts dealt with candidate appearances on late-night shows (before the 2000 and 2002 elections), the political content of the opening monologues, and the potential influence of late-night television on candidate evaluations. Stewart was thus merely one among a group of comedians whose status was upgraded during this period, but whose authority was largely confined to candidate jokes. Furthermore, the group of late-night comedians were treated as a separate entity from the rest of the journalistic community (specific news items were dedicated to the role of comedy in the election), and they were not referred to as potential journalists or as sources of news and commentary.

Frank Rich’s column in *The New York Times* was an exception to this pattern, and a harbinger of the direction in which the discourse would head. In a column that reacted to the then-discussed possibility that David Letterman’s show would replace Ted Koppel’s *Nightline* on ABC, Rich noted that:

Young viewers who ditch their parents’ news sources often do get their news from Jon Stewart’s “Daily Show” and other comic venues that not infrequently have more insight and command of the facts than, say, the Ken and Barbie dolls lately recruited as news “personalities” to stem the hemorrhaging at CNN. (Rich, 2002, p. A15)

Frank Rich was one of the key figures in shaping *The Times'* treatment of Stewart in the years to come, as well as in evoking him as an antithesis to the failures and untrustworthiness of both the Bush administration and the mainstream news media (particularly with regard to the Iraq War). In this early column, while Stewart is still mentioned with "other comic venues," he is signalized, singularized, and discussed in the broader context of a competition between different types of journalism (Letterman vs. Koppel). More important, however, is the positioning of Stewart as a legitimate news source, and the suggestion that fake news may be more truthful than some other news venues.

In 2002, we can also find a first reference to Stewart in the *American Journalism Review (AJR)*. In an article about the future of magazines, a magazine founder and a journalism educator suggested that magazines should adapt themselves to "a generation of young people" who "grew up reading *Spy* magazine or *Mad*," "watch *The Simpsons* and *South Park*," and "get news from Jon Stewart" (Rosen, 2002). Here again, there is recognition of Stewart as a de-facto news source, and a limiting of his domain of influence to a youth culture (thereby maintaining an important boundary between serious, "mature" journalism and alternative, "rebellious" news sources).

At this stage, Stewart's and *The Daily Show's* harsh criticism of journalists' practices remained out of the news and editorial sections, as well as the trade magazines. However, it did start to appear in some of the interviews from this period, like Stewart's interviews on CNN's *Reliable Sources* — a media criticism show hosted by *Washington Post* reporter Howard Kurtz. While Stewart was asked in these interviews about his views on the news media, he was clearly positioned as an outsider to the journalistic field. For example, in April 2000, Kurtz opened the interview with the following question: "All right. You make fun of honest, hard-working, public-spirited journalists. And you make money doing it. Don't you feel a bit guilty?" (Kurtz, 2000). While Kurtz is at least partly ironic, his remark indexes and opposes two different groups — the group of professional journalists and the group of comedians, in the latter of which Stewart is positioned. On one side, there are journalists, who, at least ideally, work hard to serve the public; and on the other side, there are parasitic comedians, who use the mistakes and foibles of "hard-working" people to entertain and make money. It also suggests that, while Stewart's criticism may, at times, be justified, his authority is bounded by his entertainment functions and commercial motivations.

Kurtz concluded the interview with the following words: "Comedy Central's Jon Stewart, host of *The Daily Show*, turning his critical lens on us" (Kurtz, 2000). Note the use of "us" to index the group of journalists, as opposed to the previous example, where Kurtz refers to journalists in the third person. Kurtz, who functions in a dual role as a journalist in a prestigious newspaper and a media critic, oscillates in the interview between these two discursive positions, and between positioning Stewart as a fellow critic and as a mere entertainer. However, in both examples, Stewart is clearly excluded from the group of journalists. Throughout the interview, whenever plural pronouns are used by Kurtz or by Stewart to refer to journalists, including "we," "us," "they," and the plural "you," the indexed group does not include Stewart.

Third Stage – Stewart as a Source of Political Commentary

The third period, which ran from 2003 to the middle of 2004, was marked by a growing discursive authority that was granted to Stewart by the journalistic community. The most striking phenomenon in this period was the tendency to use quotations and analyses by Stewart in *The Times's* and *Post's* reports and columns. Of the 17 items that referred to Stewart in *The Times* and *Post* during this 18-month period, nine quoted Stewart in various contexts alongside other reputable sources and as a way to support the journalist's argument. The two following examples, one from *The Times* and one from *The Post*, demonstrate this phenomenon. The first, by *Times* op-ed columnist Maureen Dowd, refers to the Abu Ghraib scandal:

President Bush also seemed in a buoyant mood on Saturday. But he might think about getting just a tad more involved so he doesn't have to first see on TV, as he clicks around between innings, the pictures sparking a huge worldwide, American-reputation-shattering military scandal. And so he doesn't keep nattering about how we had to go to war to close Iraq's torture chambers, *when they are "really not shut down so much as under new management," as Jon Stewart dryly put it.* (Dowd, 2004, p. A35; emphasis mine)

In the second example, *Washington Post* reporter Paul Farhi uses Stewart to clarify his argument about Senator Joseph Lieberman's conservative leanings: "Comedian Jon Stewart recently suggested that Lieberman is 'the candidate for people who want to vote for Bush but don't think [Bush] is Jewish enough'" (Farhi, 2003, p. A1). In both examples, Stewart's words express ideas that the journalists themselves are not allowed to say. While they are still jokes, the context in which they are embedded removes them from the comedy niche and grants them a journalistic authority. Quoting Stewart also "exposes" the journalists as viewers of *The Daily Show*, which is in turn presented as a legitimate source of political commentary for news and op-eds in *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post*.

In the beginning of 2003, the *Columbia Journalism Review (CJR)* published a conversation between Stewart and Robert Love, a *Rolling Stone* journalist ("The Kids Are All Right," 2003). The topic was "the connection — or lack of connection — between young people and the news" (p. 27), and the two discussed the idea that young people were getting their news from *The Daily Show*, as well as issues like what it meant to be an informed citizen and what were the social roles of youth magazines. On the one hand, this was the first *CJR* item that referred to Stewart, and it represented a validation of Stewart as a legitimate contributor to the magazine. On the other hand, the magazine went to great lengths to underscore Stewart's limited authority, as suggested by the opening passage:

Stewart is not a journalist, but he plays one on TV. Stewart is the anchor and lead writer for *The Daily Show*, the mostly satirical program on Comedy Central. Stewart plays with the news in a way that has captured the attention of young people. ("The Kids Are All Right," 2003, p. 27)

In other words, Stewart is not a real member of the journalistic community, and his place in the magazine is due only to his success in attracting young audiences by “playing” with the news. His authority is thus limited to the somewhat “infantile” youth culture, which is distinct from the culture of “mature,” “real” journalists.

On *NOW*, Bill Moyers’s show on PBS, Moyers interviewed Stewart and tried to explore the sources of his authority and his position vis-à-vis the journalistic community. “I do not know whether you are practicing an old form of parody and satire or a new form of journalism,” he told him. He then asked if Stewart thought of himself as a social critic or a media critic, and finally concluded, “I do want people to know that you do not pass yourself off as Walter Lippmann” (Moyers, 2003). These questions, however, were not raised in the newspapers’ texts — or at least not in the news and editorial sections. Journalists referred to Stewart as “comedian Jon Stewart” or simply as “Jon Stewart,” and granted him discursive authority without explicitly questioning its origin. Stewart’s media criticism was still undiscussed, and he was not presented as a challenge or a threat to the self-definition of journalists, or to their traditional conceptions of truth or objectivity.

Fourth Stage – Stewart as an Interloper

In the second half of 2004, the relatively non-conflictive relationship between Stewart and the journalistic community took a new turn. Over a period of 12 months — from July 2004 (the Democratic and Republican National Conventions) to June 2005 — *The Times* and *The Post* published no less than 49 items that referred to Stewart in their news and editorial pages. These texts represented heated negotiations over Stewart’s social authority and his position in relation to the journalistic field. Five major themes and patterns can be identified in the journalistic discourse during this period: a focus on Stewart’s media criticism, a search for appropriate adjectives and analogies to describe Stewart, an attempt to impose journalistic standards and identity on Stewart (despite his refusal to “join the club”), negotiations over the identity of Stewart’s audience, and negotiations over the roles and practices of journalism.

First, while items from earlier stages were framed in a political context and usually referred to Stewart’s political criticism, most items at this stage focused on Stewart’s media criticism, on his challenge to journalistic conventions, or on questions concerning his social authority and influence. Among other factors, this change was due to Stewart’s prominent role as a source of information on the presidential campaign coverage — as described in widely-cited surveys (e.g., Long, 2004; National Annenberg Election Survey, 2004) — and to his stepping out of “the Comedy Central safety zone” by giving dozens of media interviews (as part of a book tour), in which he repeatedly criticized the news media and addressed his own role within the media world. The most famous interview was on CNN’s *Crossfire* (in October 2004), where Stewart accused the show’s hosts (Tucker Carlson and Paul Begala) of “partisan hackery” and of not upholding their “responsibility to the public discourse.” When Carlson and Begala attacked back and blamed Stewart for not asking John Kerry hard enough questions when he interviewed him — that is, of also not meeting journalistic standards — Stewart replied that he did not realize “news organizations look to Comedy Central for their cues on integrity” (Carlson & Begala, 2004). The interview triggered extensive

discussions in the news media, which used this incident to negotiate the journalistic status of both Stewart and *Crossfire*-type programs (see examples below).

A second characteristic of this stage was the search for appropriate adjectives and analogies by which to describe Stewart's actual or alleged role within American society. He was called a "fake journalist" (Kurtz, 2004, p. A1), "the nation's philosopher king" (Kinsley, 2005, p. B7), and "the newest font of all political wisdom" (Cohen, 2004, p. A23). He was described by a *Times* editorial as "perhaps the most influential political commentator on television" ("Exit, Snarling," 2005, p. 12), and by others as "taking just a tad too seriously his recent appointment by acclamation as the Walter Cronkite of our times" (Kinsley, 2004, p. B7), or as "a talented comedian," who "all of a sudden wants to be Kathleen Hall Jamieson" (Carlson, in Kurtz, 2004, p. A1). Ted Koppel said that Stewart "is to television news what a really great editorial cartoonist is to a newspaper" (in Kurtz, 2004, p. A1). These various analogies and titles reveal the confusion and ambivalence surrounding Stewart's position. They represent both the new heights to which Stewart's prestige rose, and the attendant, responsive efforts to diminish his authority.

A third interesting twist in this period was the attempt to "impose" journalistic standards and identity on Stewart, despite his refusal to "join the club." The *Times* ran an article titled "If you interview Kissinger, are you still a comedian?" It opened with the question "Is Jon Stewart being coy?" and continued to suggest that:

Whether he likes it or not, Mr. Stewart's mix of news and satire has become so successful that the comedian is suddenly being criticized for not questioning his guests with Tim Russert-like intensity. (...) Some critics insist that the size of Mr. Stewart's audience should force him to take a more serious approach. (Cave, 2004, p. 5)

The Post dedicated a front page article to Stewart, starting with the words: "Jon Stewart, fake journalist and proud of it, keeps insisting he's just a comedian" (Kurtz, 2004, p. A1). The article then goes on to claim that this insistence can no longer be justified. As one interviewee said:

Stewart has pretty much painted a target on his chest with his "Crossfire" appearance. To say he is just a comedy show is a cop-out in a way. He's gotten so much power. So many people look to him that you can't really be the kid in the back throwing spitballs.

At one level, this trend can be seen as an attempt to "domesticate" Stewart and force him to assume his social responsibility and adopt journalists' professional standards. At a second level, it can be viewed as an attempt to contain Stewart's criticism and maintain control over it. As suggested by Dahlgren (1992), journalists strive to "retain definitional control of the field, its problems, and potential solutions" (p. 2). Or in other words, if Stewart wants to flay journalists and change the rules of the game, he should do it from within the community.

A fourth theme in this period's negotiations concerned the identity of Stewart's audience. On the one hand, people like Bill O'Reilly — whose own status within the journalistic field was insecure — worked to delegitimize Stewart through the marginalization of his audience. Thus, in an interview on *The O'Reilly*

Factor (September 2004), O'Reilly repeatedly referred to *The Daily Show* viewers as "stoned slackers" and "dopey kids" (O'Reilly, 2004). On the other hand, more and more journalists began to acknowledge that the Jon Stewart phenomenon was not limited to the youth community, and that the boundaries between audiences (and hence between their news providers) cannot be easily maintained. A significant role in this development was played by *New York Times* columnist Thomas Friedman, who shared his insights from his recent book tour, on which he took "the pulse of the country":

What was new to me on this tour was the number of people who also mentioned getting their news from Jon Stewart's truly funny news satire, "The Daily Show." And I am not just talking about college kids. I am talking about grandmas. Just how many people are now getting their only TV news from Comedy Central is not clear to me — but it is a lot, lot more than you think. (Friedman, 2005, p. A27)

Friedman's recognized social authority, in combination with the authority derived from eyewitnessing and "being there," validates his claims and bases them on journalistic modes of knowledge (what Zelizer [1993] called the "local mode of interpretation"), rather than on merely academic surveys.

However, the recognition of Stewart's wide audience did not necessarily signify approval on the part of mainstream journalists. Ted Koppel opened an interview with Jon Stewart (during the 2004 Democratic convention) with the following words: "A lot of television viewers — more, quite frankly, than I'm comfortable with — get their news from the comedy channel on a program called '*The Daily Show*.' Its host is Jon Stewart" (Koppel, 2004). Suggesting that viewers "get their news" from Stewart's show, Koppel positions Stewart as a de-facto news provider. However, Koppel explicitly expresses his discomfort with Stewart's status, and distances himself and his own audience from Stewart and the phenomenon of *The Daily Show*. He does so by juxtaposing and opposing his own position towards the show and the position of Stewart's audience, and by using the phrase "a program called '*The Daily Show*'" to refer to the show, thereby implying that the name is not familiar to many of Koppel's viewers (it is hard to imagine Koppel saying "a program called '*60 Minutes*'").

Finally, this period was marked by journalists' negotiations over the roles and forms of news, the meaning of objectivity and partisanship, the desired characteristics of public discourse, and questions of credibility and truth-telling. In the abovementioned exchange between Koppel and Stewart, the two anchors heatedly discussed their respective social roles and the meaning of news, credibility, and truth in the contemporary media environment (including the question of whether Koppel should say "that's BS" on his program). Such discussions also took place on the news and editorial pages of *The Times* and *The Post*. For example, a *Times* editorial in January 2005 suggested that, "An important moment in the annals of modern culture may have occurred when Jon Stewart of Comedy Central went on CNN's '*Crossfire*' last October and decided to be serious" ("*Exit, Snarling*," 2005, p. 12). The editorial used Stewart's criticism and the subsequent cancellation of *Crossfire* as an opportunity to discuss the need to produce more informative, "actual news," instead of the growing reliance on "talking heads." Columnist Michael Kinsley of *The Washington Post* offered a different view, defending the type of partisanship exhibited on *Crossfire*:

I still think that the robust, even raucous, and ideologically undisguised hammering of politicians on "Crossfire" is more intellectually honest than more decorous shows where journalists either pretend to neutrality or pontificate as if somebody had voted them into office. (Kinsley, 2004, p. B7)

Significantly, the focus in both *The Times* and *The Post* during this period was on required changes in *television news*, while generally ignoring possible implications for the printed press.

A slightly more subversive strand of conversation addressed the question of truth-telling in the contemporary political and media environment. Frank Rich was particularly active in pursuing this line of argumentation, suggesting that "the ratings rise of Jon Stewart's fake news has been in direct relation to the show's prowess at blowing the whistle on propaganda when the legitimate press fails to do so" (2005a, p. A27); and that unlike the "fake news" produced by the press and the government, Stewart's show is "labeled as fake news from the get-go" and can thereby be trusted (2005b, p. 12). In a similar vein, a *Post* editorial suggested that what Jon Stewart and the Bush administration have in common was that "they're both unabashed about putting out fake news" ("Viewer Beware," 2005, p. A22). While these texts do not represent a change in the ontological and epistemological definition of truth (much like Stewart, they assume that there is a truth and that it should be communicated to the public), they nonetheless complicate and challenge the dichotomies and assumptions that underlie the political and news culture, as well as journalists' self-presentations.

Fifth Stage – Stewart as a Cultural Authority

The period of heated negotiations ended around the middle of 2005, and the relationship between Stewart and the journalistic community entered a new phase. At one level, this phase is marked by less focused attention on Stewart (except for his appearance as Oscars® host in March 2006), and considerably less attention to his relationship with the journalistic world. However, there are many indications that Stewart occupies a privileged position in the journalistic discourse of this time period, and that, while he is not considered an integral part of the journalistic community, he is widely recognized as an important player in the cultural and media scene, and as a point of reference through which journalists make sense of various social phenomena.

First, while items that referred to Stewart during this 30-month period (July 2005–December 2007) were less focused on Stewart and on journalistic concerns, they were frequent and more varied than in previous periods (with respect to the range of topics and the range of journalists that wrote the texts). From July 2005 to December 2007, my sample includes 100 items from *The Times*, *Post*, *CJR*, and *AJR*. This is an average of 3.3 items per month, compared with zero in the first stage ("Stewart as Invisible"); 1.0 in the second stage ("Stewart as an Outsider"); 1.2 in the third stage ("Stewart as a Source of Political Commentary"); and 4.5 in the fourth stage of heated negotiations ("Stewart as an Interloper"). Furthermore, unlike the samples from previous stages, the texts were not only about politicians, journalists, or the Iraq War, but also about topics such as crime, foreign affairs, immigration, gun control, popular culture, books, and religion, to name a few (all of which appeared in the news and

editorial sections). This may suggest that Stewart's authority has permeated through the various layers of the journalistic discourse.

One of the interesting phenomena at this stage is the way in which Stewart served as a point of reference to define and understand other social and media players. For example, in several items that described political satire and controversial television journalists in foreign countries — including Iraq, Japan, Pakistan, and Israel — Stewart was invoked to explain the political impact and subversiveness of these shows. Local others, like bloggers and new "fake news" shows, were also discussed and assessed by the newspapers in comparison to Stewart. In *CJR*, an article about the historical roots of "fake news" (not in a satirical context) was headlined, "Before Jon Stewart" (Love, 2007), and an article about Metro columnists included the following quotation by a newspaper editor: "If you've got a good columnist who can deliver the goods, that both provides news and humor and opinion, then you've got *your own mini-Jon Stewart* out there" (in Twomey, 2005, p. 27; emphasis mine).

All of this indicates that Stewart — even if not a full journalist — is no longer the "negative" other, but the positive, privileged, or marked pole (see Derrida, 1981), in relation to whom journalists define other players and phenomena. Even President Bush was defined in relation to Stewart, when Maureen Dowd wrote in one of her columns that "the president sounded like a Jon Stewart imitation of himself" (Dowd, 2006, p. A17).

The qualified acceptance of Stewart by the mainstream journalistic community was articulated by Bob Schieffer to *CJR* in an interview that took place while he served as the interim anchor of *CBS Evening News*. The interview focused on the future of *CBS Evening News*, and the interviewer noted that "Moonves [CBS chairman] didn't even rule out hiring Jon Stewart from *The Daily Show*." "Let me tell you something," responded Schieffer, "if you could put Jon Stewart on Friday evening and he did a column like Andy Rooney does on *60 Minutes*, I'd do that in a New York minute. In the same way, if I could get Tom Friedman of *The New York Times*" (in Katz, 2005). When Schieffer — a representative of the "old media regime" — couples Jon Stewart with Thomas Friedman, and offers to put both Friedman and Stewart on the network evening news, it suggests that something has indeed changed in the community's boundaries and self-definition.

This change is also apparent in an *AJR* article that sets out to explore the premise that Stewart offers valuable lessons for mainstream journalists on how to "cut through the fog" of daily events more effectively (Smolkin, 2007). The article, entitled "What the mainstream media can learn from Jon Stewart," includes a broad range of opinions on whether journalists should or should not take their cues from Stewart, suggesting that the debate over the status of Stewart and fake news shows at large is far from being resolved. However, the framing of the article and its publication in *AJR* signify a non-trivial change, one of which the author, Rachel Smolkin, is well aware:

This is, perhaps, a strange premise for a journalism review to explore. *AJR*'s mission is to encourage rigorous ethical and professional standards, particularly at a time when fake news of the non-Jon Stewart variety has become all too prevalent. Stewart's faux news is parody, a sharp, humorous take on the actual events of the day, not to be

confused with fake news of the Jayson Blair, Jack Kelley, National Guard memos, or even WMD-variety, based only loosely on actual events yet presented as real news. (Smolkin, 2007)

Smolkin thus creates a distinction between fake news items and outlets that are located outside the boundaries of legitimate and professional journalism, and fake news of the "Jon Stewart variety," which refers to "actual events" and is thus located within the legitimate, professional boundaries. Furthermore, Stewart is framed as a response or an antidote to these illegitimate types of fake news.

Changes can also be observed when comparing interviews conducted by the same interviewers in different time periods. For example, if in a 2003 interview, Bill Moyers was not sure whether Stewart was "practicing an old form of parody and satire or a new form of journalism" (Moyers, 2003), in 2007 he seems to have already co-opted Stewart into the journalistic community (despite Stewart's continued refusal to accept the membership). Moyers begins the interview by describing his own news consumption routines, which demonstrate the changing definitions of journalism: "I start my day with Josh Marshall [political blogger] and end it with Jon Stewart. One's a journalist; the other says he is just a comic, but I think he's really kidding" (Moyers, 2007).

Throughout the interview, Moyers repeatedly positions Stewart as a capable journalist, one who does a better job at getting to the truth than most other U.S. journalists. This theme is demonstrated in the following two examples, referring, respectively, to Stewart's interview with Senator John McCain and to the investigation concerning the firing of eight federal prosecutors:

So many people seem to want just what you did, somebody to cut through the talking points, and get our politicians to talk candidly and frankly. (...) Your persistence and his inability to answer without the talking points did get to the truth. (Moyers, 2007)

Tens of thousands, hundreds of thousands of words were written about Gonzales' testimony last week in Congress. And I still don't think a lot of people get it. And all of the sudden, there on *The Daily Show* that evening, you distilled the essence of it. (Moyers, 2007)

The recognition of *The Daily Show* as an important source of information on public affairs came to the forefront during the Hollywood writers' strike, which began in November 2007 and took *The Daily Show* off air. A *New York Times* editorial on the strike opened with the following words:

It's difficult to assess the fallout from the Hollywood writers' strike, but it's going to be big. When "The Daily Show with Jon Stewart" went into reruns this week, hundreds of thousands of American citizens lost contact with what's going on in the outside world. ("Beware Reality," 2007, p. A26)

Finally, another set of references to Stewart during this period recognized his influence on various social systems. Alessandra Stanley pointed to the influence of *The Daily Show* on political campaigns,

suggesting that "2006 marks the Comedy Centralization of politics" (2006, p. 1); E.J. Dionne identified Stewart as a symbol of a profound change in the nation's "philosophical direction" (2006, p. A29); and Julie Bosman described how publishers' marketing strategies changed after realizing that *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report* "have become the most reliable venues for promoting weighty books" (2007, p. 3). Missing, however, were descriptions coming out of the news media of Stewart's influence on the news media themselves. These analyses may be yet to come, or they may be left to communication scholars. The analysis presented in this paper has demonstrated Stewart's shifting definition, position, and authority in relation to the journalistic field and discourse, but the questions of if and how Stewart and his media criticism have changed actual journalistic practices remain open.

Conclusion

"Outliers" have always played a pivotal role in shaping the boundaries and identity of journalism (Zelizer, 2005). This paper has analyzed how one such outlier — Jon Stewart — was negotiated by the U.S. journalistic community, as it presented itself through the news and editorial sections of *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post*, trade magazines, and television interviews, over a period of nine years. The process can be viewed as a series of discursive transitions: Stewart moved from bounded to more inclusive authority; from being trendy to being a threat; from being juxtaposed with other late-night comedians to being quoted alongside political sources and renowned commentators; from being a jester to being a political, media, and cultural critic; and from being an outsider to the journalistic community to having partial membership, or, in some cases, even "forced" membership. Significantly, each new stage in the reception of Stewart also included elements from prior stages, and earlier stages contained harbingers of future developments. However, the aggregate patterns at different time periods reveal a generally sequential process consisting of identifiable stages. While this has not been an even or linear process, and while it is still hard to assess its long-term implications, it exposes some of the dialectic strategies and dynamics by which boundaries, identities, and authority are being negotiated within the contemporary media environment.

This process also represents a complex interplay among different players within and outside the journalistic community. Within the community, certain border patrollers (i.e., respected hosts and columnists) paved the way for other journalists to openly negotiate the position of Stewart and incorporate him into their discourse. Other players, whose position in relation to the journalistic community was also insecure (such as Bill O'Reilly and *Crossfire's* hosts), tried to diminish Stewart's growing authority. Outside the journalistic world, social scientists facilitated and encouraged the legitimating process of Stewart by changing their own definition of what constitutes news, by incorporating these new definitions into experiments and survey measures, and by publishing reports and articles that received more than the usual share of media attention. This, in turn, set the context within which the journalistic community itself had to define and negotiate the cultural position of Jon Stewart and *The Daily Show*.

To a large extent, Stewart's relatively successful co-optation was due to a fit between the normative and epistemological assumptions of three central players — the journalistic community, political

communication scholars, and Stewart himself. This is in contrast to the lack of a fit between the core assumptions of mainstream journalists and cultural scholars (Zelizer, 2004a, 2004b), whose objects of inquiry (such as tabloids and reality shows) have remained largely outside the accepted boundaries of the journalistic community. The positive recognition process was also due to the fact that many academics and journalists were avid viewers of *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*. In a mock trial of Stewart — conducted at the 2006 NCA annual convention — political communication scholar Lance Bennett opened his speech with the following question: “Esteemed members of the jury: is there anyone here who is not a fan of Jon Stewart?” (2007, p. 278). No hands were raised. As some of the examples cited above suggest, many journalists share this sentiment.

This raises the understudied question of scholars as fans (see Bird, 2003; Hills, 2002; Jenkins, 1992), as well as the even-less-studied question of journalists as audiences of particular shows, genres, or media figures. How do these media preferences shape the public discourse on certain phenomena, and how are they used to negotiate and define the community’s own identity, boundaries, and self-definition? This paper offers some preliminary answers to these questions, but a more focused examination of these issues may be worthwhile.

This study is also limited by its focus on one “journalistic outlier,” and on a relatively small number of sites of journalistic discourse. Future research should examine the patterns of interaction between the journalistic community and different types of “challengers,” while also directing attention to diverse sites of journalistic discourse and further developing methods and theories that can account for these complex processes. This paper can also be seen as a call for shifting attention from isolated effects, texts, or genres to the interactions and inter-textual relations between different media players, and between them and the academy. As this paper has attempted to demonstrate, such an approach can be instrumental in advancing our understanding of the dynamics and forces which shape the culture of journalism and the new media environment.

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