

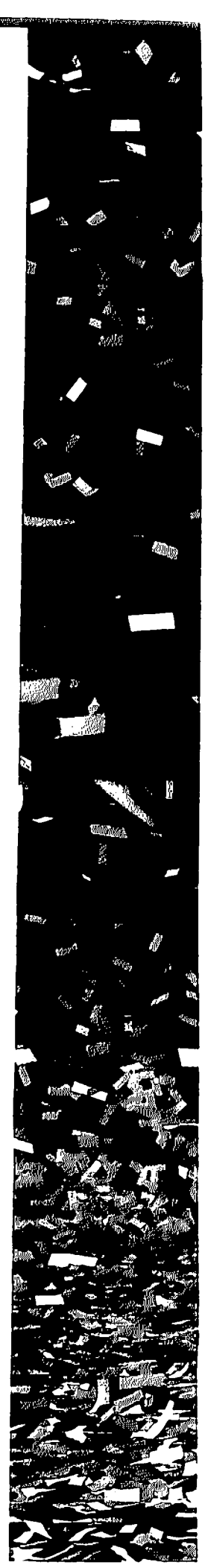
The news networks and print media are trying to hold on to young audiences. Will they be able to triumph over competitors like Jon Stewart's *The Daily Show*?

by Peter Kafka

# News

At its base, *The Daily Show* is a fake news program that threatens to steal market share from the major—oh, and real—news networks, while in the process making American citizens less informed. But to the Comedy Central show's host, Jon Stewart, it's comedy. It's a "selfish pursuit" that just happens to average more than 1.1 million viewers a night.

"We don't make things up. We just distill it to, hopefully, its most humorous nugget," Stewart told Bill Moyers on PBS's *Now in 2003*. "And in that sense, it seems faked and skewed just because we don't have to pretend to be objective. We can just put it out there."



Stewart, 42, drove home the point by reminding the hosts on a now-(in)famous appearance on CNN's *Crossfire* that the show leading into his is "puppets making prank phone calls."

As benign as Stewart's satirical news program may seem to some, its increased ratings among 18- to 34-year-olds are part of a trend that has started real-news directors and publishers down a path of trying to reclaim young viewers and readers.

### Getting the News

At this point, the news business is willing to try almost anything to get young folks to pay attention, because they haven't been for years. In 1972, 46 percent of Americans 18 to 22 said they read a newspaper once a day. By 2002, that number had shrunk to 21.1 percent. Young people aren't watching traditional television news programming either: While 50 percent of people 65 or older watch network news broadcasts, only 17 percent of people under 30 do.

And while it's commonly assumed that some of the missing demographic can be found watching cable channels or surfing the Internet for their news fix, it's not clear that's true either. Cable audiences are overwhelmingly composed of viewers older than 50. And studies of Internet usage can yield vastly different conclusions. A 2003 survey conducted by the Pew Research Center indicated that 46 percent of people under 30 go online for news at least once a week, while a 2002 poll of 18- to 24-year-olds found that only 11 percent said they use the Internet to learn about the news.

"I think this is a big challenge for the [news] professionals who have sort of steered this ship so far—trying to figure out how to land it," says Jay Rosen, who chairs the journalism department at New York University. "I don't think they know."

### Appealing to Youth

That hasn't stopped publishers and television executives from trying. Newspaper publishers have begun printing free, or almost free, news-lite tabloids designed to cater to young people. One example is *Chicago Tribune's Red Eye*, which features splashy graphics, news about celebrities and little else.

Meanwhile, ABC executives, faced with anchor Ted Koppel stepping down as anchor of *Nightline* at the end of 2005, are casting about for younger replacements—and are even reportedly considering pulling the plug on the program altogether and replacing it with a variety show.

David T.Z. Mindich, author of *Tuned Out: Why Americans Under 40 Don't Follow the News*, argues that one reason more young people aren't following the news is that they haven't been socially conditioned to do so. Not knowing who John Ashcroft is, he says, carries little stigma among people under 30. While not knowing who got fired on the last episode of *The Apprentice* could be awfully embarrassing.

However, optimists in the news business believe that technology can help them package the news in ways that younger consumers will find appealing.

"I don't think young people are a lost cause," says Michael Clemente, executive producer of *ABC News Now*, an ABC news offshoot that reformats the network's offerings to be viewed via the Internet and even on mobile phones. Clemente's channel offers bite-size news updates, in four- to six-minute chunks, and his anchors tend to favor shirts and jeans rather than suits and ties. But the news is still real news.

Then there's our friend Jon Stewart. When CBS executives began planning for the March departure of Dan Rather, they had plenty of names to choose from. And according to CBS chief Les Moonves, Stewart was among them. "Jon Stewart is a part of our company. We speak to him regularly about all sorts of different things," he told a group of television critics in January, suggesting that *The Daily Show* host could have a role in a reworked version of the network's news offerings.

Since then, Moonves has appointed longtime newscaster Bob Schieffer as Rather's temporary replacement. But the fact that Stewart is even mentioned in the same breath as Dan Rather is no joke. In the logic of what's become of the news business, it makes perfect

sense: Young people like watching Stewart on a pretend news show. Why not see if they like watching him on a real news show?



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### Stewart's Impact

Just how did Stewart hone his demographically appealing persona? After graduating in 1984 with a B.A. in psychology from the College of William and Mary, he started his comedic career doing standup in New York. A rough start ultimately led to high-profile standup and television writing opportunities, including a short-lived MTV talk show, *The Jon Stewart Show*. Before long, Stewart was starring in, writing and producing movies.

But in January 1999, Stewart began what he has called the longest job he's ever had. *The Daily Show* has been good for the star and



# for News

The proliferation of Weblogs, or blogs—do-it-yourself Web sites that allow users to link to, and comment on, just about anything—gives some observers hope that the format will generate more interest in the news, since it makes it easier to find more information from more diverse sources.

Blogs cover nearly every topic in the universe. Technorati.com, which tracks the rapidly growing sites, counted more than 7 million as of February 2005—but some of the most highly trafficked

blogs focus on news, and commentary about the way news is covered. In recent months, blogs were credited with causing both a CNN executive and a conservative journalist to resign their posts by focusing media attention on controversial statements each had made.

If there's nothing below that catches your eye, don't worry. Visit waypath.com, a blog search engine of sorts, to find a blog on any topic your heart desires. Now dive into the Blogosphere:

If you're interested in...	Check out...	Which is...
Politics	watchblog.com 	a multiple-editor blog broken up into three major political affiliations.
Books/music/culture	blogeritics.org	a blog started by Erik Olsen—the posts of 217 regular freelance writers also appear on their own personal blogs.
Google	google.com/googleblog	Yes, it's true. If you want "insight into the news, technology and culture of Google," this is for you.
Sports	ericmcclairn.com/offwingopinion	Eric McClain's musings on all things sports.
Techie Stuff	slashdot.org	where you can find "news for nerds" and "stuff that matters."
Humor	weblog.herald.com/column/davebarr	"the unofficial Dave Barry blog," which largely contains links to add or amusing information online.
What that kid from Star Trek has to say	wilwheaton.net 	a place to find out what Wil Wheaton thinks about anything, because we know you've been wondering.

the network—bringing in Emmy Awards as well as a (real) Peabody Award in 2001 for its coverage of the 2000 presidential election.

He also parlayed his popularity into the hilarious and successful bestseller, *America (The Book): A Citizen's Guide to Democracy Inaction*, a satirical political history of the United States.

While *The Daily Show* made a mockery of the political process with "Indecision 2004" and coverage of the California recall ("Redecision 2003"), part of the façade of a real news program has come from having real newsmakers as guests. California Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger, former Sen. Tom Daschle, Sen. Hilary Rodham Clinton and presidential nominee John Kerry are just a few of Stewart's guests. South Carolina Sen. John Edwards even announced his candidacy for the presidency from Stewart's stage.

So maybe it seems natural that people mistake Stewart's show for actual news. If that's the case, "that either speaks to the sad state of comedy or the sad state of news," he told Moyers. "I can't figure out which one."

## Funny and Smart?

Still, some of those "real journalists" feel threatened. When Stewart appeared on *The O'Reilly Factor* last fall, Bill O'Reilly called his viewers "stoned slackers" and "dopey kids."

But the 2004 National Annenberg Election Survey found that *Daily Show* viewers knew more about election issues than those who regularly read newspapers or watch television news. And it makes sense—unless you know who Condoleezza Rice and Howard Dean are, you won't get Stewart's jokes about them.

And likely to O'Reilly's chagrin, Nielsen Media Research recently revealed that Stewart's viewers are more educated than

O'Reilly's—they're 78 percent more likely than the average adult to have four or more years of college education; *O'Reilly Factor* views are only 24 percent more likely to have that much education.

"I strongly suspect that people who are getting their news from Jon Stewart are also getting their news from 'the news,'" says Mindich, who's also a former CNN producer and is now chair of the journalism department at Saint Michael's College in Vermont. But they're obviously tuning in to alternative sources—from Michael Moore to *Slate* to *Rolling Stone*—that play to their intelligence and their desire for a bit of levity. Given all the bad news we're bombarded with, who can blame them?

## Humorous Influence

Poking fun at the news isn't new. *Saturday Night Live*'s "Weekend Update," has been doing essentially what Stewart does for decades. And *Politically Incorrect with Bill Maher* has had plenty of fun with current events. Even late-night hosts like David Letterman, Jay Leno and the original—the late Johnny Carson—have been credited with making or breaking public figures. Notably, Carson's Watergate cracks were considered a part of Richard Nixon's downfall.

But none of this explains the publicity and pseudo-credibility Stewart and his show have garnered recently. Is it the format? Stewart himself? Or the shifting interests of young people today?

Whatever it is, news directors are scrambling to figure it out. Until then, Stewart's *Daily Show* contract has him poised to continue making the news—fake or otherwise—until at least 2008. •

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