

# The Stewart/Colbert Effect

*Essays on the Real Impacts  
of Fake News*

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McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers  
Jefferson, North Carolina, and London

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## Is Fake News the Real News?

### *The Significance of Stewart and Colbert for Democratic Discourse, Politics, and Policy*

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#### Introduction

Studies of the impact of popular culture on political and social life have increased in the past decade (Foy 2010; Cantor 2003). Yet, even without the plethora of good social science studies (Fox, Koloen, Sahin 2007; Colletta 2009; Holbert and Geidner 2009 and Baumgartner and Morris 2008), showing that "fake" news shows have both content equally as meaningful as the "real" news shows and a significant impact on real world politics and political opinion; there was, and is, prima facie evidence that these two naming categories (real and fake) may no longer convey an accurate picture. Our two-pronged thesis is that these fake news shows are not only at least as real as the mainstream news, but also that they contribute more to the type of deliberative discourse essential to genuine democracy and public policy.

Some of the evidence about "realness" comes from the so-called real news. For example, these shows regularly replay political comedy segments, and in the fall of 2009 CNN fact-checked a *Saturday Night Live* (SNL) sketch about President Obama — promptly getting skewered by *The Daily Show* (TDS) for doing so. The news-opinion program *Crossfire* invited Jon Stewart on their show (and surely came to regret it), and there was the wide-spread coverage of his thrashing of MSNBC's Jim Kramer over the coverage the real news was providing of the economic collapse.

That level of acknowledgment — combined with Presidential and Vice-Presidential candidates appearing on the fake news shows, announcing their candidacy on them (Edwards, TDS, in 2003), thanking them for their pop-

ularity bump in the polls (Huckabee on *The Colbert Report*), and even using crucial time to appear on SNL the weekend before the Tuesday of the election (McCain)—speaks to a sense of legitimacy that made it unsurprising when a 2004 Pew Study showed that *The Daily Show*, when compared to traditional broadcast news, was an equally important source of campaign knowledge for young adults (Fox, Koloen, Sahin 2007, 215). From our perspective, it was more telling when a 2007 Pew Study revealed that those who got their knowledge from Stewart's and Colbert's shows were better informed than those who got their information from more traditional sources (Pew Research Center for the People & the Press 2007).

Typically, popular culture is viewed as fiction or satire mimicking political and social life. For example, when *Saturday Night Live* debuted in 1975 it heralded a new brand of comedy. Led by a cast of Vietnam era comedians, SNL was viewed as edgy, anti-establishment, and political. Dan Akroyd's portrayals of President Nixon and later President Carter, and Chevy Chase's bumbling President Ford imitation, satirized the politics of the day. The show also included "Weekend Update," a five to six minute fake news skit that made fun of politics and current events. Today, thirty-five years later, SNL is still popular, but two "fake" news shows have become integral parts of the political discourse of contemporary politics. *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report*, go far beyond SNL in their impact on modern politics. Why?

There are arguments today that much of what passes for serious coverage of political discourse in the United States has become a simulation of reality or, worse yet, theatre, comedy, and fictional. In the 2008 U.S. presidential election skits on SNL and a skipped appearance on Letterman's *Late Show* became news. In fact, as referenced above, John McCain hosted SNL the weekend before the 2008 election appearing in a skit with Tina Fey portraying McCain's vice-presidential choice Sarah Palin. While Fey's caricature of Palin is generally viewed as negatively impacting public opinion of her, McCain had no problem participating in a skit where Fey's Palin "goes rogue" during an infomercial and tries to sell "Palin in 2012" t-shirts. It was a surreal moment, a Republican candidate for president on a show with a simulated vice-presidential candidate making fun of his own ticket.

While SNL's "Weekend Update" segment was considered sharp political satire in the 1970s, much of what was done on that show is today done more sensationally in the real news programs on Fox News, MSNBC, and CNN. How could suave original anchor Chevy Chase compete with the likes of Lou Dobbs, Keith Olbermann, Glenn Beck, and Bill O'Reilly, and their highly postmodern mixing of entertainment, commentary, and news? Indeed, we ask if even Stewart or Colbert can "outrage" the outrageous and entertaining news commentators of 2010. Our answer is that they cannot.

Using a mixture of postmodern and other literature, and results from a survey experiment, we argue in this essay that much of American political coverage is inauthentic (fake) and that the programs of Jon Stewart and Stephen Colbert both represent authentic (real) discourse that breaks through the shell of the real (fake) news revealing layers of social construction, empty symbolism, and simulacra—thus positively affecting the traditional coverage and political discourse.

## Politics as Catch-Phrases and Empty Symbols

In recent years critics have bemoaned the lack of substance in American political discourse. In a democracy citizens are sovereign, but today's political discourse is dominated by soft news, popular culture references, and moralistic flights on highly contrived events. American politics has become entertainment: professional wrestling in moral arenas with constructed villains, heroes, and victims.

Citizen opinion is considered the lynchpin of democracy. It is assumed that a better informed public, clear on their political preferences, is a positive situation. For example, Miller and Fox (2006) describe the "loop model" of democracy. The loop model asserts that the core of democracy is a sovereign citizen with political preferences. Political parties then form and put together various policy packages to meet these preferences. (The technical term for this is "interest aggregation.") Citizens vote for the parties and candidates that meet their preferences. Elected officials then pass legislation and citizens vote to retain these officials or to remove them. The key to the loop model is that there is a direct connection between citizens and elected officials.

As others also do, Miller and Fox (2006) argue that the loop model's accuracy has been severely undermined. In contemporary American politics, even at the local level, elected officials act more as "symbols" (noisy cymbals) raising campaign dollars, identifying and exploiting wedge issues. This produces interesting sound-bites that the media reports, usually uncritically and often exaggerating the importance.

Miller (2002, xi) convincingly argues that "the public discourse has taken a peculiar shape in the era of mass communication and mass marketing" and that "information has become a commodity much like fashion design." As Miller suggests, public policy making becomes little more than an exercise in marketing. Thus, in today's political environment, even decisions involving war, and therefore life and death, are marketed to citizens as "shock and awe," "mission accomplished," and the "the surge."

It has been widely noted for decades that much of network coverage of

campaigns has focused on what is called horserace coverage. That is, they cover the race for the nominations and the election (Who's ahead? Who has momentum? Who's exceeding expectations? Who dropped way behind? Who raised how much money?), rather than exploring the issues in any depth, outlining the policy positions of the candidates, or meaningfully examining their qualifications. Even the coverage of the candidates tends to seem more similar to what we would expect from *Live With Regis and Kelly*, or *The View*, than from a hard news show. Exacerbated by campaigns that are intentionally vague and pitched to our emotions, for example featuring mom and apple-pie positions and pictures of candidates playing with children, the end result is candidates elected with little to no mandate regardless of the size of their victory.

For decades the impact of media was discounted because studies showed it was very difficult to alter party identification. Today though, with our greater reliance on and understanding of electronic, visual media, we have a more sophisticated understanding of the way in which media can impact public opinion. For example: framing — and its impact on how you perceive and think about an issue; priming, including subliminal affective priming — which relates to the accessibility of an issue and the criteria by which we evaluate that issue; and the question of which issues we are even evaluating, i.e. agenda setting. With all the research findings about the brain and emotion it is simply impossible to discount the importance of the media's coverage of politics.

For example, recent research in cognitive science has called into question how individuals form opinions about politics. While scholars traditionally have argued that individuals are rational and dispassionate, carefully weighing the costs and benefits of various actions or candidates for office, Westen (2008) argues that political decisions are significantly grounded in emotion. Moreover, our policy analysis approach (Clemons and McBeth 2009) is grounded in narrative analysis. That is, we view policy making as a battle of conflicting stories that play out in the media. These policy narratives have plots, characters, themes, and often use stark language or images to accomplish a variety of strategic policy goals including influencing public opinion, in part by expanding or containing issues. Indeed, the evidence of humor's affective effect, the quality of the stories both *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report* tell, and the reality that both real and fake news coverage consists of prototypical stories, suggests one should not expect much difference in terms of what people learn from them (except that perhaps the fake news asks tougher questions).

The work of scholars such as Edelman (1964), Stone (2002), and Lakoff (2004) have led studies in political communication, policy analysis, and electoral politics to focus on the use of symbols, metaphors, euphemisms, and

statistics to frame issues, set the agenda, and persuade. However, while the earlier focus was on cognitive based rational actor models, the new models stress our affective domain. This is not completely new — for example, Murray Edelman noted that metaphors can evoke on both the rational and emotional level. Yet, the work of Lakoff on framing, Loftus (1997) on creating false memories, Westen (2008) on fighting political fights at the gut level, and authors such as Gigerenzer (2007) and Gladwell (2005) on unconscious decision making, is starting to impact all of the social sciences. While some of this research is particularly related to the topic of this book (e.g. the role of humor in priming and framing), for our purposes here, it is enough to note that both the cognitive and affective pathways of learning can affect, if not effect, political views.

While the real news includes cognitive inputs, it is also a form of entertainment with its sound bites, symbols, and heroes and villains; and this emotive aspects impacts the political views of its audiences. The fake news is funny and certainly emotive but it also includes cognitive elements, possibly more. Thus, certainly fake news has an impact on politics. The questions are, does it have more of an impact, or as much impact, as the real news; and, is that impact perhaps more positive for democracy and policy?

We will test our thesis that the fake news is actually the real news by examining the 2008 United States' presidential election campaign. We first review existing literature on *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report*, as well as literature asserting that American politics has become little more than empty symbolism and entertainment. Second, we (de)construct some of the major narratives and symbols emanating from that election cycle as reported in the "real" media. Then we provide an analysis of how both the TDS and the TCR altered these narratives and ultimately punctured the empty symbols. This sets the stage for our extended case study on one of the symbols, the detailing of a survey experiment, the reporting of our results, and, finally, concluding thoughts about the topic of the fake news versus the real news.

## Review of the Literature

An impressive body of literature on fake news, particularly focusing on the TDS and the TCR has developed in recent years. Holbert, Lamb, Dudo, and Carlton (2007) study the priming effects of viewing *The Daily Show* and find that individuals with lower political efficacy are particularly attracted to the message of Stewart. Colletta (2009) discusses both Stewart and Colbert in the context of "political satire and postmodern irony." Colletta (2009, 856) argues that postmodern irony is different from our traditional view of irony.



Postmodern irony is based in the notion that there is no external or objective reality but rather simply constructions of reality and it is self-referential in that “(a) postmodern audience is made conscious of the constructed nature of meaning and of its own participation in the appearance of things.” Colletta views the television viewer as “in on the joke” in that the viewer knows that they are watching a construction of reality. She (2009, 856) states that while Colbert (fake news) uses absurdity in his parody of Bill O’Reilly, O’Reilly himself (the “real” news) uses similar strategies, thus “blurring the distinction between absurdity and politics as usual.” Later, she questions whether it is possible to satirize shows such as this, and then argues that Jon Stewart’s famous *Crossfire* appearance was ultimately more effective than the satire regularly displayed on the TDS. Finally, in a study that also explored the satire of Colbert along with the effect of political ideology on viewer perceptions, LaMarre, Landreville, Beam (2009) found that while conservatives believed that Colbert was actually conservative, liberals were more likely to view him act as satire.

Following this reasoning, Baumgartner and Morris (2008) conducted an experimental study showing that while *The Colbert Report* (TCR) has an impact on viewer attitudes it is not in the direction that Colbert may want, in that exposure to Colbert led to increases in support for President Bush and Republican policies for casual viewers (i.e. not his regular audience). An earlier study by Fox, Koloen, and Sahin (2007) found that while the TDS’s coverage of the 2004 U.S. presidential election was mostly about humor, they were still equal in substance with the network news in terms of addressing the issues and candidate qualifications. While the literature provides evidence that the fake news might really be the real news (Colletta 2009; Baumgartner and Morris 2008; and Fox, Koloen and Sahin 2007), an alternative interpretation of the literature is that it also suggests the real news is the fake news.

## Definitions

One task that must be addressed before continuing is to define the terms real and fake. The word real is a powerful word and, with apologies to the great definition in the children’s classic *The Velveteen Rabbit*, in terms of the news, two components—content and impact—would seem most relevant. Real news would cover serious and important topics (more on the deficit, less on Tiger Woods or Anna Nicole Smith), in greater quantity than fake news. This coverage would reveal meaningful policy differences, puncture the false balloons, peel back layers, and hold themselves and others accountable (e.g. by showing viewers their earlier statements, votes, and actions). It would be

more than an easily manipulated echo chamber eviscerated by repeated claims about bias and guilty of just repeating, over and over again, the standard story-line others tell. The distracting bread and circus coverage that dominates the news sometimes makes it seem as if the old carnival fraud of *Wizard of Oz* fame is back there behind the curtain using smoke and flames, flashing lights, computer altered images, and other special effects—not to mention a frighteningly loud and intimidating voice.

On a continuum between real and fake, the impact of real news should be such that it impacts public opinion and other media coverage, strengthens democracy, matters to key political players, informs the policy debate, and creates a discourse where alternative views are engaged (rather than people talking past each other or being allowed to make unsupported claims). Its impact would also ideally include an educational function, teaching citizens not what to think, but how to think; providing a lens through which the media’s consumers would recognize the use of moral fables, false simulacra, distracting highly controversial events of little significance, and rhetoric that frames issues as a Hobson’s Choice, or on the basis of sacrosanct—and therefore non-debatable—grounds.

Thus defined, relative to both content and impact, the terms real and fake in the context of the media, can be evaluated by not only the authors, but also by the reader. Next, we begin our analysis.

## The 2008 Election: The Stories of the Mainstream Media

The 2008 U.S. Presidential election campaign can profitably be used by narrative analysts to explore the use of empty symbols, villains, victims, and heroes. The election was historic with the early front runner for the Democratic nomination a woman (Hillary Clinton), an eventual nominee who was African-American (Barack Obama) and the second female vice president nominee in U.S. history (Sarah Palin). The United States was involved in an unpopular and increasingly difficult war in Iraq, the economy collapsed in the fall of 2008, and the stage was set for a historic moment in American politics. Yet, the narrative of the 2008 election did not necessarily hone in on America’s role in the world, the relationship between democratic government and capitalism, or the exciting possibility that the American power structure was to fully include both African-Americans and women in the competition for the most powerful office in the world.

While these issues were certainly debated and discussed, the masses were exposed to a litany of marketing exercises, catch phrases, and name calling,

as well as thoroughly introduced to various characters in the professional (mud) wrestling of 2008 U.S. politics. In order to set up our analysis of how TDS and TCR contributed to the political discourse of the election, we will focus on issues (or entertainment events) that dominated the 2008 election. First, we will discuss and report media coverage data on four major symbols of the 2008 election: Joe the Plumber, William Ayers, ACORN, and Jeremiah Wright.

**Table 1: News Stories from Google News**

*Symbols and All News Sources*

"Jeremiah Wright" — Google News stories for 2008: 16,600

"Joe the plumber" — Google News stories for 2008: 8,250

"William Ayers" and "Obama" — Google News stories for 2008: 6,390

"ACORN" — Google News stories for 2008: 14,300

*Substantive Policy Issues*

"Health Care Reform" — Google News stories for 2008: 10,100

"Iraq War" — Google News stories for 2008: 54,800

"Recession" — Google News stories for 2008: 275,000

*Symbols and Cable News (Google News)*

<i>Cable News</i>	<i>Wright</i>	<i>Joe</i>	<i>Ayers</i>	<i>ACORN</i>
Fox News	1,260	230	291	269
MSNBC	449	123	129	114
CNN	1,380	238	236	225

Source: Google News Search for 2008

## Joe the Plumber

Using Google News, we found 6,360 stories about Joe the Plumber in the year 2008. This included 230 stories on Fox News, 238 stories on CNN, and 123 on MSNBC (see Table 1). On October 12, 2008, Joseph Wurzelbacher asked Barack Obama a question about his tax proposals during a campaign stop in Ohio. Wurzelbacher told him that he was about to buy a plumbing business and asked Obama whether his tax policies would lead to higher taxes on his future business (Reuters 2008). This was three days before the final presidential debate and the McCain campaign quickly knighted Wurzelbacher with the name "Joe the Plumber." Thus dubbed, Wurzelbacher became a media celebrity and McCain repeatedly mentioned Joe the Plumber in the 15 October 2008 presidential debate. Eventually he campaigned with McCain despite the news media discovering that Joe wasn't really a plumber. Nonetheless, he became an important symbol for McCain's framing of Obama as out of touch with the average American (Joe) in the waning days of the 2008 campaign.

Joe the Plumber was a classic synecdoche and part of a larger "strategic

problem definition" (Stone 2002, 155). He was a single individual meant to represent a larger whole; in this case, a working man who had pulled himself up by his boot straps and was about to purchase his own small business. Standing in the way of McCain's supposed everyman hero was Senator Barack Obama whose tax policies, according to the McCain campaign, were going to crush the dreams of the victimized plumber.

On 16 October 2008, Jon Stewart covered the Joe the Plumber phenomenon with reporter John Oliver providing a review of the excessive news exposure given to the man, claiming the media was "trying to destroy his life." During the same episode, they covered the many references by both Obama and McCain to Joe. Stewart engaged in typical sophomoric humor before launching into how the fascinated media had facilely fixated on Joe, showing clip after clip of media attention. Stewart seemed to be indicating that Obama had fallen for the trap, and that by giving Joe so much attention he was making this fictional plumber a real entry. Much of Stewart's attention was on how easily the media fell in love with the Joe the Plumber storyline, showing that at a time of war and financial crisis a fictional plumber's false scenario dominated media discourse. It is rather clear that he is pulling back the curtain to reveal both an empty symbol and the media's complicity or incompetency.

Colbert covered this story on 22 October 2008, referencing McCain's Joe multiple references and a stereotype of an overweight blue collar worker's waistline ("I am afraid he is addicted to crack"). He noted that McCain and Palin built upon the concept by giving others identities too (e.g., Wendy the Waitress and Molly the dental hygienist), arguing that these ordinary Americans needed "tax cuts and off-shore drilling, not universal health care and last names."

Colbert, in essence, deconstructs McCain's reification of Joe the Plumber by refocusing our attention from the McCain campaign's focus on these fictional characters to the few substantive, and traction-less policies that the McCain/Palin ticket was promoting at the time (drilling and across the board tax cuts). On the face of it, Colbert's comedy on Joe the Plumber seems light-hearted and even at times non-political, yet his redirecting of the debate from a fictional plumber to real issues either being promoted or ignored by McCain and Palin is piercing. But it would take his regular Colbert Nation audience to understand Colbert's clever deconstruction, and even they would be unlikely to consciously recognize how deftly he punctured both the false symbol of the campaign and the legitimacy of the media's coverage.

## William Ayers

William Ayers was a member of the subversive 1960s anti-Vietnam War group the Weathermen. Ayers engaged in several bombings in the 1960s and

much later he became a professor at the University of Illinois where in the 1990s he served on a committee with Barack Obama. He subsequently hosted a fund-raiser that Obama, then running for the Illinois state legislature, attended (Shane 2008). The media, led by the McCain campaign jumped on the association, linking Obama to Ayers — once again trying to call into question Obama's fundamental character. We found 6,390 stories about Ayers (a Google News search for 2008) including 291 stories on Fox. The Ayers theme furthered the McCain campaign's narrative by asking "who is the real Barack Obama" as they tried to solidify their construct of Obama as dangerous, different, and not a typical American.

Such construction of opponents as the "other" is a typical narrative tactic and they hoped to find fertile ground tapping into the culture of fear that had permeated post 9-11 America. Approximately 40 years after Ayers' crimes, by labeling Ayers a terrorist (language not used at the time of his crimes), they tried to tie events from the 60s to today. In the McCain campaign narrative, Ayers is the villain and by default Obama, despite very tenuous, slight ties to Ayers, is also constructed as a villain for associating with Ayers ("pal"ing around with a terrorist). Both McCain and Palin positioned themselves as heroes trying to save the American public from the "real" Barack Obama.

*The Daily Show* (7 October 2008) dealt with Ayers by directing attention toward Sarah Palin. Stewart shows a clip of Palin stating, "it's time that we find out who the real Barack Obama is." Stewart then retorts to Palin, "Excuse me woman that we met six weeks ago, we want to find out more about you, is your husband a crazy secessionist? Did you fire that guy for not firing the guy that you wanted him to fire?" Stewart thus redirects the audience toward the fact that Palin was even more of a political unknown than Obama, who had just weathered a long and grueling national campaign. Interestingly, Colbert only dealt with Ayers in short segments. Colbert's most sustained treatment of Ayers (9 October 2008) was in a clip that included conservative complaints about McCain's failure to raise Ayers in the most recent debate. This pattern on both shows — of peeling back the layers to reveal, with silliness, the silliness of the supposedly important issue, and then moving on — is both a hallmark of their mode of operation and testimony to their success.

## ACORN

The low-income lobbyist group, the Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now (ACORN) more easily became a symbol of the 2008 presidential election because Barack Obama and others had, in 1995, represented the group in a lawsuit over voting rights. And, additionally, the Obama

campaign supposedly gave money to ACORN (Strom 2008). All of this was controversial because several local chapters of ACORN were in legal trouble for allegations of voter fraud and embezzlement (Strom 2008).

Because Obama had been a community organizer, ACORN provided a way for critics to negatively portray his past occupation. John McCain raised Obama's relationship to ACORN in the 15 October 2008 presidential debate (New York Times 2008). This issue was very successfully sold to the media. In fact, in 2008, there were over 14,000 news stories found via Google News dedicated to ACORN — more than were dedicated to health care reform during the campaign year. Among cable news, Fox News led the way with 269 stories about ACORN.

In a show (30 October 2008), the week before the 2008 general election, TDS correspondent John Oliver narrated a story about what community organizers do. After showing video of Sarah Palin and Rudy Giuliani making fun of Obama's work as an organizer, Oliver interviews a conservative think tank representative who argues that Osama Bin Laden too is a community organizer. Oliver concludes with interviews of ACORN employees, as well as a conservative organizer who works with children in poverty and who says she is voting for Obama. Then Oliver returns to the conservative think tank advocate who contends, without offering any evidence, that community organizers exchange crack cocaine for votes.

Colbert too focused on ACORN on 21 October 2008. After typical TCR humor involving the group's name, Colbert launched into his "The Word" segment with the theme "Fantasyland." After explaining that ACORN had been accused of registering Donald Duck and Mickey Mouse to vote, Colbert launches into a fiery argument to convince the audience that cartoon figures should not vote; thus revealing the absurdity of the claim that this somehow constituted voter fraud. Colbert then raises the issue of the Help America Vote Act, discussing how it allows the government to disqualify voters due to typos and other irregularities on government records. Finally, Colbert concludes with John McCain speaking to ACORN in 2006, allowing viewers to see McCain praising ACORN.

## Jeremiah Wright

Our Google News search found 16,600 stories on "Jeremiah Wright" for 2008 (see Table 1). Wright was a perfect villain for the Republicans. An African-American preacher and a proponent of black liberation theology, Wright had made controversial remarks both in public and in his pulpit. His "God Damn America" sermon chastised the United States, holding the government at least partially deserving of the 9/11 attacks (Knowlton and Cantor



2008). These remarks and others from the pastor who had married Barack and Michelle Obama, baptized their children, and whose phrase, “the audacity of hope,” was used as the title of an Obama book (Knowlton and Cantor 2008), set off a feeding frenzy among television news journalists and commentators. As seen in Table 1, CNN had 169 stories on Wright during March 2008 alone and 1380 stories for all of 2008. Fox News had 129 stories during the first month of the controversy and 1260 for the year, whereas the more liberal MSNBC had “only” 95 stories in March 2008 and 449 for the year.

### In-depth Case Study: Jeremiah Wright

The media fascination with Wright led to our choosing Wright as our symbol to use in an experiment. Wright received more media coverage than health care reform and coverage of him totaled fully one-third of the coverage afforded to the Iraq War (see Table 1). To accomplish our goals, we first analyzed a sampling of mainstream media coverage of Wright along with an analysis of how both the TDS and the TCR covered Obama’s controversial pastor. Then, we designed a survey experiment where students answered questions after watching clips from the mainstream media, from *The Daily Show*, and from *The Colbert Report*.

We selected a 13 March 2008 story from ABC’s *Good Morning America* (ABC News, 2008) as representative of mainstream media coverage of Wright. This segment (that runs 3:24) juxtaposes images of Wright’s fiery, angry, and controversial remarks at the pulpit with a calm Obama who is not interviewed for the clip, but rather has his words taken out of context to set up ABC’s story. For example, Obama is shown saying that “I don’t think that my church is particularly controversial,” and then Obama is shown talking about Wright’s work on South Africa. These remarks are then used to setup an ABC News review of Wright’s statements including calling the U.S. the KKK, attacks on Republicans, and the 9-11 themed comments about the U.S. supporting state terrorism (“America’s chickens coming home to roost”). Then, two of Wright’s church members are interviewed and they defend Wright. Finally, the clip closes with a statement that Senator Obama views Wright as an old uncle, who sometimes says things that he doesn’t agree with.

The piece typifies modern mainstream journalism. Reporter Brian Ross first accurately states that Obama has been a member of Wright’s church for 20 years, that Wright had performed the marriage ceremony for Obama and his wife Michelle, baptized Obama’s children, and was the inspiration for Obama’s book *The Audacity of Hope*. Then we see the “God Damn America” clip ending with the statement by Ross, “it is not known whether Senator

Obama was in church on this day.” Then instead of waiting for an interview with Obama on Wright’s controversial statements, ABC and Ross serve up decontextualized statements from Obama defending Wright, creating an almost imaginary conversation with Obama on the subject. Ross then uses Obama’s comment about South Africa as a lead-in to a litany of Wright’s angry outbursts on a variety of subjects.

The video is a classic political story with a villain (Wright) and a theme of guilt by association. There are no efforts to deal with the complexities of race relations or to try and view the world from an African-American’s perspective (other than one short interview with an African-American woman that, in context of the Wright clips, seems insincere). Obama is portrayed more as a villain himself than a victim, in that Obama’s decontextualized quotes consistently defend Wright, not for the remarks that ABC has just shown, but for other much less incendiary comments made by Wright. The whole piece is stitched together like a postmodern circus with short clips, quick editing, and the construction of a reality (guilt by association) that — upon logical examination — has little to do with electing a president to office.

### *The Daily Show’s* and *The Colbert Report’s* Treatment of Wright

*The Daily Show* focused on Wright on 18 March 2008 in a 5:50 segment. After showing the “God Damn America” video while Stewart makes funny faces at the harshness of Wright’s statement, Stewart plays clips from cable news pundits who all suggest that this is the end of Obama’s run for the presidency. Introducing Obama’s Philadelphia speech on the topic, Stewart introduces Obama as a prize fighter, mocking the very serious speech. Taking parts of Obama’s speech out of context, Stewart sets up a joke about Obama and his mixed racial heritage. When Obama starts discussing black anger, Stewart auto locks the imaginary doors on his desk. As Obama then moves into a discussion of white anger, Stewart unlocks the doors. After a Klu Klux Klan joke, Stewart allows Obama to speak in length and then concludes that “a prominent politician spoke to Americans about race as though they were adults.”

Later in the show, Stewart engages in a discussion with *The Daily Show’s* “Senior Black Correspondent” Larry Wilmore. In an awkward and sometimes tense exchange, Stewart and Wilmore discuss black and white relations in the context of music, car stereos, and more serious topics like profiling. During one exchange Stewart auto locks his “auto” desk again. In the end, Stewart and Wilmore ultimately find consensus in their view of the Hurch character



from the 1970s TV show *Starsky and Hutch*, suggesting that we have more in common than we have to fear.

Though much of the nearly 10 minutes devoted to Obama and Wright is comical, these clips ultimately portray Obama as a man of mixed race, intelligently and sensitively struggling with the complexity of race relations, an important issue that has long vexed our country. The exchange with Wilmore, while humorous and often light, is ultimately powerful as the two get into a discussion of America as a land of opportunity versus America as a former slave nation that still struggles with race. Remarkably, we found no real news show that similarly devoted 10 solid minutes to Obama's speech and Wright's remarks.

Colbert's first response to the Wright ordeal was also on 18 March 2008, in a segment titled "Yes we Can." After playing Wright's infamous quote, Colbert is shocked, mostly that Wright called America "she." Taking Obama's speech out of context (by backing up Obama's faux call for voters to flock to McCain), Colbert states that he will play Wright's speech everyday before the election. The next night, Colbert, in "The Word" segment, defined media reviews of Obama's speech as mixed (then reads the glowing reviews from the mainstream media), references his own church's "sanctioning" of child abuse, and uses video footage of Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson blaming 9-11 on U.S. immorality. He then uses a video quote of McCain refusing to agree that Falwell is "an agent of intolerance."

## Survey Experiment

In order to test our hypothesis that the fake news is, in fact, more real than the real news and that it thus contributes to an authentic discourse and democracy better than the real news, we designed an experiment around the Jeremiah Wright story. Students in introductory American Government courses in Idaho and Pennsylvania were given a survey and pre-tested on their partisan and ideological views. The students watched the ABC *Good Morning America* clip, then they were shown two *Daily Show* clips discussed above, and then finally they saw the 19 March TCR clip. After viewing the coverage by each program (in other words, before moving on) the students were asked what they learned from the clips, how informative they were, and whether they made manifest the complexity of race relations. Additionally students were asked to rate whether the clips were biased either for or against Obama. They were also asked to rate the funniness of the Stewart and Colbert clips. After the survey discussions were held with the students (similar to focus groups) where their comments on the clips were noted, and later recorded and evaluated.

## Results from Survey Experiment

As seen in Table 2, overall, respondents felt that they learned the most from the ABC News video. The ANOVA revealed that there are no significant differences in the learning ratings of the ABC clip based on ideology. Interestingly, TDS and TCR learning ratings and the associated ANOVAs, demonstrated that there were significant differences in perceptions of learning between the ideological groupings. Moderates felt that they learned more from each show compared to either conservatives or liberals. Conservatives rated both TDS and TCR particularly low in terms of what they learned.

**Table 2: Learning, Information, Race, Funniness**

	Conservative (20)	Moderate (15)	Liberal (16)	Overall	F-test
Learned					
ABC	3.90	3.60	3.00	3.55	2.102
TDS	1.95	3.20	2.13	2.39	3.821*
TCR	1.65	2.93	2.56	2.33	4.085*
Information					
ABC	4.15	4.27	3.44	3.91	2.015
TDS	2.25	3.93	3.19	3.06	5.455**
TCR	1.95	3.60	2.63	2.65	4.582*
Complexity of Race					
ABC	2.65	3.47	2.81	2.89	1.174
TDS	2.60	4.07	3.50	3.31	3.354*
TCR	1.05	2.20	1.75	1.63	2.824
Funny					
	Conservative (20)	Moderate (15)	Liberal (16)	Overall	F-test
TDS	1.75	1.67	1.44	1.61	.939
TCR	2.20	1.73	1.81	1.88	2.035

NOTES: \*\* p. < .01; \* p. < .05. For first three questions, scale = 0 (low) to 6 (high). For the funny question, the lower the mean, the funnier the clip was rated. Three respondents did not indicate an ideological preference, total n = 54.

## Information

Respondents also felt that they received the most information from the ABC News clip (see Table 2) and the ANOVAs demonstrated no significant differences between ideological groupings. However, once again, there were significant differences among the ideologies when it came to rating the information gained from TDS and TCR. In particular, moderates and liberals, compared to conservatives, rated both shows higher in terms of information.

### Complexity of Race

Overall, respondents believed TDS best dealt with the complexity of race relations (Table 2). Again, while there were no significant differences between mean scores for the ABC News clip, both liberals and moderates were significantly more impressed with how Stewart's show dealt with race relations. However, there were no differences among ideological groupings on racial complexity and TCR.

### Funny

In Table 2, there was no ideological differences in how the experiment participants rated the funniness of Colbert and Stewart and this finding is consistent with LaMarre, et al. (2009).

### Perceived Bias

In Table 3, 50 percent of the conservatives thought that the ABC clip was neutral while 45 percent of conservatives thought that it was biased against Obama. 80 percent of the moderates thought that the ABC News video was biased against Obama as did 75 percent of the liberals. Thus, while the participants thought that they learned more from the ABC clip, they clearly did not think it was a neutral piece of journalism. Interestingly, 50 percent of conservatives thought that TDS's coverage was biased against Obama, whereas only 40 percent of moderates and 25 percent of liberals thought that it was biased against Obama. Finally, 35 percent of conservatives thought that Colbert's segment was biased against Obama, compared to 20 percent of the moderates and 44 percent of the liberals. These findings are interesting and with Colbert, at least, they back up LaMarre, et al. (2009). They show that conservatives believe Colbert is a conservative since we would expect that conservative experiment participants would believe that Colbert was not biased against Obama. Liberal experiment participants seem more in on the satire expressed by Colbert.

**Table 3: Bias For or Against Obama**

	Conserv.	Moderates	Liberals	Overall
<i>ABC News</i>				
Biased in favor of Obama	1 (5%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	1 (2%)
Neutral	10 (50%)	3 (20%)	4 (25%)	19 (35%)
Biased against Obama	9 (45%)	12 (80%)	12 (75%)	34 (63%)
<i>The Daily Show</i>				
Biased in favor of Obama	1 (5%)	0 (0%)	3 (19%)	4 (6%)

	Conserv.	Moderates	Liberals	Overall
Neutral 9	4 (45%)	9 (60%)	9 (56%)	29 (54%)
Biased against Obama	10 (50%)	6 (40%)	4 (25%)	21 (40%)
<i>The Colbert Report</i>				
Biased in favor of Obama	4 (20%)	4 (27%)	1 (6%)	9 (17%)
Neutral	9 (45%)	8 (53%)	8 (50%)	26 (48%)
Biased against Obama	7 (35%)	3 (20%)	7 (44%)	19 (35%)

### Discussion

We were surprised that the experiment's participants believed that they learned the most from, and received the most information from, the ABC clip. Indeed, Fox, Koloen, and Sahin (2007) found no differences in substantive coverage between the real news and the fake news (*The Daily Show*) and Colletta (2009) argues that as TV viewers we are sophisticated and understand the entertainment quality of contemporary journalism. Yet, it appears that overall our participants, at least, do not necessarily understand the constructions and postmodern collages of contemporary journalism. In addition, there appear to be ideological factors that predispose individuals' reactions to TCR and TDS. In particular, moderates learned the most from the TDS and TCR clips, followed by liberals. This backs up the point made by Baumgartner and Morris (2008) and Colletta (2009) that you have to be "in on the joke" to appreciate the purpose of these two shows. Conservatives did not feel that they learned from the TDS and TCR clips. Furthermore, while Baumgartner and Morris (2008) found that TCR produced changes in attitudes toward more conservative beliefs, our data indicates that our respondents, mainly college freshman, were generally (but not always) able to distinguish the more liberal intentions of both shows.

We are puzzled why moderates would be more satisfied by the fake news shows coverage than were liberals. One possibility is that both TDS and TCR clips included tough stances toward Obama. Jon Stewart plays much of the same snippets of Jeremiah Wright did ABC and Stewart acts shocked at what he is hearing. Such activities probably resonated negatively with liberals. Conservatives, on the hand, were likely unhappy with Stewart's summary of Obama's speech ("he talked to us like an adult"). Interestingly, and consistent with Baumgartner and Morris (2008), many participants in the Idaho debriefing were also unaware that Colbert was a liberal playing a conservative and some felt betrayed when they found out. Thus, Colbert's aggressive stance at the beginning of his clip turned off liberals and his later mocking of John McCain for his association with the religious right turned off conservatives. Moderates, by definition, like to see both sides of the story so they were more impressed with both Stewart

and Colbert than were liberals or conservatives. Yet, it is surprising that moderates reported finding more information in, and learning more from, ABC's coverage because that clip had literally no "other side" to it. Perhaps it is difficult to test postmodern constructed realities when there is no logic to any of it.

It is also intriguing that respondents overall believed *The Daily Show* better captured the complexity of race relations. Once again, both liberals and moderates were more impressed with how TDS dealt with race relations. Such a finding goes beyond Fox, Koloen, and Sahin (2008) suggesting that the fake news can, on occasion at least, be more substantive than the real news. Thus, while respondents overall thought they gained more information and learned more about Wright from the real news (ABC), respondents overall thought that the TDS dealt better with the complexity of race relations. Therefore, minimally, our working hypothesis is partially confirmed. While the real news, according to our participants, brought out more information about Jeremiah Wright, the fake news (at least TDS) dealt better with race relations.

This study helps confirm the idea that the fake news may be more real than the real news, using the definition established herein. And, though correlation does not equal causation, there are many examples of how Stewart and Colbert's coverage seemed to alter mainstream coverage by breaking through the false shell, by reframing the policy debate, and by putting new issues on the table and taking other ones off the agenda. From their exposure of death panel silliness, to their coverage of the Henry Louis Gates, Jr., incident, from catching Fox News' use of old film to exaggerate the size of a crowd, to pointing out Glenn Beck's ties to a company that sells gold, their coverage appears to result in issue coverage dissipating or being altered by the "real" news.

Studies have shown (Westen 2008, 368) that when people learn about priming, for example, learning about the mortality salience effect (which predisposes people to a more conservative mind-set), its impact is counteracted. Therefore, puncturing the use of sacred rhetoric (Marietta 2008), pointing out incongruities and hypocrisy in narratives, and breaking one side's use of the press's complicity in monological arguments (Clemons and McBeth 2009, 237); plus helping to produce a better informed public that is also less inclined to blindly trust the mainstream media (Fox, Koloen, and Sahin 2007), surely constitutes impacting political opinions and furthering an authentic democratic discourse, potentially improving public policy. That is significant.

## Acknowledgments

The authors would like to thank Rachel Brown for her help with the experiment and both research and editorial assistance.

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## Jon Stewart a Heretic? Surely You Jest

### *Political Participation and Discussion Among Viewers of Late-Night Comedy Programming*

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For the past decade, political communication scholars have extended their research outside of the bounds of traditional news programming in the application of mass communication theories. Recent research has acknowledged the importance of entertainment programs in processes of political socialization and opinion formation; (Holbert, Pillion, Tschida, Armfield, Kinder, Cherry, and Daulton 2003; Holbrook and Hill 2005; Moy, Xenos, and Hess 2006; Xenos and Becker 2009; Young 2006; 2004). Late-night comedy programs such as those hosted by Jay Leno and David Letterman have been analyzed to assess their potential role in informing or influencing their audiences. With research reports from Pew suggesting that young people report receiving political information from these shows, and overtime trends suggesting an increase in exposure to these programs among young people (Pew 2004), the topic has become a favorite among scholars and journalists alike.

*The Daily Show* with Jon Stewart on Comedy Central, which parodies a traditional news program and offers satirical critiques of public officials and the press, presents a different format from network late-night comedy shows. *The Daily Show* offers several distinct and politically relevant forms of content in each 22 minute episode. First, the news segments presented as "headlines" at the beginning of the show and "on location" by news "correspondents" throughout the program offer the audience pointed political satire that is critical of