

A QUALITATIVE INVESTIGATION OF *DAILY SHOW* VIEWERS:  
SYMBOLIC CONSTRUCTIONS OF IDENTIFICATION AND CREDIBILITY

By

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## PREFACE

Political edutainment. It's the hot term right now. At its most basic level, it represents the merging of news and entertainment programming. On a deeper level, the rise of political edutainment programming signals complex changes in the telecommunication industry that will continue to be felt throughout the next decade(s).

On a personal level, my own interest in this topic was ignited back in the late 1990s. I was teaching a news-writing lab at the University of Florida's College of Journalism and Communications. In an attempt to increase my students' interest, I began incorporating alternative "news" from cable sources such as *the Daily Show* and even seemingly lesser formal programs such as *Saturday Night Live*. Although many of the students watched these shows, and other alternative satirical programming, most did not initially regard these nontraditional formats as news. I would then lead a participant discussion that revolved around the question: "What is news?" As a graduate student in telecommunications, I began to wonder myself: Exactly what elements constitute a news program, and how does humor, or other entertainment value, factor into the equation? I had always read newspapers and considered myself reasonably well informed about public policy issues. However, when *The Daily Show* debuted circa 1996, I became a loyal viewer and over time found myself feeling better informed about national and international events. In addition I found myself engaging in more conversations about politics than I had ever previously done. In short, I believed myself to be better informed

and more involved in public affairs—and I credited this change largely to my regular *Daily Show* viewing.

It is widely acknowledged television has become the primary source of political information for the majority of the American public. However, there is far less agreement concerning the impact different televised formats have on various viewing audiences. The inquiry is further exacerbated by fact that the telecommunication industry as a whole is wrestling with revolutionary changes. Deregulation, digitization, and interactivity are just a few of the variables the researcher must contend with in trying to assess television's influence in the modern world. As a child I remember waking up before dawn and watching the broadcast signal before the day's programming began on one of four available networks. Today, any time of day, I can choose between hundreds of programming options on satellite and cable. On top of that, the Internet allows me instant access to viewers across the country (or around the world) to converse with about plot lines, characters, or any other topic I desire. For that matter, if I don't find something I like on television, I can search the World Wide Web for programming as well. In fact, with my EMAC and a \$500 camcorder, I can produce my own programming and post it for others to view and comment on.

While somewhat off topic, the above paragraph hopefully illustrates the radical transformation that has occurred in the telecom industry in the past 2 decades. The following investigation was initially fueled by my curiosity concerning the role alternative news programming plays in modern information gathering and attitude formation. My subsequent research has been extremely gratifying and I am excited to be a contributor to the growing literature on this subject. It is my hope that communication

research such as this can help to guide media producers about ways to engage and inform audiences, and that the media industry responds responsibly to the challenges and opportunities new technologies present.

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Using a qualitative methodology, this study investigated viewers of *The Daily Show (TDS)* in order to better understand how the modern television viewing audience, particularly the Generation X demographic, perceives alternative news programming, in terms of the meanings they attach to the communication experience, their attitudes concerning non-traditional news formats, and whether they identify with a larger symbolic community of other viewers. In addition, the research addressed the theoretical relationship between humor and information gathering, with particular emphasis on social identification theory and information short-cuts (group identification and schema-theory). The research was grounded in the symbolic interactionism framework, and data were gathered via a combination of focus groups, long-interviews, and diaries.

The results indicate that modern audiences perceive a "myth of objectivity" in current television news reporting. They consider most reports to be more editorial than objective, but charge that the bulk of the media industry refuses to acknowledge this

phenomenon. All respondents categorized *The Daily Show* as a media satire/news parody program. However, two distinct categories of viewers emerged: those who consider the show strictly as a source for entertainment, and those who consider the show to be a new genre of news programming.

Collectively, respondents identified with a symbolic community of other viewers. This identification appears to be heavily rooted in frustration with traditional network news coverage. Respondents appreciate the satirical commentary *The Daily Show* provides and see themselves reflected in the program's coverage. The data showed three overall categories for how respondents judged credibility with regard to *TDS*:

- (a) respectability, which includes an increased level of status conferred by the mainstream media, as well as a higher caliber of political guests appearing on the show;
- (b) bias perception (liberal-bias, incumbent-bias, bias of humor, and identification bias);
- and (c) program format, which encompassed the construct of source credibility as well as the distinction between the show's headline and feature segments.

## CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION

*Come senators and congressmen, please heed the call . . .  
for the times they are a changing.*  
—Bob Dylan

*Webster's New Universal Unabridged Dictionary* defines news as “a report of a recent event; intelligence; information” (p. 1295). Although nothing in this definition addresses the tone of how such information should be passed along, traditionally, broadcast television news has generally been regarded as a “sacred cow.” Serious journalism has perceived little utility for self-parody, and reporters generally strive to be considered sober, objective public informants.

This image of the objective, conscientious journalist is rooted in the public service model of broadcasting, a model that has radically changed since the deregulation of the 1980s and 1990s. And while the notion of the public service broadcasting model was always ideal at best, in the wake of massive deregulation and profound channel increase brought about by digital technologies, political edutainment programming has snowballed in response to the increased commercial overtures of for-profit news organizations and 24-hour networks. As Howard Kurtz, media critic for the *Washington Post* lamented, “News has become everything from *Hard Copy* to *Entertainment Tonight* to *America Online*” (Zoglin, 1996, p. 61).

This investigation seeks to better understand the how the modern television viewing audience (particularly the Generation X demographic) perceives alternative

news programming, in terms of the meanings that they attach to the communication experience, their attitudes concerning the anti-traditional news format, and whether they identify with a larger symbolic community of “other” viewers. A symbolic interactionist perspective is utilized to organize the research. Symbolic interactionism strives to uncover the motives people ascribe to their behaviors and to understand how individuals construct meaning in their lives. The approach supports a more active, cognitive role for individuals than does many other approaches. It contends that “culture and social structure change over time” (Hewitt, 1988, p. 23), and as such, individuals will (to varying degrees) adjust their behavior in order to secure the outcomes they ultimately desire. Symbolic interactionism is grounded in the notion that as a result of socialization, people strive to “belong” to a community, which provides some measure of identification for its members (Hewitt).

This study focused on viewers of *The Daily Show (TDS)*, a half-hour satirical news program broadcast on Comedy Central. Several qualitative measures were employed to collect data: focus groups, long-interviews, and diaries. A qualitative analysis was determined to be the most appropriate methodology for this examination due to the exploratory nature of the research, and the desire to try to identify the rationale behind individuals’ decisions to watch the program. Through this data collection, the reasons why viewers choose to watch the program and what meanings they attach to the show, its content, and how they regard the show’s host and correspondents can be better understood. In addition, this examination helped to better determine whether viewers developed a sense of identification with the talk show host and correspondents and whether they felt connected to a larger viewing community as well.

The investigation occurs at a time when the telecommunication industry is at a crossroads. Digital technologies have provided an unprecedented wealth of channels that encourage niche programming. The modern television news viewer has programming options available as never before in the history of the medium, as well as additional exposure access to online forums such as Internet chat rooms, web blogs, newsletters, and listservs. Simultaneously, the traditional television news format has lost credibility as networks succumb to more profit-oriented practices in the aftermath of industry deregulation. Ideally, the results of this investigation will contribute to the emerging literature and knowledge base concerning alternative news formats and audiences.

Chapter 2 reviews literature appropriate to the investigation. Chapter 3 discusses the methodology that will be used. Chapter 4 presents the results of data gathering, and the study ends with a discussion and conclusion section in Chapter 5.

## CHAPTER 2 LITERATURE REVIEW

Studies of communication behavior and political agenda-setting must consider both psychological and sociological variables; knowledge of both is crucial to the establishment of sound theoretical constructs. (McCombs & Shaw, 1972, p. 135)

This review begins with the theoretical perspective to be used in this study: symbolic interactionism. The concepts of community, generalized others, and idealized representations are discussed. Literature on shared reality also is incorporated to further increase the understanding of this approach.

The review then investigates how individuals process information and develop attitudes by reviewing literature on political socialization and social identification theory. Media's role in this process is then examined, with a particular emphasis on the increased merging of news and entertainment programming. Findings about Generation X are then presented, including their socialization experiences and media habits. Finally, source credibility literature is reviewed and the discussion ends with an overview of *The Daily Show*.

### **Symbolic Interactionism**

“The complex and even paradoxical relationship between the individual and society and culture” has long intrigued social psychologists (Hewitt, 1988, p. 22). Such paradox arises out of the symbiotic relationship between a society and its members. Almost from birth, humans are conditioned so that they can operate within a particular society. However, as Hewitt notes, “this very society on which they depend is also



dependent upon them, for society is nothing more than the coordinated actions of its members, and its culture is transmitted from one generation to the next only through their actions” (p. 22).

Throughout life, one is expected to behave in certain prescribed ways in a variety of social situations. These “lessons” are taught through a variety of channels: family, peers, institutions (such as education and religion), and the mass media. Although there is a lack of consistency among researchers and disciplines as to the degree of each group’s influence, it is generally understood that to some degree, an individual is the product of his socialization experiences and his predispositions will be significantly impacted by unique developmental experiences throughout his lifetime, including childhood socialization, and economic and ethnic considerations (Atkin, 1975; Zaller, 1992).

As a theoretical perspective, symbolic interactionism distinguishes itself from other social psychology approaches by investigating human behavior and reasoning processes from the perspective of “*how* people estimate potential costs and benefits and *why* they find certain actions more rewarding than others” (Hewitt, 1988, p. 23). In addition, symbolic interaction acknowledges that environments (social, political, and cultural) evolve, and thus the researcher needs to understand not only how they are sustained, but also how they change over time (Hewitt, 1988).

But what is symbolic interaction, and how does the process occur between people? The tenets of symbolic interaction are rooted in the concept of shared reality. Shared reality is a process by which individuals interact to create common areas of experience. In every condition that a communication message occurs, all involved parties (i.e., the sender, and all the recipients) must actively, interdependently process its

meaning. Thus, the success of shared reality is a collaborative endeavor. In order for individuals to successfully communicate with each other, they must construct, or recognize, agreed upon “symbols” to represent abstract psychological constructs (Hewitt, 1988). Symbols include more obvious constructs such as language; however, it is important to recognize that communication messages are routinely sent through nonverbal channels as well. For example, how one dresses or other aspects of an individual’s physical appearance can convey a wealth of information about one’s social perspective (Hewitt, 1988; Leary, 1996). A symbol is an abbreviation, and what a particular symbol represents will vary—not only from individual to individual but, on occasion, even the same individual may interpret information differently over time, and in different contexts. This symbolic attribution will be constructed out of the number and types of associations a person attaches to a symbol. Likewise, members of different societies or cultures may interpret symbols in unique ways, and not all members of a particular group may attribute identical or even similar meanings for a given symbol at a particular moment in time (Baran, McIntyre, & Meyer, 1984).

In this discussion it is important to understand what the terms “society” and/or “community” represent. Traditionally, communities emerged out of physical geographic boundaries. Sociologists term these “organic communities.” Members of organic communities experience a sense of identification with one another and share similar values and views of the world (Hewitt, 1988). An individual can gauge his or her actions within the established norms and expectations of other community members, collectively referred to as the “generalized other” (Hewitt, p. 131). The generalized other is an idealized representation of a group member (Goffman, 1959). The construct provides a sort of blueprint of actions for community members to follow, in order to maintain the

status quo, and enables society to function in a coherent, organized fashion. In this context, groups of people identify with specific role types and adapt to existing norms of conduct. For example, one likely has specific ideas about how a doctor or priest should behave. Routine interpersonal exchanges carry similar expectations, for example, appropriate exchanges when greeting a friend or acceptable behavior at a funeral. Goffman (1959) extends the concept of role playing to larger groups, wherein the “front” becomes a “collective representation” (p. 27). The reward for following the prescribed set of behaviors is status and acceptance within the community and, subsequently, a positive self-image, an important goal for most humans (Leary, 1996). In fact, the noted sociologist Erving Goffman (1959) popularized the notion of dramatic role playing in everyday life, and went so far as to assert that the world is a stage, and everyone is an actor. In the continuing play of life, different roles require performances for varying audiences and the actor adjusts his or her performance accordingly to engender the desired response.

Goffman’s social psychological constructs of the “self” and the “generalized other” help to decipher the complex processes that comprise how an individual navigates his path through the world. Because humans have the intellectual capacity of “self-consciousness,” that is, to be conscious of the self, “we are able to become objects to ourselves” (Hewitt, 1988, p. 11). As such, individuals wrestle with how to define the self within a society (or within multiple societies). An individual can belong to a number of different communities. For example, a college student might define himself as a member of a fraternity community, a sports team community and as a member of his academic community. In addition, when he visits his parents at home, he rejoins the community of his nuclear family, and perhaps his hometown. However, although people may operate

within a number of different communities, they do not necessarily identify strongly with all of them:

They work for a company, live in a certain neighborhood or city, have a family, belong to clubs and other voluntary associations, and interact with people in diverse settings. The construction and maintenance of personal identity requires more than the array of roles and group memberships encountered in everyday life. It requires the ability to identify with others with whom one has at least something in common, to regard these others as a community, and to make that community the basis for assembling a more coherent picture of the self. To a great extent in modern life, these others must be sought and sometimes imagined. (Hewitt, 1988, p. 138)

Complicating the issue further, technology now allows people to create communities without regard for physical boundaries. This radically alters “the basis on which people form communities and thus identify with one another” (Hewitt, 1988, p. 134). It also impacts the manner in which communities operate. A virtual community may have less formal guidelines for its members, and the “sense of community must be sustained by the self-conscious imagining of the nature and scope of the community” (Hewitt, p. 135). In these instances, “the creation and maintenance of identity requires more self-consciousness” (Hewitt, p. 136). This evolution has led some to conclude that “identity is the chief problem of modern society—[and] that the task of finding identity is thus a main goal of modern people” (Hewitt, 1988, p. 136).

### **Political Socialization**

An individual’s political identity is constructed through a process of political socialization. “Political socialization is a developmental process by which children and adolescents acquire cognitions, attitudes and behaviors relating to their political environment” (Atkin, 1975, p. 2), and encourages the transmission of political culture among generations. This process maintains political stability and contributes toward an overall reservoir of diffuse support for the system in general (Erikson & Tedin, 2001).

The construct parallels symbolic interactionism in many ways. Like symbolic interactionism, in order for the cultural system to successfully continue over time, new generations must conform to its existing prescriptions. As such, “youth must be inculcated with a desire to fulfill role expectations of society concerning normative political behavior” (Atkin, 1975, p. 2). Akin to symbolic interactionism, multiple agents are considered key transmitters of political orientations from generation to generation including parents, schools, peers, and the mass media (Atkin, 1975; Zaller, 1992). For the individual, the process is a gradual one. As Greenstein (1968) notes “the socialization process typically begins with abstract emotional attachments . . . these vague affective allegiances are supplemented with specific knowledge during adolescence, when the child develops a more rational understanding of his political world” (Atkin, 1975, p. 2).

As noted in the preceding section, symbolic interactionism contends that investigations into human behavior and reasoning processes need to account for “*how* people estimate potential costs and benefits and *why* they find certain actions more rewarding than others” (Hewitt, 1988, p. 23). This contention has particular relevance for this investigation because as Craig (1993) notes, for many people “politics is a low-salience domain” (Owen, 1997, p. 86). However, citizens realize that politics affects their lives, and as such they “find a means of balancing the costs and benefits of political activity” (Dalton, 2002, p. 24). Political science researchers have exhibited keen interest in the processes by which individuals approach these challenges.

### **Information Shortcuts**

As members of a society we are socialized from our earliest interactions. Through these interaction lessons, we learn how the world works. We form attitudes and

beliefs about the nature of objects, values and individuals. These lessons can be both direct and indirect, and they are powerful. Edelman (1993) compares the shifting lens of the social world to a “kaleidoscope of potential realities” (p. 231). His treatment focuses upon the intrinsic power social category classifications wield over political issues. Central to this perspective is the influence of unconscious cues upon an individual’s belief system. Given the enormous amount of information a person has to process on a regular basis, it is understandable that the majority of data we receive are categorized into existing categories of knowledge storage. Research shows that this level of process varies and is affected by issues such as cognitive load and motivation (Eagly & Chaiken, 1993). Because they are used as such routine organizational guides, “categories are especially powerful as shapers of political beliefs, enthusiasms, fears, and antagonisms when they appear to be natural, self-evident, or simple description rather than as propaganda tools” (Edelman, 1993, p. 232).

One manner by which individuals organize information and create their political attitudes is through the use of information shortcuts. Information shortcuts provide a rationalized means of organizing information with a minimum amount of cognitive effort. The political science literature references three types of information shortcuts: specialized interests, reference standards, and schema-theory (Dalton, 2002). This review will address the latter two as they are most relevant to this investigation.

### **Reference Standards—Group Identification**

One method of organizing political information is by using existing reference standards, such as social groups, as a source of political cues. “Membership in a social group, either formally or through psychological ties, can act as a guidepost in dealing with policy questions” (Dalton, 2002, p. 27). There are substantial data, extending back

to the early Lazerfeld, Berelson, and Gaudet (1948) voting studies, which confirm that social groups provide important political cues (Dalton, 2002).

Conover (1984) found that “group identifications play an important role in defining the perceptual viewpoints that people bring to bear on politics; people identifying with different groups focus on different things and evaluate political issues from different perspectives” (p. 760). Furthermore, “group identifications contribute to how an individual structures the political world; and in turn, those cognitive structures shape the evaluation of political phenomena” (Conover, 1984, p. 781). This effect is particularly strong for minority groups and groups that have distinctive political perspectives (Conover, 1984). However, as Kinder (1982) suggests, it is important for the researcher to explore “the process through which objective membership in a social group takes on both psychological and political significance” (Conover, 1984, p. 761).

Conover (1984) defines group identification using two dimensions: an awareness of one’s own objective membership in the group, and a sense of psychological attachment to the group. Her definition highlights an important distinction between objective group membership and identification, in that “membership is treated as a necessary, but not sufficient, condition for identification” (p. 761). This emphasis underscores the notion that an individual might be a member of a group, but not develop important psychological ties to that group, which in turn would influence his political perception and attitudes (Conover, 1984).

### **Schema-Theory**

Schema-theory is another type of information shortcut documented in the political science literature. Fiske and Linville (1980) define a schema as a “cognitive structure of organized prior knowledge, abstracted from experience with specific instances which

guides the processing of new information and the retrieval of stored information” (Conover, 1984, p. 762). Schema-theory is based upon a “vertical structuring of beliefs within specific political domains . . . a broad organizing structure is linked to general political orientations” (Dalton, 2002, p. 26). This method of organization enables an individual to make logical and structured judgements based on general orientations rather than requiring specific information on a variety of political topics, which would be enormously time-consuming (Dalton, 2002). Self-schemas represent important factors in understanding group identification on political perception because they “direct attention toward information that is personally relevant; they enhance the memory of such information; and they function as the basis of future judgements and inferences involving one’s self . . . [as well as] influence the processing of information concerning others” (Conover, 1984, p. 763).

As discussed earlier, social psychology theory posits that individuals perceive themselves in terms of “self” and “other.” There is a private self and a public self. At the next level, a person may develop a self-schema and perceive similarities with oneself, and a particular group. At this level, group identification occurs. “In effect, in the process of consciously classifying oneself as a member of a group, the individual takes the very first step toward blending together the mental representation of the self with the cognitive stereotype of some group” (Conover, 1984, p. 762). Furthermore, a somewhat linear relationship should exist between perceived group identification and influence: “the stronger the group identification, the stronger the perceptual effects” (Conover, 1984, p. 763). However, it is important to remember that this relationship does not imply that group members will all share the same attitudes toward an event or product. Rather, it indicates that by focusing on a particular phenomenon, issue salience for an individual



who identifies with the group will be heightened for that particular topic. “The group’s interests are especially salient in the perception and evaluation of political phenomena” (Conover, 1984, p. 764).

Furthermore, Conover (1984) contends that “in particular, the perceptual relevance of any one issue for a specific group will depend largely on whether the language or symbols defining the issue link it to the group” (p. 765). Second, “groups most activated by the political environment should be most distinctive in their perceptions and evaluations. Which group ties are most likely to have been stimulated by the recent political environment?” (Conover, 1984, p. 765). These issues will be revisited shortly in terms of the specific characteristics of Generation X.

Researchers still wrestle with major issues in the area of political socialization. For example, how stable are an individual’s beliefs? In general, at what age do these beliefs tend to stabilize? Does political socialization occur primarily through traditional channels of family, school, and institutions, or does it reflect the current political environment (Sears & Valentino, 1997)? The next section investigates the literature on how humor can function as a powerful influence upon an individual’s schema formation.

### **Humor**

The previous section explains how group identification can facilitate the organization of political information. Because this study is concerned with humorous delivery of political messages, it is necessary to understand how these issues are connected in the humor literature.

### **Social Identification Theory**

Social identification theory (also known as identification class theory or reference group theory) is one of the richest areas of humor research. The underlying premises of

humor social identification theory echo those of social psychology identification theory: Identification with a particular social group will influence the way in which a person views the world. However, in the realm of humor social identification theory, the manner by which an individual's beliefs are reinforced by his or her membership in a group is achieved through the use of humor. As Palmer explains, "what people laugh at, how and when they laugh is absolutely central to their culture" (Palmer, 1994, p. 2).

Sociologists (Hyman, 1942; Merton, 1968, Sherif, 1936) claim that an individual views the world from a social frame of reference; this framework is often derived, at least in part, from the groups to which he/she belongs . . . reference group theory (by whatever name: disposition theory, identification class theory, or social identification theory helps to explain the evaluation of group-directed humor). (Fine, 1983, p. 172)

The earlier review of symbolic interactionism explained how symbols serve as an abbreviation for individuals to make sense out of a variety of complex phenomena. Humor serves as a powerful symbolic resource for various kinds of groups, and often plays an important role in establishing community by indicating that one is "a knowledgeable member of a social group" (Fine, 1983, p. 167).

Laughter is employed as part of a "conventional signal-language" . . . [it] is generated in the course of social interaction and it can be used by participants to communicate about and to construct the meaning of such interaction . . . in the case of humor, the stimulus is a complex cultural product which requires complicated mental processing. (Mulkay, 1988, pp. 95-96)

Understanding a humorous communication requires an enormous degree of shared meaning between the message sender and recipient. This process is sometimes referred to as humor "negotiation." First, in order to be successful, a humorous message must be understood by the receiver. Second, in addition to comprehension, the comedian (or humorous source) must also elicit "permission" from the audience (Palmer, 1994). Humor is almost always socially mediated, occurs in a social context, and varies

according to the “interpersonal dynamics of that context” (Mulkay, 1988, p.107). Social groups can provide a strong framework for interpreting the intent of a humorous message. LaFave (1972) conducted extensive research on the phenomenon of group affiliation concerning humor and considers humor a matter of “judgement,” whose degree of success or failure is dependent upon the degree to which the listener identifies with the various components of the message, i.e., the source and the message content. For example, a racist joke told to a member of a minority group will likely be interpreted differently depending on whether the source is a member of the minority group or not.

Humor construction incorporates multiple levels of shared understanding among group members. Members of a group will often use specific language and have common experiences that they can draw upon to develop humorous exchanges. This reservoir of shared knowledge helps to create a sense of group identification, of community. However, by creating a group of people inside the humorous communication exchange, the process also inherently excludes others who do not share the in-group’s internal knowledge base and relevant reference points. Differentiation humor, which reinforces differences among social groups, then emerges through this process (Lynch, 2002).

Differentiation is also a common process within the political realm. The process of supporting one’s own political grouping and denigrating others’ views and actions is considered “a basic structural principle within political language” (Mulkay, 1988, p. 205). In the following quote, Mulkay (1988) is referring specifically to political cartoons; however, his statements are relevant for all forms of political humor.

The political cartoon, like humor in general, always sets its reader a puzzle. The “meaning” of the cartoon is never made fully explicit. Background knowledge of the political scene, of current affairs and of the conventions of cartoon humor must be used to interpret the clues provided in the text. As in all humor, the components of political cartoons are organized bisociatively to create semantic

oppositions which the reader must decode. The oppositions inevitably operate to undermine the position of one or more of the politicians involved and to reveal an alternative view which is implicitly advocated in the text of the cartoon. (Mulkay, 1988, p. 203)

LaFave's (1972) contributions offer more insight on the relationship between group identification and humor. Previous research has found evidence that individuals are more inclined to appreciate humor directed at reference groups with which they have negative associations and display less enjoyment at jokes in which their own reference group is the target of the joke. LaFave (1972) later expanded this concept, when he found evidence that not only do people identify with members of their own immediate reference groups, but that they sometimes also identify with members of other groups that may share similar characteristics of their own group, or personal situation. Through this relationship, an individual can experience vicarious superiority effects through humor.

It is evident from this review that powerful socialization forces shape how people learn to react to humor. Much humor is based upon socialized stereotypes and these stereotypes are routinely activated in popular culture portrayals, as well as in the political environment. The next section looks at research conducted on the persuasive effectiveness of humor.

### **Humor As An Agent Of Attitude Change**

While satire has always been perceived as a powerful force of social change, past research on the topic has delivered inconsistent findings on its persuasive effects (Markiewicz, 1974). Humor is generally considered an appropriate mechanism to enhance audience attention and interest on a subject, but research has not found a linear relationship between humor and information retention (Gruner, 1967). However, critics

charge that although strong empirical support for humor's role does not yet exist, the fault may lie more with experimental methodology than theory (Markiewicz, 1974). Despite the lack of empirical evidence, the fact that humor is frequently employed in persuasive communications, such as advertising and speeches, underscores the generally held belief that correctly utilized, humor is an effective persuasive mechanism (Brown & Bryant, 1983).

One of the main theoretical arguments in the humor field concerns the impact of satire upon the existing political system. Does humor subvert or sustain the existing status quo? Mulkay (1988) contends that political humor tends to "conserve, rather than to subvert the existing patterns of political life . . . [because], the more closely humor is incorporated into existing social structures, the more it comes to maintain those structures" (p. 211). However, Mulkay also concludes that humor "should not be regarded as an inherently inferior form of discourse. In its purest form, it constitutes a radical alternative to the way in which we create our ordinary social world" (Mulkay, 1988, p. 222).

Charles Gruner (1967), a pioneer in humor research, conducted the first study on speaker ethos and audience information gain. Gruner called for study into factors that "might interact with the effect of humor on retention" (p. 1232). Markiewicz (1972a, 1972b, 1973, 1974) responded to this challenge and conducted several studies investigating the effect of source credibility as a moderator on humor persuasiveness. Although she did not find consistent evidence to support the source credibility moderator, in a subsequent publication Markiewicz (1974) acknowledged that her source credibility manipulation was weak, and that future research should explore the construct.

Gruner (1965) suggested two particular difficulties in conducting research on the effectiveness of satire, and pointed to these as reasons as why data may erroneously suggest that its power is limited. The first reason is that the indirect nature of satire makes it difficult for subjects to recognize the speaker's main argument thesis. Second, consistent with Goodchilds (1959) findings, a speaker may experience a loss in ethos by subjects by using satire.

Consistent with the previous literature reviewed on social identification, both in the political science and humor disciplines, Mulkay (1988) contends that a recipient's frame of reference will determine his use of the political humor message. Likewise, a relationship tends to exist between the larger distribution network and the specific channel of communication, whereby the end user has a predisposition for the message because he is emotionally attached to the media product as a whole. For example, Mulkay notes that the audience for a particular political cartoonist will also be a reader for the newspaper or magazine itself, and thus the audience will be inclined to favor the political stance of the cartoonist's (who is endorsed by the periodical) message. Generally speaking, political cartoons, "are addressed to the converted and are designed to strengthen, and reaffirm, recipients political commitment rather than to change it" (Mulkay, 1988, p. 209). The perspective has significant relevance for this study. *The Daily Show* is considered alternative programming on a comedy network. Future sections of this chapter explore the political socialization of Generation X, and the audience for *The Daily Show* and its parent network, Comedy Central.

### **Politics and Media Framing**

Members of different political groupings understand political events in significantly different ways . . . people with different political commitments tend to employ divergent interpretive frameworks to formulate the character of the

events in which they are involved. In this sense, the actors subscribe to different political realities; they inhabit divergent political worlds. (Mulkay, 1988, pp. 205-206).

Thus far, this review has explored issues of political socialization and theoretical frameworks concerning how these associations are developed and activated. The discussion will now examine the research regarding mass media as a political socialization force. The review will then move on to research conducted on entertainment and humorous political programming.

### **Minimal Effects**

In the wake of WWII, concern over the growing popularity and diffusion of electronic media (i.e., radio) led social scientists to investigate audience effects from exposure to political broadcast messages (Iyengar et al., 1982). Early research found minimal effects for political broadcast material and the literature continued to reflect this belief for several decades. In fact the academic community was so entrenched in its defense of the minimal effects theory that as late as 1956 one political scientist, Eugene Burdick, abandoned the American Political Science Association (APSA) when he was unable to find another colleague who would support research that questioned the minimal effects theory (Robinson, 1976). However by the late 1960s, televised images of the Vietnam War helped to usher in a new era of political media research. Rather than focusing on the limited arena of campaign effects, social scientists began to examine the effects of televised journalism on political attitudes (Robinson).

Television is considered a unique medium for transmitting news for several reasons. Perhaps most importantly, the audience for television news is comprised of individuals who actively monitor politics as well as those who “would virtually have no news were it not for television” (Robinson, 1976, p. 426). Robinson labels these two

groups as advertent and inadvertent audiences, respectively. As such, this phenomenon creates a unique pattern of exposure for television news, in that it is the only medium where “socioeconomic status and degree of exposure are negatively correlated. Those who are less wealthy or less educated, etc. are not only more likely to rely on television news, they are also more likely to watch television news” (Robinson, p. 426). As a result, the inadvertent audience member is theoretically the most vulnerable to persuasion or other televised effects due to their predicted lower levels of political knowledge and sophistication. Robinson contends that the theory of the inadvertent voter can explain the changes that have occurred within the electorate concerning partisan stability and information flow. He hypothesizes that “television journalism may be . . . the missing link in our understanding of contemporary political change” (pp. 425-426).

Although researchers (Volgy & Schwarz, 1980; Zaller, 1992) argue that existing data gathering methods, and subsequent data gathered, still do not represent the full strength of the effects of television on political attitudes, media—and television in particular—is cited as a major source of political information. Furthermore, it is generally acknowledged that because most individuals cannot experience much of the inner world of government directly, television provides the American public with a majority of its characterizations of political issues and personalities (Volgy & Schwarz).

So, how do television portrayals influence individual’s political attitudes and knowledge levels? In two articles investigating the power television wields in the public policy arena, Iyengar et al. (1982) and Iyenger (1987) provide strong evidence that an “individual’s explanations of political issues are significantly influenced by the manner in which television news presentations [are framed]” (p. 815). Iyengar (1987) also notes that “causal beliefs are important ingredients of political knowledge . . . opinions,



attitudes feelings, and behaviors . . . are organized around beliefs about causation” (pp. 815-816). As such, Iyengar (1987) concludes, “individuals’ attitudes toward political issues can be significantly altered by the manner in which television news frames these issues” (p. 816).

### **Politics and Entertainment Programming**

But what about programming that combines political information and entertainment? Does it have the potential to exert influence upon political attitudes and beliefs on the viewing public as well? Dominick (1974) and Rarick, Townsend & Boyd (1973) found support for entertainment television as a potentially effective mechanism to influence political orientations (Atkin, 1975). And Volgy and Schwarz (1980) concluded that television entertainment programming may function as an extremely potent socializing agent because (a) the viewer may be less critical of the message than when viewing traditional news programming, and (b) television may be the only “direct” experience many viewers have with different ethnic and professional groups, and to various societal problems.

In the mid- and late-1980s, several researchers examined the impact of specific entertainment shows on political attitudes and beliefs. Feldman and Sigelman (1985) conducted a groundbreaking investigation into the impact of entertainment television on political attitudes when they analyzed the impact the television docudrama *The Day After*, a fictionalized account of the aftermath of a Soviet nuclear attack on an American city. They found that the program most directly influenced information salience about nuclear war, as opposed to changing individuals’ attitudes on the subject. Several years later, Lenart and McGraw (1989)<sup>1</sup> conducted a panel study to determine how the

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<sup>1</sup>Although the Feldman & Sigelman and Lenart & McGraw studies provide great insight into the arena of political attitudes toward entertainment programming, it is important to recognize that they both deal with fictionalized content.

television docudrama *Amerika*, which depicted “life in the Midwest 10 years after a Soviet takeover of the United States,” affected viewer’s political attitudes and stereotypes (p. 697). Lenart & McGraw’s results showed a significant trend of increased conservative attitude change in individuals who viewed the program. Both studies also examined mediating factors, such as demographic variables, and indirect exposure to the programs such as associated coverage and interpersonal discussion.

### **Politics and Comedy Programming**

Although social and political satire has appeared on television from the medium’s earliest days its broadcast heritage illuminates the complexity of humor itself. Although a complete analysis is untenable here, a brief review is included to help provide context for the research.<sup>2</sup>

While many vaudeville comedians made successful transitions to radio, they found the motion picture medium a less welcoming public space for their performance art. However, on television, performers like Milton Berle, George Burns and Gracie Allen, and Jack Benny found the success that had eluded them on the big screen. The comedy-variety show became “TV’s vaudeville,” a format which was the progenitor for the modern talk-variety show (i.e., *The Tonight Show*, *Late Night with David Letterman*). The star of the show would “emcee” the production, joke with guests, introduce sketches, and provide continuity between the program and commercials (Marc, 1997). However, while pioneer comedians, such as Jackie Gleason, Sid Caesar, and Red Skeleton made the successful initial transition to television, “TV vaudeville” (i.e., the comedy-variety show) would not emerge as the dominate genre for television comedy. When television was introduced to the American public, the country was still reeling from the recent effects of

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<sup>2</sup> For a more comprehensive review see Marc (1997).

McCarthyism on the entertainment industry. Network executives were reluctant to expose themselves to potential criticism, and advertisers—television’s revenue source—wanted to develop audiences that would be encouraged to perpetuate the “American Dream” by buying their products, not revolt against the status quo. As such, the narrative sitcom genre emerged as a “safer” platform to portray American culture. Although early television comedies (many of which were transports from radio) such as *The George Burns and Gracie Allen Show* (CBS, 1950-1958), *I Love Lucy* (CBS, 1951-1961), and the *Honeymooners* (CBS 1955-1956) may have incorporated social and political elements (i.e., Ricky Ricardo was a Cuban immigrant, Jackie Gleason portrayed a working class man), these weekly 30-minute portrayals did not challenge the foundations of American ideology as the Lear sitcoms of the 1970s (*All in the Family*, CBS 1971-1979; *Maude*, CBS, 1972-1978; *The Jeffersons*, CBS, 1975-1986) and others (*Mary Tyler Moore*, CBS, 1970-1977; *M.A.S.H.*, CBS, 1974-1983) would 2 decades later (Marc, 1997; Bodroghkozy, 2001). The idealized representations of family life that the Networks “sold” to the American public of the 1950s (i.e., *Father Knows Best*, various, 1954-1960; *The Dick Van Dyke Show*, CBS, 1961-1966) upheld traditional family values, as well as American patriotic sentiments (Marc, 1997).

Of course there were exceptions that more directly merged politics and entertainment. For example, comedian Mort Sahl lampooned Eisenhower on *The Ed Sullivan Show* (Klein, 1996), and politicians routinely appeared on *The Jack Paar Show* (Paar, 1961; Severo, 2004).

*The Steve Allen Show* (NBC, 1956-1959) is a particularly notable entry in this era. Allen hosted alternative performers such as beat poet Jack Kerouac and comedian Lenny Bruce. However, his attempts to incorporate such controversial figures proved

challenging in the post-McCarthy era on a medium that survived on commercial advertising:

The comic possibilities of Lenny Bruce suddenly unleashed on a TV Show between a commercial for Dupont and an appearance by the Three Stooges are sacrificed to television's paranoid, lowest-common-denominator legacy. Ironically, the "least objectionality" principle is upheld even as it is seemingly subverted by the presentation of an outspoken advocate of racial desegregation, First Amendment expression rights, and sexual freedom. (Marc, 1997, p. 59)

It is important to recognize that, in the modern landscape of cable niche-programming, Bruce's humor and persona would likely have found an audience that embraced his perspective and would have allowed him the freedom of speech to present his material intact (Marc, 1997).

However, in the more restricted era of mass "public trust" programming, edgy, angry, opinionated voices did not have many outlets on television. It is interesting to note that in the arts, using humor to navigate around governmental censure (or censure from the ruling class) has long historical roots. As early as the fifth century B.C.

Playwrights, including Aristophanes and Euripides, managed to work politically satiric references into their plays by allegorizing the current events (i.e., The News) of Athens into fictional settings, a convention well understood by the audience. By swaddling jokes in the blankets of a drama, an artist could "get away" with things that would be considered vulgar or even mortally offensive had they been presented to the audience in direct second-person address. To this day, drama has a relatively better time of it than stand-up comedy in totalitarian and authoritarian societies. (Marc, 1997, p. 14)

Unlike stand-up comedy, which "often depends on the shocking violation of normative taboos" (Marc, 1997, p. 20), the situation comedy tends to reinforce the status quo. The important distinction between the stand-up comedian and the comedic actor is that the stand-up artist minimizes the line between the worlds of fantasy and reality.

Unlike dramatic actors who are recognized as playing a role, or even a TV reporter who is viewed as an objective presenter of "The News," the stand-up actor is more fully

perceived as representing himself and his personal views with the audience (Marc, 1997). “The contrast between the boldness of stand-up comedy and the ameliorative structure of dramatic comedy had a significant impact in shaping the character of American commercial television in the 1950s” (Marc, 1997, p. 17).

Whereas the comedy sitcoms of the 1950s idealized the American family, and the American experience, the fare of the 1960s took the escapist quality of the medium a step further. Rather than address the significant and visible political and social changes taking place, American comedy sitcoms of the 1960s instead opted to showcase escapist entertainment such as domesticated witches (*Bewitched*, ABC 1964-1970) and shipwrecked passengers (*Gilligan’s Island*, CBS, 1964-1967) (Bodroghkozy, 2001; Marc, 1997).

However, several programs did emerge during this period that are considered important markers in television’s political satire history: *That Was the Week That Was*, *The Smothers Brothers Comedy Hour*, and *Laugh-In*. Their success varied, largely in relation to the degree of their antagonistic stance against the establishment. *The Week That Was* (TW3) debuted on NBC in 1964. The show, hosted by journalist/comedian David Frost, was adopted from British television (Frost was also the original host in Britain); and the format was devoted exclusively to topical satire. At the time, the content was considered so controversial that NBC stopped airing the show in the weeks preceding the 1964 Johnson-Goldwater election, and in the wake of constant censorship battles the network cancelled the show after only one season (Marc, 1997).

The second testing of the waters came in the familiar form of the comedy-variety show. *The Smother’s Brothers Comedy Hour* (SMB) was CBS’s attempt to lure younger viewers to their network. The show’s first season began in January of 1967, and its

content was “nothing less than avant-garde” (Marc, 1997, p. 120). *SMB* directly targeted controversial issues such as the Vietnam War and drug use. And like *TW3*, *SMB*’s producers found themselves continually harangued by CBS censors. For example, Pat Paulsen, an *SMB* series regular, “ran for president” during the 1968 election campaign, and poked fun at the real candidates and the electoral system in general. However, in the weeks immediately preceding the Humphrey-Nixon election CBS refused to allow Paulsen on the air (Marc, 1997). Another recurring sketch, “Share a Little Tea with Goldie,” parodied afternoon TV advice shows for housewives and was riddled with drug-oriented humor. Although the network censors argued over the some of the content in the Goldie sketches, much of the material made it onto the air, simply because the older, less hip, CBS executives did not understand the slang vocabulary used by the counterculture. The entire story of the reasons behind *SMB*’s demise is chronicled elsewhere in detail (Bodroghkozy, 2001; Marc, 1997); however, here it is sufficient to note that by the spring of 1969 the show was cancelled, largely due to the politically charged material it incorporated. In addition to advertiser concerns, some network affiliates protested the show’s “sick” standards and threatened not to air it in their areas, particularly during prime-time (Bodroghkozy, 2001).

The third entry in this era’s category was *Rowan and Martin’s Laugh-In* (NBC, 1968-1973). *Laugh-In* proved to be a much more commercially viable platform for topical commentary than either *TW3* or *SMB*. Despite the fact that the show addressed topical issues (for example, there was a weekly news summary called “Laugh-In Looks at the News”), it’s delivery was far more casual and nonconfrontational than its predecessors. A prime example of *Laugh-In*’s success at skewering the establishment while simultaneously endearing itself to the mass public is evident in Lily Tomlin’s

portrayal of telephone operator Ernestine. As Marc (1997) reports, Tomlin's Ernestine character "provided the closest thing to an evolved critique of an American corporation that had ever been heard on the airwaves" (Marc, 1997, p. 125). The show also featured a litany of famous guests, including a particularly noteworthy appearance by Richard Nixon in 1968 delivering the show's classic line "Sock it to me" (Marks, 2000). Another unique feature of *Laugh-In* was its revolutionary production techniques. George Schlatter, *Laugh-In's* creator/producer, developed a modern style of editing that used quick cuts that transformed the traditional aesthetic traditions (Marc, 1997).

Despite these attempts to lure younger viewers with the shows mentioned above, in large part, the television viewing audience of the era still largely consisted of older viewers and children. Not finding representation, the highly desirable 18- to 34-year-old advertising demographic had largely tuned out the medium in favor of folk and rock music (radio) and alternative print media. The general feeling among the country's youth was that television was tied to the "establishment" and was an integral part of the hegemonic process that they were so earnestly rallying against. Some in the industry worried that this generation, the first to be raised with television, might have abandoned the medium for good. Because the medium was so new, there was no historical precedence to guide the industry as to whether they could recapture the youth market (Bodroghkozy, 2001). The situation generated serious concern within the television industry as it struggled to bridge the gap between the estranged politicized youth of the day and the medium's older, loyal, more conservative viewers. As the 1960s came to a close, television executives began to see the writing on the wall. They recognized that the formula would have to change in order for the medium to survive.

The sitcoms of the 1970s signaled important changes for the television industry. Rather than avoid the cultural issues as the escapist fare of the 1960s had, television comedies began to explore the generational, ethnic, and political divisions that existed within American society. A far cry from the happy heterogeneous nuclear family portrayals of earlier sitcom fare, the new comedy sitcoms included untraditional families, minorities, and dared to present the establishment, including the military, in less than ideal ways (Bodroghkozy, 2001; Marc, 1997). Again, a complete review is not viable here, but it is important to recognize that the commercial success of these formats paved the way for a new generation of television programming. As Marc (1997) notes,

Programming formats rise and fall. . . . As is the case with automobile marketing, the latest model anachronizes the previous by defining a new state of the art. . . . If commercially successful, one TV show may significantly revise an “existing order” that has been casually portrayed in a given genre for years. (Marc, 1997, pp. 134-136).

For the first time, the networks were faced with developing programming for a generation that had experienced television all of their lives. In the 1960s television action/adventure crime shows such as *Dragnet* and *The Mod Squad* had begun to incorporate “The News” (i.e., salient issues of the day); however, the sitcom, “the most-intimate of prime-time genres” (Marc, 1997, p. 145), had yet to tackle these topical issues. In the early 1970s three shows in particular—*Mary Tyler Moore*, *All in the Family*, and *M\*A\*S\*H*<sup>3</sup>—exploded onto the small screen and helped not only to legitimize the sitcom, but the television medium, as a viable art form. The genre respected its audience’s post-60s maturity, and delivered the advertising industry “a

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<sup>3</sup>It is telling however, that the principals of *M\*A\*S\*H* would not comment on the show’s political content, or even to acknowledge that it contained any. Marc (1997) surmises that the producer’s anti-antagonistic stance (and strong ratings) helped to protect the series from censorship despite the “legacy of McCarthyism that continues to cast a shadow over American popular culture” (p. 158).



quality mass audience delivered by a quality product” (Marc, 1997, p. 145). The comic narratives found their way into national dialogue, and their success would spawn a multitude of other programs that allowed heterogeneous representations of the American experience such as *Sanford and Son* (NBC, 1972-1977), *Good Times* (CBS, 1974-1979), and *One Day At a Time* (CBS, 1975-1984).

In addition to the sitcom, comedy in the 1970s would find success in another familiar format: the comedy-variety show. *Saturday Night Live* (*SNL*) debuted on NBC in 1975 and showcased cutting-edge comic talents. NBC’s President, Herb Schlosser, wanted the show to be risky and exciting and to deliver a modern view to a youth audience. Schlosser hired Lorne Michaels, a young Canadian producer, to develop the show and create a marketable identity (Wallner, 1991).

*SNL*’s long run (it is still on the air today) is a testimony to the fact that the show did find its voice, and subsequent audience. However, in its first season the show wrestled to establish itself. Celebrity guests hosted the show (comedian George Carlin was the show’s first host) and a troupe of talented comic actors, including John Belushi, Dan Akroyd, and Gilda Radner, performed sketches. *SNL* also included a segment called “Weekend Update,” a news style presentation that satirized topical issues (Wallner, 1991).

Although the show was perceived as edgy and radical by some, critics charged that the humor served to reinforce the status quo, rather than challenge it. Furthermore, the nature of the humor was superficial. Although there were rare exceptions, rather than use humor to expose problems within the system, *SNL* more often than not went for the sight gag, and relied on skewering personal characteristics of a politician, rather than his stance on issues (Wallner, 1991).

The above review is a brief historical outline of some of the processes that shaped the nature of television satirical programming. While not all-inclusive it should help the reader appreciate some of the historical precedents for the modern topical satire program. It is significant to note that the “literate peak” of the Lear-era television sitcoms occurred during the final days of the Big Three’s dominance, before cable television began to exert its influence over the broadcast spectrum. The subsequent expansion of the airwaves would again radically change the nature of the television, providing commercial space for a variety of niche programming. In the current age of narrowcasting the presentational style of the comedy-variety genre has morphed into entire networks (i.e., MTV, The Nashville Network, and Comedy Central). As the next section addresses “The News” became the genre “most radically affected by cable,” with the “main effect of greater variety in television choices [being] the tabloidization of television news” (Marc, 1997, p. 188).

### **Credibility Crisis**

In many respects *The Daily Show* traces its origins from the comedy-variety genre. Although this type of programming may have ruffled feathers with network executives in the past over the handling of topical issues, and generated debate among audiences, the “entertainment” function of the format has generally led the elite to dismiss it from more serious analysis. Recently, however, the genre as a whole, and *the Daily Show* in particular, have gained an unprecedented degree of legitimization: a source of political information (Smith & Voth, 2002). Polls show that 10% of Americans routinely get information about the presidential race and other political news from late night comedy-talk shows (Marks, 2000), and this phenomenon is even more salient for younger audiences. A 2000 presidential survey by the Pew Research Center for People

and the Press found that almost half (47%) of Americans of voting age under 30 obtain the majority of their political information from late night television (Kloera & Jubera, as cited in Smith & Voth, 2000). And political strategists are taking note. For example, in the 1996 presidential election, Democratic and Republican campaign operatives began monitoring David Letterman and Jay Leno's opening monologues in order to help determine candidate performance (Shuger, 1997). In addition, appearances on late night television talk shows are now a mandatory part of the campaign process for political candidates (Marks, 2000). The distinction between the genres has become so blurred that politicians have begun to announce their candidacies on these "entertainment" programs. Arnold Schwarzenegger announced his bid for Governor of California on *The Tonight Show* (CNN, 2003) and John Edwards declared his Presidential bid on *TDS* (Zap2it, 2003b). As the genre exhibits its highest level of credibility to date, media researchers are beginning to ask what factors have fueled this trend?

Although politics has always had a dramatic flavor, "the line between show business and politics has never been thinner" (James, 2000, p. B11). Industry deregulation and a subsequent denigration of professional journalism are considered major factors in the process. In the decades before cable television threatened network revenues and competed for their audiences, the Big Three (ABC, NBC, CBS) considered their news departments more in terms of public service than profit margins (Auletta, 1992). However, deregulation in the 1980s and 1990s led to massive media conglomeration. Furthermore, networks and other media providers were often bought by companies that were not formerly in the news business. The media frenzy of the time often led to bidding wars, and forced corporations to take on huge debt as they acquired these media outlets (Auletta, 1992, 1998). Corporations had to justify their bottom lines

to shareholders as the network news departments never had before. In addition, news networks such as CNN, MSNBC, CSPAN, and the Fox Channel began broadcasting 24 hours a day, which not only increased competition between news providers but forced producers to generate huge amounts of content to fill the expanded airtime (Zoglin, 1996). Increased capacity has also produced a wealth of niche programming alternatives that were not available in past decades (Marc, 1997).

In response to these pressures television news programming began to display characteristics formerly associated more closely with entertainment programming than traditional news reporting. For example, magazine style shows have increased. The format generates good revenue and allows networks to appear to be fulfilling their public service role without shouldering the enormous cost of original newsgathering. News bureaus have also begun to whittle down their field reporting, both by consolidating crews and increasingly relying on Internet reporting (Rottenberg, 1994).

Another important phenomenon in this evolution has been the increased amount of sensationalized reporting. Events such as the O. J. Simpson murder trial and the Clinton/Lewinsky debacle helped to blur the line between news and entertainment even further as reporters scrambled to get increasingly lurid details to hold the public's attention (Klein, 1996). Production trends have further erased the line as to where the theatrical ends and the real politics begin. Television's increased shift toward reduced sound bites, rapid-fire editing, and style versus substance is evident in both entertainment-oriented programming and in news and political coverage (Klein, 1996).

These factors have resulted in a crisis of confidence in the American news media (Garcia, 2003). In an article titled *News Industry Anguish Over Crumbling Credibility*,

Nicholson (1998) discusses the findings from a Princeton Research Associates Survey<sup>4</sup> indicating figures as high as 62% of Americans having lost faith in the news media accuracy. Other data show similar levels of public mistrust. A 1996 TIME/CNN poll reported that 75% of the respondents considered the news media "sensationalistic," 63% found it "too negative," and 73% said they questioned the accuracy of the news they receive (Zoglin, 1996). Several high profile episodes of respected journalists fabricating news stories also have added to the public's cynicism (Nicholson, 1998).

And it is not just viewers who are concerned. Broadcasters themselves express similar reservations about the future of the industry. In a 1997 address to the Institute for Public Relations Research and Education, Don Hewitt, Executive for CBS News and founder of 60 Minutes, voiced his fear that "broadcast journalism, as America knew it, relished it and depended on it, in the 40s, the 50s, the 60s, and a good part of the 70s, is becoming a lost art and may all but vanish by the end of the century" (Hewitt, 1997, p. 48). Another news icon, Walter Cronkite, also criticized the industry for television journalism's falling standards. He claimed that the Big Three networks frequently were too soft in their newscasts and that reporters failed to interpret the day's events for their audiences (Rottenberg, 1994). Cronkite laid blame on tabloid journalism saying that "It is part of the whole degeneration of society in my mind. We've always known you can gain circulation or viewers by cheapening the product, and now you're finding the bad driving out the good" (Rottenberg, 1994, pp. 35-36). Pundit style news shows have also contributed to the problem. Instead of rationally discussing the issues of the day, the McLaughlin style format has been reduced to guests facing off on each side of the fence, promoting extreme views. The end result is a shouting match which often resembles

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<sup>4</sup>The poll was commissioned by Newsweek in 1998 (Nicholson).

professional wrestling more than intellectual debate (Friend, 1997). And so as traditional news media have slid into more entertainment style programming techniques, “entertainment” programming has begun to gain a margin of respectability.

### **Generation X**

Members of Generation X are a prime demographic for alternative news programming. This next section discusses the political socialization of Xers and why they may be particularly susceptible to this type of information format.

#### **Generation X—Political Socialization**

The investigation now turns to the question, what are the characteristics of Generation X? Is this group an identifiable entity politically? The question raises several problematic issues for inquiry. As Bennett and Craig (1997) caution, generational research is difficult because of the “life-cycle effect.” Researchers must try to distinguish whether new generations display different patterns from previous generations over time, or whether they simply repeat patterns of previous groups. In studying Generation X, this problem is exacerbated because its members have not yet progressed through the full life-cycle. “As a result it is impossible to know for certain whether any differences that currently exist between Xers and older cohorts will endure” (Bennett & Craig, 1997, p. 8).

Even the term generation can be ambiguous. How is a generation defined? In terms of years? Events? Furthermore, no one has successfully determined the age at which an individual begins to interpret the importance of political events upon their personal identity (Bennett & Craig, 1997). So who are the members of Generation X, and what is their psychological makeup? These questions have frustrated researchers. As Bennett and Craig (1997) assert “stereotypes abound, but the collective identity of

Gen-Xers—sociologically, culturally, politically, remains elusive” (p. 3). However, despite this cynical outlook, some defining characteristics of Generation X have emerged.

Mannheim (1952) coined the term generation unit to “describe a group of people born during the same period who at a relatively young age experienced some major event . . . that left them with a sense of having shared a common history and with feelings of kinship connecting them to others of approximately the same age” (Bennet & Craig, 1997, p. 4). Generation X, also referred to as the post-baby boom generation, is generally considered to be comprised of persons born between 1961 and 1981. However, Conover (1984) concluded that group identification is defined as “objective group membership acting in concert with a sense of psychological attachment” (Conover, 1984, p. 782). “Not all group identities and their related self-schemas are politically relevant. To a certain extent, the political significance of various group identities may depend on the nature of the political environment” (Conover, 1984, p. 782).

Part of the quandary for researchers has been a lack of “identifiable influential events” for the X generation.<sup>5</sup> For the post-baby boomers, there was no Great Depression, no Vietnam. However, despite an apparent lack of specific notable events, more abstract experiences have contributed toward shaping Generation X’s policy beliefs and approaches. Cynicism, of politicians, the media, and the process as a whole, is a defining feature for this age group (Dunne, 1997). In the political realm, Gen-Xer’s were raised in the post-Watergate era. Unlike other generations, Xers “have spent their entire lives in an environment in which damning messages about government and its leaders are

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<sup>5</sup>The terrorist attacks of September 11th can now be considered a milestone event for all Americans, however.

the norm . . . moreover, the life experiences of gen-Xers have tended to confirm this negative dialogue” (Owen, 1997, p. 89). Generally, Xers display greater levels of interpersonal mistrust than their elders (Owen, 1997). The radical change of the traditional family structure strengthened Xers overall cynicism and is an important factor in the group’s socialization process. Xer’s are three times more likely to be products of divorce than their parents were (Dunne, as cited in Strauss & Howe, 1991). This statistic has further ramifications in terms of larger proportions of working mothers for Gen X children (20% in 1960 to 47 % in 1980 for children under 6; for 6- to 17-year-olds, the numbers rose from 43% in 1960 to 76% in 1990, Dunne, as cited in Strauss & Howe, 1991). As a result of this phenomenon, “many Generation X children became independent and responsible at a much earlier age than did previous generations of children” (Dunne, 1997, p. 426).

The economic climate also signaled cynicism for Gen Xer’s. It is hypothesized that Xer’s may be the first generation to have fewer opportunities and expect a lower standard of living than their parents (Dunne, 1997).

[Members of Generation X] grew up in a world of broken promises . . . they were the first kids to experience widespread divorce and to stay home alone while their boomer parents were out finding themselves. AIDS and the worldwide recession suggested to them that life is short and jobs are not guaranteed. (Edwards, 2000, p. 16)

This pessimistic categorization of Generation X is largely reflected in mainstream media. The “boomer-led media” routinely portrays Gen X as “politically impotent and civically inept,” (Cowan, 1997, p. 194) a phenomenon that serves to further alienate the demographic and fosters the belief that activism is a futile effort (Cowan), and reduces Xers sense of political efficacy (Owen, 1997). Politically, few ads or campaign issues are targeted toward younger adults.



Relative to the voting age population, candidates consistently under-targeted members of Generation X and over-targeted individuals 50 and over [resulting in] . . . a youth population that is starved for information. . . . In one sense campaigns often help foster a permanent underclass in politics. (Freyman & McGoldrick, 2000, p. 63)

Members of Generation X are less likely to identify with either major political party system, and “exhibit a relatively high degree of volatility in their partisan affiliations” (Dennis & Owen, 1997, p. 45). In fact, in the 2000 Presidential election, Xers comprised the nation’s single largest potential voting bloc “with significant swing potential. Only 5% of young people in one survey said party affiliation is a key reason to vote for a national candidate” (Cowan, 1997).

However, contrary to the media-hyped myth of the apathetic Gen X youth, its members are involved in civic activities. A 1997 survey of college freshman showed that young Americans had the highest rate of volunteerism in 30 years (Cowan, 1997). However, because Xer’s have little faith in the established system, their methods are less traditional than their parents may have been. A 1993 Boston Globe college student poll showed that “while 73% believe an individual can bring about change in our society, 56% believe meaningful social change cannot be achieved through traditional American politics” (Dunne 1997, p. 1). The dot-com economy toward the end of the millennium fueled this notion by creating a class of wealthy young entrepreneurs who were learning that they could directly impact society by going around the system, for example, by starting foundations or companies that promoted a particular cause. Also, partly in reaction to Xer’s perception that they are disadvantaged in traditional media, they have become proficient in using technology to gain competitive advantage over their elders (Dunne, 1997). “Xers ask themselves, what are the things that I care most about and I can control? Let me focus my energy there and make an impact” (American Society of

Newspaper Editors [ASNE], 1996, p. 2). Xers focus on finding cost effective solutions (measured in time and money) and are open to new ways of accomplishing their goals (ASNE, 1997).

Dennis and Owen (1997) examine Generation X in terms of political identification, and offer two explanations that support the hypothesis that Xers are indeed different from prior cohorts. Their first explanation is that Xers have had a unique political socialization process from previous generations. Second, Xers are politically alienated from the system.

However, some research indicates that Xers are not significantly more distanced from the political process than previous generations. Owen (1997) conducted inter-generational research using data from the 1992 and 1994 ANES surveys to explore these concepts. She found that Xers perceptions of their political effectiveness are as strong as other generational units and suggests that, although their feelings of patriotism may not be as strong as older Americans, this difference may equal out over the passage of time as Xers age.

Yankelovich Partners conducted a national study, commissioned by ASNE, investigating the behaviors of Generation Xers. They found that Xer's experiences have led them to develop schema that are unique from previous generations. Time frame is one example of this phenomenon:

For this generation, the future is not 40 years from now. The relevant time frame is more likely, a week, a month, or, at the most, a year. Planning for a future, which is decades away, and may never happen as planned, makes little sense for a generation struggling in the present. (ASNE, 1997, p. 2)

As the Yankelovich data report, although youth has always been associated with

Searching for fun and new experiences . . . it is an aspect of Xer life that they will likely retain in one form or another throughout their lives. What is sometimes

misunderstood is that the Xers' pursuit of fun is not irresponsible or immature. Instead, to the Xer mind-set, fun is the opposite of serious and formal. Xers want to derive some level of fun from everything they do . . . this influences the brands they purchase, the media they consume. (ASNE, 1997, p. 2)

This sentiment segues well into the next section.

### **Generation X—Media Use**

Generation X has been raised in an environment that offers a proliferation of media choices unlike that of any previous generation. The expansion of the electronic media during Xers formative years cannot be underestimated when evaluating this group's media use:

Generation X is not an oddball group that will pass through the decades and be replaced by one that behaves more in ways that you are used to and more traditionally. Generation X exhibits symptoms of cultural changes in the way people use media, based on the dominance of the electronic media in our culture. (ASNE, 1997, p. 7)

One of the most obvious factors in examining the socialization process of members of Generation X and their media use patterns is the fact that this generation is the first to be raised with television:

Generation X has been called the MTV generation with good reason. For these young people, television served as baby sitter, entertainer, and educator. And in a world punctuated by dual-income households, absentee parents, and working mothers, TV became a form of company as well. Xers were the first generation to be spoon-fed educational programming like "Sesame Street" and "Mr. Roger's Neighborhood." (ASNE, 1997, p. 3)

However, it may come as a surprise that research shows that Xers are only marginally higher consumers of television than Boomers: about one hour more per week on average. The differences emerge when looking at volume and type of programming. Xers are accustomed to variety, both in terms of media channels and content. Particularly they watch cable, and prefer programming that is more personalized, as opposed to more traditional (and impersonal) television such as network news:

Boomer television favorites such as *20/20*, *60 Minutes*, and *Dateline* don't even make the Xer top 10 list. And CNN, the most watched cable channel among Boomers, falls to number six on the Xer list, and for the record, MTV is the number one Xer channel. (ASNE, 1997, p. 3)

The Yankelovich study data showed relatively low levels of Internet penetration for Xers. At the time of the study (1996), fewer than 3 in 10 Xers had online access (ASNE, 1997).

Radio was found to be a significant medium for Xers, as well as print media.

However, for Xers, magazines were preferred over newspapers. In fact the Yankelovich data shows 59% of Xers subscribe to magazines (compared to 68% of Boomers). And while more than 40% of Xers are regular newspaper readers (defined as reading a newspaper every day or almost every day), 25% of Xers never or seldom read one. One reason cited for the preference of radio and magazines for Xers is the capability of those industries to develop products for individualized market niches, thus providing the personalization this demographic craves from their media (ASNE, 1997).

One theory concerning Generation X's media habits was developed by Adam Platt (ASNE, 1997), a media critic and alternative journalist. In 1995 Platt conducted a study of the changing media use patterns of Generation X. Platt contends that traditional print media are no longer the dominant agenda setters they once were. Electronic media are now, without question, shaping how younger audiences gather and consume information. Platt says that Xer's expect information gathering to be combined with entertainment, and cautions that media producers who don't provide an element of entertainment in their products, including news, will not successfully target this demographic. In addition, he contends that Xer's socialization experiences, particularly the breakdown of traditional family and community, make this group seek more of an

emotional connection with their media, fueling their preference for electronic media over traditional print formats:

They are searching for a personal connection, an insight into how other people live and what their values are. . . . When we talk about how we are going to connect with Generation X, we need to remember that we aren't looking at what the electronic media communicate. . . . We need to look more at *how*<sup>6</sup> the electronic media communicate and engage people. . . . It comes down to an issue of emotion, a visceral connection with the audience. The electronic media are hot in that they make a very emotive, basic core connection. They are evocative. Younger people who have grown up on television expect a passionate connection with their information sources. (ASNE, 1997, p. 7)

One way television producers have engaged the Generation X audience has been to play on its issues of identity. When MSNBC launched its 24-hour network, the anchors displayed a fresh look to an industry that was accustomed to seeing older white men in suits delivering the news. Many of the correspondents on MSNBC are young (the average age is 35) and display a diversity, both ethnically and professionally,<sup>7</sup> that is rare for a news network (Friend, 1997). Friend contends that for the MSNBC model “you need an appropriate-looking messenger . . . image *is* identity” (p. 36).

Another valuable example in alternative programming that has been wildly successful in capturing the youth market is *The Simpsons*. The animated television show has been lauded as providing some of the “most sophisticated comedy and satire ever to appear on American television” (Cantor, 1999, p. 734). Moreover, the producers have achieved this by creating “a believable human community” (Cantor, 1999, p. 735).

Earlier the paper discussed the sense of isolation Xer's feel as a result of their

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<sup>6</sup>Emphasis added.

<sup>7</sup>Many of the contributors on MSNBC don't originally come from news (Friend, 1997).

socialization patterns. The following quote helps to explain why the show holds such appeal for this group:

The Simpsons is based on distrust of power and especially of power remote from ordinary people. The show celebrates genuine community, a community in which everybody more or less knows everybody else (even if they do not necessarily like each other). By recreating this older sense of community, the show manages to generate a kind of warmth out of its postmodern coolness, a warmth that is largely responsible for its success with the American public. (Cantor, 1999, p. 745).

Part of the show's success also lies in the fact that it credits its audience with high levels of understanding, both for popular culture references, and for a knowledge of television. The Simpsons "presents the paradox of an untraditional show that is deeply rooted in television tradition" (Cantor, 1999, p.737). By focusing on an object of satirization, *The Simpsons* subsequently acknowledges its importance in our culture (Cantor, 1999).

Before moving on to discuss *The Daily Show* in particular, and explore how the program incorporates some of the techniques discussed above to engage its audience, there is one final area of literature to be reviewed that relates to this investigation: source credibility.

### **Source Credibility**

Research shows that a number of factors influence an individual's perception of source credibility. Similar to schema theory, a recipient of a mass communication processes a message using previously established attitudes and knowledge categories. As McCroskey and Jenson (1975) contend, "what an individual brings to the media situation (i.e., his background and preconceived notion) is a much more important determinant of media impact than anything in the media itself" (p. 169).

Hovland and Weiss (1951) conducted some of the earliest research on source credibility. They found that for an audience member, credibility was based upon two primary dimensions: perceived trustworthiness (operationalized as objectivity) and perceived expertise. Several years later, Whitehead (1968) expanded Hovland and Weiss's dimension categories to include dynamism and professionalism (along with trustworthiness and expertise). Although professionalism parallels expertise, Whitehead aligns it more closely with the manner of presentation than the speaker's actual knowledge level about a particular subject.

Berlo, Lemert, and Mertz's (1970) findings further added to the newly emerging data, as they credited three dimensions evaluating source credibility: safety (safe-unsafe; just-unjust; kind-cruel; friendly-unfriendly; honest-dishonest); qualification (trained-untrained; experienced-inexperienced; skilled-unskilled; qualified-unqualified; informed-uninformed); and dynamism (aggressive-meek; empathetic-hesitant; bold-timid; active-passive; energetic-tired). The safety dimension broadens Hovland and Weiss's (1951) "trustworthiness" dimension. Whereas trustworthiness refers more to how the receiver perceives the intent of the source, safety is a "general evaluation of the affiliative relationship between source and receiver, as perceived by the receiver" (p. 574).

### **Attribution Theory**

This concept, a message recipient's perceived intent of the source, requires further explanation. Attribution theory is an appropriate framework to help better understand this matter. Attribution theory posits that a receiver's determination of source credibility is based upon his or her perceptions of the source's motivations for advocating his or her position. In particular, message recipients infer two types of source bias: knowledge bias and reporting bias (Eagly, Wood, & Chaiken, 1978). Knowledge bias is

formed based on observable characteristics of the communicator, such as gender and race, that lead the recipient to associate the communicator with certain dispositions. For example, a young urban woman might be regarded by some as being more supportive of feminist platforms than a middle-aged man. Reporting bias refers to the role that the communicator represents in presenting his or her message. For example, a spokesperson for the White House has an identifiable external agenda to maintain in his or her communications message (Eagly, Wood, & Chaiken, 1978).

Attribution theory predicts that when knowledge bias expectancies are confirmed, message validity is reduced. This occurs because “recipients believe that communicator’s positions are a product of their biased access to relevant information” (Eagly, Wood, & Chaiken, 1978, p. 425). Message validity is lowered in instances of perceived reporting bias because recipients question the communicator’s motivations and sincerity. Conversely, when expectations are disconfirmed in either case of bias, communicator persuasion, and credibility are enhanced (Eagly, Wood, & Chaiken, 1978).

### **Credibility of News Sources**

Because of the issues implicit in presenting news, researchers have focused specifically on how audiences evaluate the credibility of news sources. Markham (1968) conducted the first study of source credibility dimensions for television newscasters. His findings echo other studies that looked at more general sources, and he identified three major dimensions of source credibility: a reliable-logical (or validity) of the message factor; a showmanship, dynamism, or entertainment factor; and a trustworthiness dimension. The reliable-logical factor refers to how viewers tend to judge “the elements of the message that could not be checked in regard to logic and credibility” (p. 61). Markham notes that this does not connote an evaluative dimension (i.e., a recipient is



not judging whether they like or agree with the message, but simply if the message has face validity). Markham also references Anderson and Clevenger's (1963) interesting contention that source credibility is divided into two conceptual groupings of fixed and variable.

The "fixed" concept assumes an unchanging credibility during the communication, and the "variable" concept assumes that in the communication situation the [receiver] interacts with the message during the course of the communication and his perception of the communicator changes during this period. (Markham, 1968, p. 58)

The earlier research reviewed on symbolic interactionism, shared reality, schema theory and group identification resonate well with Anderson and Clevenger's variable concept of credibility.

One of the most interesting findings from Markham's (1968) study was that, with regard to "trustworthiness" of the newscaster, subjects appeared to prefer a "more or less casual or extempore mode of newscasting within limits of seeming expert. This might be a very fine line that the newscaster would have to approach but not cross in his style of presentation" (p. 62). However, it is important to note that Markham's study used out-of-state newscasters who were unfamiliar to the subjects.

McCroskey and Jenson (1975) also looked at the image of mass media news sources and developed a scale (still used today) to help measure media source image. Their research was motivated by a desire to bring a more multi-dimensional perspective to the inquiry of mass media news source image. The suggested dimensions of the McCroskey and Jenson scales of "Measurement for Mass Media News Source Image" are competence, character, sociability, composure, and extroversion. Although they found all five dimensions to be important indicators of source image, competence, character, and sociability were determined to be the most relevant.

Rouner, Slater, and Buddenbaum (1999) conducted a more recent investigation into the area of news source credibility. Although it does not deal specifically with television newscasters, their inquiry is an especially relevant one for the modern researcher as it reflects the impact of the significant changes that have been occurring within the news industry. Rouner et al. address the relationship between source credibility and increasing public mistrust of the news industry. The authors claim that past source credibility research has more often focused on issues of expertise as opposed to bias. Rouner et al. argue that Hovland's original dimension of trustworthiness has important implications in the current media environment. As credibility in the news media (and institutions in general) continue to decline for American audiences, "one might expect trust in the news media to be a function to some extent of the degree to which the media are perceived to be objective or biased" (Rouner et al., 1999, p. 42). Bias may be a subtle perception by an audience member. Media may be perceived as biased, not necessarily for stretching the truth, but by ignoring their "duty" as expected by the public:

News media present biased information by focusing on trivial aspects of important news events, like personality flaw and behavioral gaffes; primarily cover events, leaving no professional convention for addressing many of the most serious problems confronting contemporary societies, like hunger, racism, resource waster and depletion; fragment the news, which distorts larger issues; and rely on too many of the same types of sources. (Rouner et al., 1999, p. 42)

Indeed, the findings by Rouner et al. (1999) suggest that "consumers' inability to perceive news media conventions may contribute to consumer distrust in media" (p. 48). The authors propose that journalists should function in more interpretive roles, as opposed to trying to maintain the traditional veneer of objective journalism.

Rouner et al. (1999) advise journalists to learn more about their audiences and to expand their range of sources so that more of the public sees themselves reflected in mass media discourse. They also suggest that journalists may need to take a more educational approach to news delivery in an age of increasing issue complexity. In a similar vein, McCroskey and Jenson (1975) argue that “we need research designed to determine perceptions of source image for different types of sources on the part of different kinds of receivers to find measures of specific communication contexts” (p. 170). That is precisely what this investigation seeks to do.

### **The Daily Show**

The research reviewed indicates that the anomie of Generation X has created a niche market for satirical alternative programming. Members of Generation X are cynical of the established status quo. The knowledge bias is partially a result of not being able to relate to the personalities. They do not feel that these older, white men, who are part of the system, share similar values with their generation. This attitude is exacerbated by the fact that traditional news programming marginalizes the younger demographic in its newscasts. In addition, the news industry as a whole has lost substantial credibility with American viewing audiences due to increased sensationalism and a focus on profits (Garcia, 2003; Sohar, 2003; Trammell, 2003).

With host John Stewart’s tongue planted firmly in cheek, and self-deprecatingly billing itself as “the most important show ever,” Comedy Central’s<sup>8</sup> broadcast of *The Daily Show (TDS)* provides an appropriate format to explore the relationship between humor, identification, and news. While earlier research reviewed shows that *The Daily*

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<sup>8</sup>Comedy Central is a joint venture of Time Warner Entertainment Company and Viacom International. (<http://www.dailyshow.com/>)

*Show* is not the first television program to use humor to comment on topical issues, the program's format models itself more directly upon a traditional news format than the some of the other alternative "political edutainment" programming such as *Saturday Night Live* or the various late-night comedy-variety talk shows such as *Letterman* or *Leno*.

*TDS* is 30 minutes long, similar to a typical news broadcast, and airs Monday through Thursday at 11:00 PM Eastern Standard Time.<sup>9</sup> The show begins with the host, Jon Stewart,<sup>10</sup> reporting on the day's news in the "Headlines" section. Later in the show Stewart provides further updates, in a segment titled "Other News." In between, correspondents provide slice-of-life reporting on unusual events and characters. Stewart also conducts an interview with a person of note.<sup>11</sup> The show ends with a humorous recap of the top news stories, and a "Moment of Zen" in which an unusual video clip is shown.

*The Daily Show (TDS)* was created by two women, Lizz Winstead and Madeleine Smithberg (Katz, 1996). Working out of the former MacNeil-Lehrer NewsHour offices in New York City, *The Daily Show's* writing staff is comprised of former newsmen and stand-up comics. The team gathers "material from wire and satellite feeds as well as every news program they can lay eyes on and pump out subversive, satiric pieces that parody the form and content of 'legitimate' news shows" (Bargmann, 1998). In addition,

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<sup>9</sup>Repeats of the show are rebroadcast throughout the following 24 hours, however, and highlight clips from the show can be accessed online.

<sup>10</sup>Jon Stewart replaced the original host, Craig Kilborn, in 1998 when Kilborn went on to host his own late night talk show on CBS.

<sup>11</sup>It is telling that in the early years of the program, the interview guest used to hail much more often from the entertainment industry, while now the guest is more often connected with the political realm.

*TDS* is particularly adept at capitalizing on the public's increasing knowledge of how the media operates (including the technology used) and lampooning it, while simultaneously operating within its context (Bargmann, 1998).

The show debuted circa 1996 and has been gaining momentum as a legitimate alternative news source in recent years. The show's profile was significantly enhanced after receiving a Peabody award for its coverage of the 2000 Presidential election. *The Daily Show* beat out Fox, CNN, and all of the Big Three networks and took home one of the most prestigious awards in broadcast journalism (Comedy Central, 2001). Other award nominations followed, including two Television Critic Association awards in 2003 (the show was simultaneously nominated for both outstanding comedy and information program) and five Emmy nominations that same year (Boomtown, Daily Show lead, 2003). Although PBS's *Frontline* took home the Television Critic's award for "Outstanding Achievement in News and Information," *TDS*'s nomination in that category is significant (*60 Minutes* was another nominee). However, the show did win two other categories: one recognizing the show itself for "Outstanding Achievement in Comedy," and "Individual Achievement in Comedy" for host Jon Stewart for (Zap2it, 2003a). The show also won an Emmy for "Writing for a Variety, Music or Comedy Program," beating out *Saturday Night Live*, *Late Night with David Letterman*, *The Conan O'Brien Show*, and *Robin Williams Live on Broadway*; and it won another for best "Variety, Music or Comedy Series," beating *Letterman*, *O'Brien*, *SNL*, and the *Tonight Show with Jay Leno* (E! Online, 2003).

Jon Stewart became the host of *The Daily Show* in 1999, and since then the audience has almost doubled, from 427,000 to 788,000 by the summer of 2003 (Bauder, 2003). The target audience for *TDS* is generally considered to be a younger, hipper

audience: the Generation X or MTV generation. Specific numbers for *The Daily Show* versus traditional news programming highlight the strong support the show wields with this demographic.

Table 2-1. *The Daily Show* versus traditional news (%)

	18-34 years	Males	Females
Daily Show	41 (3)	63 (9)	36 (1)
Tonight Show	19 (4)	42 (3)	57 (7)
Late Show/David Letterman	20 (7)	44 (5)	55 (5)
ABC News: Nightline	15 (7)	41 (3)	58 (7)
ABC News: Nightline—Mon.	24 (1)	57 (4)	42 (6)
ABC World News this Morn	17 (9)	45 (9)	54 (1)
ABC World News Tonight	8 (3)	41 (9)	58 (1)
ABC World News Tonight—Sat.	8	46 (1)	53 (9)
ABC World News Tonight—Sun	7 (3)	43 (3)	56 (7)
This Week	8 (3)	47 (9)	52 (1)
Cbs Evening News—Rather	7 (8)	43 (7)	56 (3)
Cbs Evening News—Sunday	12 (3)	46 (5)	53 (5)
Cbs Morning News—6:30am	17 (6)	44 (5)	55 (5)
Cbs Saturday News	11 (4)	48 (9)	51 (1)
Face the Nation	9 (8)	43 (9)	56 (1)
Newsbreak—3.44	14 (9)	25 (3)	74 (7)
Meet the Press	9 (4)	48 (3)	51 (7)
NBC Nightly News	10 (2)	43 (1)	56 (9)
NBC Nightly News—Sat.	6 (7)	43 (4)	56 (6)
NBC Nightly News—Sat.(B)-10/05/2002	6 (1)	41	59
NBC Nightly News—Sun.	9 (2)	44 (3)	55 (7)
(CNN)	11 (6)	49 (2)	50 (8)
(CNBC)	8 (9)	66	34
(FOXNC)	9 (6)	51 (6)	48 (4)
(HLN)	13	55 (9)	44 (1)
(MSNBC)	14 (1)	50 (7)	49 (3)

(Nielsen Media Ratings, 2002)

Comedy Central, *TDS*'s broadcast network, also enjoys heavy patronage by members of Generation X: they comprise slightly more than one-half of its total viewers. Garcia (2003) points out another interesting component of this research: the gender variable. Comedy Central's audience is comprised of mostly male viewers, whereas most traditional network talk show audiences are predominantly female. A 2004 survey conducted by the Pew Research Center found that for the first time, *TDS* pulled in more

male viewers aged 18-34 than any of the network evening news shows (Stewart delivers, 2004).

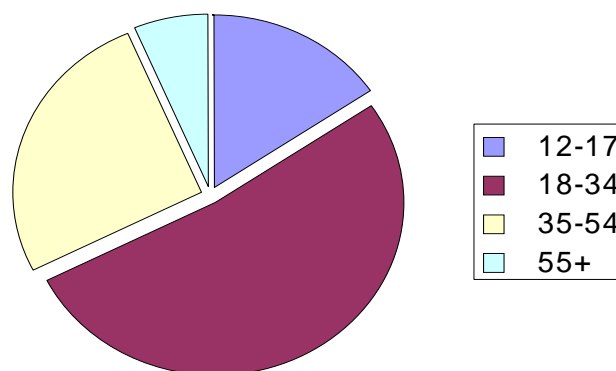


Figure 2-1. Comedy Central's audience by age (Garcia, 2003)

Table 2-2. Audience composition: *TDS* versus network's talk shows

	18-34 years (%)	Males (%)	Females (%)
<i>The Daily Show</i>	41.3	63.9	36.1
<i>Tonight Show</i>	19.4	42.3	57.7
<i>Late Show</i>	20.7	44.5	55.5

(Garcia, 2003)

Communication and political science literature provide data that support the idea that audiences are susceptible to media framing of news. However, as Edelman (1993) notes, a message that conforms to an individual's predispositions has a much higher likelihood of being accepted. So how do the producers of *TDS* cultivate such identification within a mediated context?

Specifically, *The Daily Show* uses humor to engender the referent group. However, as discussed earlier, in order for the audience to appreciate the humor incorporated on the program, the viewer must understand and accept the communication. They have to "get it." Not everyone will understand the jokes—nor are they supposed to. *The Daily Show* producers use a variety of techniques to achieve this communication negotiation or shared mass communication reality. *The Daily Show* is laden with pop-

culture references targeted at the Gen X demographic. The writers use language specifically designed to include their audience and, simultaneously, exclude noncommunity members (Garcia, 2003).

Many *Daily Show* viewers grew up with television. They are familiar with the commercial function of the medium, and *TDS* is particularly adept at capitalizing on this knowledge and lampooning it, while simultaneously operating within its context (Garcia, 2003). Viewers of *The Daily Show* are aware that producers and networks want to make money, and that the notion of public service broadcasting is an ideal concept at best and no longer realistically functions in the modern broadcasting model.

But how does this relate to audience members tuning into a satirical news program on a cable network? Symbolic interactionism tells us that community identification is an important part of the way in which an individual perceives himself in the world. Taking social cues from his various communities, the individual develops perceptions and attitudes about the phenomenon he encounters in daily life. In the complex modern world, a person may seek out a more abstract community that better reflects his idealized representation of a “generalized other.”

Late-night talk shows, such as *TDS*, have particular advantages in creating an intimate relationship with their audience. They are generally broadcast each weekday evening,<sup>12</sup> and are taped on the day of broadcast. The format of the show has the host (i.e., the comedian) begin by referencing news and popular culture events that have occurred. Because the material is part of the national knowledge, the host can have high expectations that the audience will be able to share in the symbolic construction of the communication. In addition, successful late-night talk show hosts are on air for many

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<sup>12</sup> Daily Show does not broadcast on Fridays.



years. This allows viewers to get to know them over a long period of time. During this time, the regular viewer will witness the host react to and comment upon a variety of phenomena from presidential races, to natural disasters, to the World Series. This ability to interact with the talk show host on a regular, almost daily, basis also increases the actor's resistance to forming unfavorable impressions (Sohar, 2003). For example, if on occasion, the talk show host makes a joke or comment to which the viewer is offended, he or she most likely has a repository of prior experiences to balance the recent negative impression against. Social psychology literature shows this to be an effective means of identity protection (Leary, 1996).

In addition, the host often will talk about events from his own life, furthering an intimate connection. The format also includes an extended cast of characters aside from the host. On *The Daily Show*, several correspondents are active members of the mediated community. The host will interact and joke with other regular actors on the show. Through these interactions the viewer can begin to form a sense of involvement, especially over time as he or she learns more about the cast of characters and begins to identify with them. The increasing popularity of other mass communication forums (websites, listserves, chatrooms) that support the show also serves to build a sense of community among participants (Sohar, 2003).

However, despite the growing credibility the popular press is bestowing upon *TDS*, the show's creators and talent are reluctant to accept the status the mainstream media are conferring. Ben Karlin, executive producer for *TDS*, reasons that a viewer needs to supplement the show with real news in order to be well-informed. Likewise, Jon Stewart, despite being invited by NBC to provide commentary after President Bush's

State of the Union address in January 2004, seems to be resisting the title of news anchor in favor of retaining his role as comedian (Stewart delivers, 2004).

### **Research Questions**

The overarching research question this investigation sought to answer was “What meanings do viewers of *The Daily Show*, particularly members of the Generation X demographic, attach to the program?” From this, the investigation further sought to understand how viewers perceive the information presented on *The Daily Show*. For example,

- **RQ1:** Do they perceive it as credible?
- **RQ2:** Do viewers consider *The Daily Show* more of an entertainment or news program?
- **RQ3:** Furthermore, do viewers of *The Daily Show* perceive themselves as marginalized by the mainstream news media, and subsequently feel that anti-traditional programming, such as *The Daily Show* speaks more to their needs and interests? And if so, why or how?
- **RQ4:** Finally, do viewers of *TDS* identify with a larger symbolic community? If so, how do they perceive that community?

Having reviewed the relevant literature concerning and surrounding the issues this study seeks to explore, Chapter 3 will explain the investigation’s methodology in more detail. A justification for choosing a qualitative approach is also provided.

## CHAPTER 3 STUDY METHODOLOGY

### **Rationale**

A qualitative methodology was chosen to gather data for this study. There were several rationales for this decision: the exploratory nature of the research questions, the abstract understanding of audience reception of satire, and the difficulty in controlling the measures quantitatively.

The primary goal of qualitative research is understanding (Lindlof, 1995). Qualitative measures allow the researcher to expand the scope of inquiry and encourage respondents to share their impressions, their beliefs, and their feelings about a particular subject. Qualitative research is extremely valuable because it can help the researcher to better understand how culture and society influence human behavior. Qualitative tools, such as long interviews and focus groups, help provide context for individuals' actions. Trying to measure abstract concepts quantitatively restricts the level of understanding the researcher can achieve (McCracken, 1988).

One of the fundamental differences between quantitative and qualitative methodology is how each method approaches research from the start. In quantitative research, precise categories to be studied are determined in advance. The quantitative researcher then works to understand the relationship between these variables. In contrast, the qualitative researcher relies upon the exploratory nature of the research to help guide him during the process of constructing the analytic categories (McCracken, 1988).

According to McCracken (1988), “For one field, well defined categories are the means of research, for another they are the object of research” (p. 16). Or as Lindlof (1995) explains, qualitative research “favors an inductive mode of inquiry” (p .56). However, Lindlof (1995) notes that while some early symbolic interactionists did examine the relationship between “media formats and audiences constructions of reality,” little of this research was conducted qualitatively (p. 45). In response, he calls for increased investigation into these topics using qualitative methods to explore “the rich possibilities of symbolic interactionism for studying the sites and events of popular communication” (Lindlof, 1995, p. 45), which is what this study seeks to do.

As mentioned earlier, Gruner (1965) suggests two particular difficulties in conducting research on the effectiveness of satire: (a) its indirect nature, which makes it difficult for subjects to recognize the speaker’s main argument thesis, and (b) the fact that a speaker may experience a loss in ethos by using satire. Therefore, if researchers better understand the relationship between an audience member’s levels of identification with, and comprehension of a humorous source, the data may reflect the true nature of the phenomenon more accurately. Qualitative techniques can be extremely powerful and produce valuable insights about how a particular group of individuals perceive messages in this manner.

As discussed earlier, experimental studies examining media effects and political measures have had limited success explaining the complex relationships between these variables, primarily due to the inherent difficulty in determining the direction of causation. Researchers have consistently wrestled with issues of validity in experimental designs whose measures depend upon separating an individual’s political attitudes and level of political interest from the individual media consumption because they will

interact positively due to self-selection (Volgy & Schwarz, 1980). The weak empirical support previously reported concerning humor and information gain echoes these concerns. In the quantitative studies reviewed concerning humor and information gain, the researchers acknowledge that their findings suffered from an inability to control their source manipulations successfully.

Although qualitative research relies on inductive reasoning, it is important to recognize that the researcher brings an initial understanding of the issues to the table. The qualitative researcher has experience, often personal in nature, of the subject(s) to be examined, and this knowledge base helps him to formulate a research design (McCracken, 1988). As discussed in the Preface, the researcher has watched *The Daily Show* and conducted research on this topic over the last several years. However, at this point it is important to investigate the issue more formally, and in greater depth. Prior knowledge will be instrumental in helping to guide the research design; however, there are many unanswered questions and relationships to be explored.

### **Methods**

A multi-method qualitative approach was used to gather data. This approach combines several qualitative methods: the long interview, focus groups, and participant diaries. Method triangulation allowed the researcher to compare results from several different sources, increasing the data reliability (Lindlof, 1995). The author conducted all focus groups and one-on-one interviews, as well as the resultant transcriptions. Diarists were responsible for keeping their own notes.

An important difference that separates quantitative and qualitative research is the construction of the participant sample pool. Quantitative research relies heavily upon its ability to produce results that can be generalized to the population at large. This requires

researchers to gather data from large sample pools that are representative of the larger population. In contrast

the purpose of the qualitative interview is not to discover how many, and what kinds of, people share a certain characteristic. It is to gain access to the cultural categories and assumptions according to which one culture construes the world. How many and what kinds of people hold these categories and assumptions is not, in fact, the compelling issue. It is the categories and assumptions, not those who hold them, that matter. (McCraken, 1988, p. 17)

However, the researcher determined that, to help increase trustworthiness for the findings, participants should be recruited from the local community as well as from the university population. The following sections outline the literature on qualitative gathering techniques and the specific conditions used in this study.

All data for this study were collected between May 2004 and November 2004. The data collection methods were combined over the time frame in order to include interview, focus group, and diary data over the course of collection period. Participants were recruited from the local community as well as from the university population so that the data would incorporate *TDS* viewers outside of a strict student demographic. Various methods of recruitment were utilized, including classified advertisements in the University of Florida campus newspaper (the Alligator), a notice in two community monthly magazines (The Satellite, The Iguana), and postings on a community listserv (Civic Media Center) and web-community, Gainesvillebands.com (GBDC). The researcher also recruited participants on campus holding a sign that read “Do you watch *the Daily Show with Jon Stewart?*” and in the local community by word-of mouth. Word-of mouth proved to be a highly effective method of recruiting as people learned that research about *The Daily Show* was being done, and forwarded the information to friends who watch the show. As a result, the data pool reflects a broader demographic

than if recruitment had been restricted solely to campus. The researcher was looking for participants who watch *TDS*. Thus, all recruitment ads simply stated, “Do you watch *the Daily Show with Jon Stewart?*” as a prerequisite. No frequency parameters were given, so the data pool consists of occasional to frequent *TDS* viewers. The ads also mentioned that a doctoral student was conducting dissertation research and that a monetary incentive was being offered, but no specific dollar amount was given in the ad. The monetary amount was left open in order to encourage more people to call and learn about the research project. All focus group and interview participants were paid \$10 for their participation and refreshments were provided. Because of the more involved nature of the diary data collection, each diarist was paid \$50. All associated data collection costs were self-funded by the researcher.

All focus groups and interviews were audio-taped to free the researcher from having to take notes and provide a comprehensive record of the dialogue. Audiotaping was chosen over videotaping to alleviate any unease participants might experience over being videotaped. In addition, the researcher had better access to audio equipment, and as several interviews and focus groups were done in public, video cameras would have been much more visible. All focus groups and interviews were conducted by the researcher, as well as all data transcription.

A short survey (Appendix A) was administered to participants immediately following their participation in order to collect demographic data and to provide specific information about *TDS* viewing habits.

### **Focus Groups**

Focus groups are considered group interviews in qualitative research. The dynamic changes, however, because focus groups exploit participant interaction to

“produce data insights that would be less accessible without the interaction found in a group” (Morgan, 1997, p. 10). The focus groups were conducted using a more structured approach. Compared to a less structured approach, structured focus groups generally follow a predetermined set of questions that center around the researcher’s preexisting agenda (Morgan, 1997).<sup>1</sup>

For focus groups, 6 to 10 participants are usually recommended per group, although this range is a suggestion, not a fixed rule. Larger groups often require more moderator control, whereas issues that elicit high levels of participant involvement might lead the researcher to prefer a smaller group (Morgan, 1997). In determining the number of focus groups that need to be conducted, saturation—i.e., “the point at which additional data collection no longer generates new understanding” (Morgan, 1997, p. 43)—is the goal. However, as Morgan (1997) notes, “variability of the participants, both within and across groups” (p. 43) is an important factor in determining the number of groups necessary. While three to five focus groups is a general rule for qualitative research, groups comprised of more heterogeneous participants tend to require more total groups “because the diversity in the group often makes it more difficult to sort out coherent sets of opinions and experiences” (Morgan, 1997, p. 44). However, as Morgan (1997) cautions, any study using focus groups must require a minimum of two focus groups (per segment) to avoid potential bias within one particular setting.

Four focus groups were conducted, between July 26, 2004, and November 1, 2004. The first focus group was organized by one participant who answered an advertisement about the research and said that a number of people in his dormitory watched *TDS* and would probably be interested in participating. The researcher

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<sup>1</sup>See Appendix B for the focus group and interview question guide.



coordinated with him and set up a focus group, which was conducted at a University of Florida student housing complex at which all of the participants lived. Some of the participants did know each other and were friends, but because the nature of this research was not considered to be extremely personal in nature, the researcher determined that this familiarity would not be a deterrent. In addition, because the study was investigating levels of identification, it was thought that the inclusion of these data might elicit additional insight into respondents attitudes towards this construct.

The second and third focus groups consisted of participants gathered via the techniques described earlier: newspaper advertisements, the GBDC website, and word-of-mouth. Both of these focus groups were held at a local restaurant located in a convenient downtown location. Participants for the fourth focus group were recruited via an advertisement in the campus newspaper and from the researcher going on the university campus holding a sign which read “Do you watch *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*?” The final focus group consisted entirely of undergraduate students and was held in a classroom on the university campus.

### **Interviews**

As McCracken (1988) notes, the long interview method enables the researcher to access “the mental world of the individual, to glimpse the categories and logic by which he or she sees the world” (p. 9). This quote echoes the tenets of the symbolic interactionist perspective. How better to understand the way in which a person views the world, or a specific slice of it, than to ask him or her about it? It is important to recognize, however, that many people have difficulty responding accurately to direct questioning. Some may feel that they need to engage in impression management for various reasons; this can be deliberate or unconscious. Therefore, the researcher must be

prepared to uncover the information he or she seeks indirectly, and via well-planned question guides (McCracken, 1988).

McCracken (1988) suggests that qualitative researchers are better served to conduct more in-depth interviews with fewer participants. In general, eight in-depth interviews are considered sufficient for qualitative research.

In line with McCracken's suggestions, eight long interviews were conducted. Interviews were conducted during the period from May 27, 2004, through October 12, 2004. Interview respondents were gathered via many of the same techniques as the focus group participants: classified advertisements in local community and campus newspapers, posts on the GainesvilleBands.com website, and word-of-mouth. Interviews took place at various locations, predominately at local coffeehouses and restaurants. In addition, two interviews were conducted at a local civic media center. In general, the interviewer would arrange to meet at a location convenient for the interviewee.

### **Diaries**

Participant diaries are another qualitative method that may be employed in data collection. This method requires participants to record their thoughts about the object under inquiry (in this case, *TDS*: its cast, content, and delivery)

Again, "qualitative methods are most useful and powerful when they are used to discover how the respondent sees the world" (McCracken, 1988, p. 21). This is precisely the line of inquiry this investigation seeks to discover. The research questions revolve around the meanings viewers of *The Daily Show*, particularly members of the Generation X demographic, attach to the program. Research indicates that the meanings viewers attach to the program will largely be a result of cultural socialization. The "frames" individuals develop influence their view of the world, and mold their beliefs, their

preferences, and their inclinations. Thus, to unearth these abstract concepts, a qualitative methodology is the most desirable approach.

Much like a personal diary, diarists in the study were asked to record thoughts about the show, and were encouraged to include any relevant emotions that the program elicited. Diary participants were recruited through an ad in the university campus newspaper, *The Alligator*. As with recruitment of other methods, the ad stated that a doctoral student was doing research and needed people who “watch *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*.” Diary participants were told that they would be paid \$50 for watching *The Daily Show* for one week and recording entries (a full week of Daily Show viewing constitutes four original programs).

The researcher met with the four prospective diarists (2 males, 2 females) to explain the nature of the task and to answer any questions that the participants might have. At this initial meeting, participants also signed the required study release forms. The researcher instructed the diarists to watch the show with a pen and paper and to jot down any thoughts that came to mind, and to continue to write during commercials, and immediately after viewing the show to promote more accurate reflections. In addition to recording thoughts specifically in conjunction with watching the program, diarists were also encouraged to include relevant impressions or encounters concerning the show that they might experience after the fact. Diary participants were instructed to note any communications (mass mediated or interpersonal) they were exposed to in relation to *TDS* viewing. For example, if a diarist engaged in a conversation about the show with a friend, that exchange should be included in the diary to the fullest extent possible, including any relevant thought processes that might have emerged during or after the conversation.

Because *The Daily Show* is broadcast several times a day, participants were instructed to note which broadcast they viewed (or if they viewed more than one). Also, diarists were told to note whether the program was watched alone or with others. Despite providing these specific instructions, the researcher was careful not to coach the participants too much about what was expected concerning the viewer's experience. Diarists were simply instructed to write any thoughts that were elicited by watching the program and to record any relevant thoughts or discussions that occurred regarding the show. The participants were encouraged to include any information they chose, and to include "more" rather than "less" if they were unsure of the relevance of a potential item. For example, a viewer might see one of the show's correspondents on a television commercial promoting a product and have attitudes regarding whether the correspondent was violating his "objectivity." In addition, diarists were also asked to write an introductory entry about *TDS*. Ideally, the goal of the diary method was to obtain data that is self-generated by the participants, not elicited by the researcher. So again, the researcher was careful not to coach the diarist too much, and simply told them to include some background information about their relationship with the show, for example how long had they been watching the show and any relevant reflections of their experience with the show.

Participants were asked to turn in a printed copy of their entries, along with a disk, CD, or email copy of the transcript. The researcher picked up the data for each diary in person, and at that time asked the participant to complete the survey. Once the survey was completed and diary obtained, the participant was paid \$50 in cash for his or her participation.

Incorporating several data-gathering methods strengthened the validity of the findings. By analyzing responses from a variety of methods the researcher could better observe patterns that emerged across situations and contexts and develop a more comprehensive narrative about the mediated experience of *The Daily Show* viewer.

### **Data Analysis**

All focus group and interview audio transcription was conducted by the researcher. Transcriptions were done consecutively along with the research (i.e., the researcher would conduct an interview [or focus group] and then transcribe the audio in the following days). Diaries were written by the participants themselves and turned in to the researcher. The researcher took the completed transcripts from all three data collections and made three photocopy reprints. One hard copy was kept intact for archival.<sup>2</sup>

As discussed earlier, the research approach for this study was an inductive, rather than a deductive one. To this end, the researcher began analysis by first reading through all the transcripts. In line with qualitative methodology, no attempts to categorize information were made during this initial reading (Lindlof, 1995). At this point, the researcher's goals were simply to acquaint herself with the whole of the material to begin to sense common emergent themes.<sup>3</sup>

After the initial read-through was completed, the interview and focus group texts were reviewed line by line and coded. At this point, in order to help organize the data, folders were created representing the initial categories that emerged. The researcher then

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<sup>2</sup>In addition to paper copies, transcripts were also saved to disk for archival.

<sup>3</sup>The researcher did conduct all interviews and transcriptions, so an initial level of familiarity with the data was expected. However, despite this, the researcher felt that it was important to review the data in its entirety before beginning a detailed analysis.

cut up the transcripts and placed each coded entry in its appropriate folder. If an entry was determined to be relevant in more than one category, it was placed in as many folders as warranted. Analytic induction required the researcher to continually review the data to refine themes and categories (Goetz & LeCompte, 1984). Once the initial analysis was completed, the entire process was repeated until the final themes and categories were determined. After this final analysis of focus group and interview data, the diary data were then analyzed. Because the diary data were not structured in a question format like the interview and focus group data, it was determined that analyzing these data groups separately would be a good method to evaluate the trustworthiness of the emerging categories. The categories constructed from the interview and focus group data did align with the diary data. After analysis was complete, member checks were conducted with seven participants to help validate the trustworthiness of the findings and to ensure that the respondents intentions were accurately represented.

The following chapter presents the views generated by the participants concerning *TDS* and associated themes. To provide the most accurate representation, in many instances raw data, that is the participant's own words, are included. This method of thick description is recommended in qualitative research to help increase internal reliability, and to provide evidence to guide others interested in evaluating the researcher's conclusions (Goetz & LeCompte, 1984).

## CHAPTER 4 RESULTS

This investigation originally posed several questions around which to structure its research. Foremost, the researcher sought to learn more about the meanings *TDS* viewers attach to the program, particularly members of Generation X. Research questions addressed whether viewers consider the show as more of an entertainment or as a news program, whether they perceive the information presented on *TDS* as credible, and whether they identify with a larger symbolic community. To a large degree, these categories overlap, and the discussions cross-reference these issues. Prior to presenting the findings, however, a brief review of the study participants is provided.

### **Participants**

Data were collected from a total of 35 interviews, focus groups, and diary participants.<sup>1</sup> The mean age was 25, with a range between 18 and 40. The gender breakdown resulted in a total of 21 male and 14 female participants. Caucasians were the predominant ethnicity represented, comprising 74% of the data set (26 respondents). The remaining 26% of the respondents were Hispanic (4), Black (1), biracial (1), and three participants who classified themselves as other.<sup>2</sup> In terms of the respondents' occupations, the data set included 17 undergraduate students, 7 graduate students, 8 professionals and 2 who listed their occupation as "other." A breakdown of each data

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<sup>1</sup> All respondent names have been changed in this paper to protect anonymity.

<sup>2</sup> Ethnicity choices were listed as White, Black, Hispanic, Asian, Indian, Other.

gathering method is provided below and additional demographic information is available in Appendix A.<sup>3</sup>

Four focus groups were conducted, between July 26, 2004, and November 1, 2004. A total of 24 people, 15 males and 9 females, participated, with the breakdown as follows:

- July 26, 2004—3 males, 3 females, age range 21-25
- August 11, 2004—5 males, 2 females, age range 20-33
- October 26, 2004—4 males, 1 female, age range 30-40
- November 1, 2004—3 males, 3 females, age range 18-23

The focus groups included college students, both graduate and undergraduate, as well as nonstudents. Although the majority of the participants were White, several participants were from ethnic backgrounds. There were a total of four Hispanics (three males, and one female), one biracial (White and African-American) female, and three “Other” (one male and two females).

Interviews were conducted during the period from May 27, 2004, through October 12, 2004. Five males and three females participated, and the age range spanned from 20 to 31 years. As with the focus groups, the interviews included participants from both the student and professional population. All of the interview participants listed “White” as their ethnic background.

The diary data were gathered during the week of August 23, 2004, and programming included then-Presidential nominee John Kerry as a guest, and a rerun of former-President Clinton’s appearance. Despite numerous coordination efforts, one participant did not turn in his diary; thus, the diary data samples were restricted to three

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<sup>3</sup>One participant from the first focus group did not fill out a post-survey so the only data included for her are gender and ethnicity. The gender variable was observable, and she discussed her ethnicity (Other) during the focus group discussion.



journals. The final demographics for the diary participants were two females, one white, the other African-American, and one white male. All three diarists were undergraduate students at the University of Florida. The diarists ranged in age from 20 to 24.

Overall, the data revealed three key themes regarding participants' perceptions of *TDS*. First, participants viewed *TDS* as a media satire/news parody show. Second, although all participants considered the *TDS* to be a media satire/news parody, they were divided regarding whether they perceived it to be strictly an entertainment program, or whether they regarded it as a new genre of news program. The final theme, respectability, addresses how respondents operationalized credibility regarding the program.

### **Theme #1—*TDS* is a Media Satire/News Parody**

Overwhelmingly, *TDS* viewers perceive the news industry as failing in its mission to provide relevant analytic coverage to the public. Respondents said that trends such as corporate concentration and a political backlash after the terrorist attacks of 9/11 have contributed toward a weakened news industry that oftentimes crosses the line into entertainment and partisanship. As Don lamented, “News, entertainment—it’s all the same thing.” Or as Rich said during a discussion of where *TDS* fits into today’s political media environment, “I mean the real news is a joke too.” Julie offered a similar opinion:

I think another reason people would watch [*TDS*] it is because they’re disillusioned by the media. And you know, they watch CNN, they watch Fox and they figure, well that’s fiction also, so I might as well just watch *TDS*, because either way it’s going to be fiction.

As such, they see *TDS* as a forum for satirical commentary about the declining state of the news and media industries. For example, Aaron said,

It parodies the news of the day. Also mainly I think it parodies the media. And how they [*TDS*] report the news seems to be focusing more on spoofing the way

news is reported rather than the actual news itself most of the time, which I appreciate because I think the media's ridiculous most of the time.

Jeff expressed similar sentiments:

It definitely tries to bring out some of the absurdity of like what's happening in news and the fact that maybe we shouldn't take things quite so seriously, or at least we should try to examine them and have an opinion about them instead of ignoring them because it's too painful to swallow or whatever.

Denise's diary entry lent additional support to this perspective and addressed the element of "reality" that is necessary for successful satire. She wrote,

I believe that what makes anything funny—really funny, is by how close to the truth it really is—the more true, the funnier anything is . . . its kind of a rule of comedy and one that "*The Daily Show*" hits the nail on the head just about every night."

As Aaron also stated, Denise is referring to the manner by which *TDS*, "really questions how the media reports the news and spoofs the media." Or as Jerry commented, "It's like if the media is the fourth check and balance of the government, than *The Daily Show* is the fifth—the check on the media." As Chris said,

He's [Jon Stewart] given satire a new purpose. It's not just satire to make people laugh. A lot more people sit up and listen now, to Jon Stewart and Lewis Black. They've started to really straddle that line between, I guess, comic and pundit. It's not just satire to be funny anymore. They're not just making fun of people because they want to get a laugh. They're making fun of people because they think these people need to be made fun of—people need to sit up and listen. It's given, I guess, a new respect to their field, kind of—their own new little breed of comedian.

Sarah shared a similar opinion, and credited the satire on *TDS* with the following:

Expos[ing] the media and the political system in a way that no one else does, and in a way the public needs to know. . . . *TDS* has made me know that I can't always trust what I read in the paper, or what I see on CNN or presidential debates. It's made me question the media and the political system.

Robert offered an interesting perspective on the role the program plays with regard to mainstream media. He suggested that *TDS* provides one of the most accessible platforms for the alternative press:

I really do think that *TDS*, Micheal Moore's movies, Air America you know, all these things are—they fit in as like, the “alternative press” that I think has been marginalized in a way but somehow either because they're using humor, or they're on a bigger stage those folks [*TDS*] haven't been marginalized in a certain way, that it's more accessible, so that it's more acceptable—you know like, like rounding up the *Iguana*<sup>4</sup>, or finding *In These Times* or going to some website—it takes a lot of—it takes some energy, and because *The Daily Show* is on TV when you're winding down the day, you know I think it fills a real niche, and like I said, I think because they're looking at things and talking about things in a way that fits in with people's experiences, and the way that they're looking at the world, you know, I think it, that why I said I kinda don't like it when he says they're a fake news program because I think in some ways, they're undervaluing their own role, especially in younger people's understanding of the world.

In trying to categorize *TDS*, late-night talk shows and comedy sketch shows such as *Saturday Night Live (SNL)* were mentioned frequently as comparisons. As Paul said,

As far as I'm concerned it's basically just a late-night talk show with a twist that's it's made in the format of a news show as opposed to a late-night talk show. Instead of having Johnny Carson coming up talking about the news, format of a newscast. They may have one guest or two and then they have reports. That's what makes it different I guess.

Eva had a similar response and said, “Well it's kind of a cross between the Letterman format, and the whole *SNL* news format.”

However, respondents offered contrasting views on whether *TDS* differs from its predecessors in terms of the effectiveness of its satire. Kaya compared *TDS* to other late-night talk shows, such as *The Tonight Show with Jay Leno*:

For years they've been making fun of the news, and . . . it's just been for a cheap laugh—they want that punchline. When you're watching Jon Stewart, I don't think you're really looking, ok, well it's just a cheap punchline . . . now it's satire with a purpose, so it's cool.

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<sup>4</sup>The *Iguana* is a local alternative newspaper.

While Kaya credited the satire on *TDS* as being more effective than prior shows in the genre, Aaron voiced disappointment that the show isn't more hard-hitting:

It's interesting because it [*TDS*] evolved a lot from being your typical just kind of what *SNL* did with their news when they first started into something very original. It's hard to describe really what they're doing, but, it's a news parody show I guess . . . [but] . . . I think sometimes they [*TDS*] play to the easier laugh, rather than question it, or spoof it.

In the final focus group an exchange occurred regarding this issue, and respondents concluded that *TDS* and Stewart are more of a target now because they are at the forefront of the genre:

Fred: I think it's going to take a little bit more time—because I think that a lot of older people, and this is pure conjecture, probably still think of it as that goofy, jokey new show. In time it will get up there with Leno and Letterman and Johnny Carson. People will begin to acknowledge it as something more than that goofy news show that's on after dirty puppets.

Kaya: You make a good point with Jay Leno. No one questions when Jay Leno's doing his like, monologue in the beginning, like, "Oh hey—did you watch Jay Leno last night? Was that real, or was that not?" He spoofs factual news too, like anyone else does. The reason Jon Stewart gets so much flak from politicians or O'Reilly, or whoever it may be, is because he does it the best.

Ed: Yea, nobody watches Jay Leno anymore, so he's not really a media focal point. You know, real news, or fake comedy, or real news, or whatever he was, so . . .

Kaya: Jon Stewart's pretty much like the new frontier, like the main head figure, so that's why they're basically focusing on him instead of Conan O'Brien or someone that still has his loyal audience, but you know . . .

Chris: Well it's because the show is, it's jokes with a point. It's edged humor, and it's there for a purpose.

Another show that was suggested when respondents were trying to categorize *TDS* was *The Chappelle Show*. Broadcast on Comedy Central, *The Chappelle Show* is a half-hour comedy-sketch show hosted by Dave Chappelle, an African-American stand-up

comedian, well known for his satire on social, political and racial issues. Respondents compared the satire on *The Chappelle Show* to *TDS*. As Robert explained:

If you watch *SNL* or Mad TV or some other sketch type thing—you know what’s even a better example these days, is like the Chappelle Show—where he’s like taking things that are going on, and he’s too taking them too far and making a joke about it and stuff like that. And again, I don’t think anyone would watch it even for the first time and think, “Oh, this is a news show.” It’s sort of like reading the opinions page.

Some respondents commented that the material on *The Chappelle Show* is less accessible to broader audiences than the content on *TDS*. The following exchange between Don and Tade illustrates the issue well. Tade began by talking about the feature correspondents on *TDS* and the conversation progressed into a comparison and explanation of the different genres:

Dave: I think he [Jon Stewart] has to put those things in [ie: feature correspondents] just so it’s like universally funny to everyone. Because if he just did it solely on politics people wouldn’t watch it you know.

Tade: I agree. But I still think a lot of people don’t watch it [*TDS*] because it is politics. I think that a lot of people are just like South Park and Reno 911, and Chappelle Show, things you can just kind of like zone out to.

Dave: I appreciate that too.

Tade: I do too. I love that.

Dave: Chappelle Show has a lot of social commentary.

Tade: It does, but from a different perspective.

Dave: Yea, like they deal with stuff that like almost the hip hop culture would. I mean I’m not gonna say the hip hop culture, but like youth oriented. Cause they do skits like real-world, Little John. These are stuff . . . like my parents can watch *TDS* and can appreciate it, but they don’t know who Little John is. You know what I’m saying? Stuff like that.

Robert also commented on the fact that the satire on *TDS* includes nonpolitical coverage, and said that this type of humor was what initially drew him into the show:

I got hooked, because of some of the non-political segments, like the guy Ed Helms, does this like tech talk, and I was like almost wetting my pants, because he was like [saying] how great digital cameras and all this stuff is, and he was supposed to be demonstrating it all, and like none of it was working, and he's trying to plug it in, and it's so close to reality. When you see a story like that on the news its like, "The digital camera will drive your car, and put your kids to bed," and like I see my mom reacting to these commercials on TV, or whatever, like AOL, and then get frustrated, because AOL doesn't work that way—it's slow, and like he was poking fun at that, and it was real, and I was like, oh this is hilarious. And then I started watching it and got more hooked on, sort of their political spin on things.

Despite the fact that all respondents felt *TDS* succeeds as a media satire/news parody program, participants differed as to whether they regarded the show as strictly an entertainment program, or an entertaining method of receiving the news. The next section looks more directly at how participants categorized the program specifically.

### **Theme #2—Entertainment Program vs. New Genre of News Program**

While all the respondents regarded *TDS* as a news and media satire program, two distinct views surfaced in the data: those who regarded the program strictly as a source of entertainment, and those who considered *TDS* to be a new genre of news programming.

As Ted said, "I don't watch it for news. I think it's humorous, so I watch it for entertainment, personally." Elsie also emphasized the entertainment value of the show and said she did not consider it as a news source, "I watch it because I think it's really funny."

Many of the respondents who said that they considered *TDS* primarily an entertainment program, also commented that they were news "junkies," and got their news from a number of sources. As Rich said, "I watch it for entertainment. I mean I'm kind of a political junkie. I watch *Hardball* and *Meet the Press* and all those shows so this is kind of nice to just get, you know . . . political commentary and comic spin."

Ricardo also shared that he does not consider *TDS* as a source for news:

I watch it for entertainment, for the laughs. It's not my source of news—I have plenty of other sources for that. But I do like the way they couch commentary with humor. And I think that's a real effective way to criticize policies.

As evidenced in the quotes above, despite the fact that respondents characterize *TDS* as providing “political commentary,” some still do not consider it as a news source. Moreover, some expressed concern that viewers would use it as a primary source of news. As Elsie said, “I think since they do make jokes out of it, I don't think that they expect people to watch them—they don't expect just the average person to turn on *The Daily Show* to get news.” And Paul voices his doubts that viewers would use *TDS* as a news source:

I really don't think a whole lot of people rely on it to tell them all the issues of the world, inform them completely, and tell me who to vote for and tell me what to think about this. I think they say like 38% get their fake news or something like that [from *TDS*], but I'd be pretty skeptical to think that for that whole 38% that is their sole news source, and they don't get their opinions based on something else. I would hope so.

Ricardo voiced similar sentiments, but broadens the scope to include people who get their news from *any* single source, “I've read that there's a certain percentage of *TDS* viewers for whom *TDS* is their main source of news. And I find that as frightening as the percentage of people for whom the Fox Channel is their only source of news.”

Despite the fact that these respondents consider the show as entertainment, they do not discount the fact that it does contain information. They appear however, to view the show as more of a supplement to the news, presented in an entertaining way, not necessarily as a valid source independently. As Peter said, “You can't look at *The Daily Show* as a news program, you have to take it as a humorous adaptation of current events.” The following exchange from the focus group held on July 26th presented this perspective well:

Veronica: I think it falls more toward entertainment. I wouldn't think of it as a hard core news source. I'd watch it for entertainment and then it would bring up some news sources and then when I'd go watch a national news source I might think of *The Daily Show*, or vice versa, but I wouldn't think of it as [a news source, I'd think of it as] entertainment that happens to be on Comedy Central.

Paul: I guess I agree with her. I tend to know the story first. And then I come to *TDS* and if I kind of agree with his assessment of it, or not even that necessarily but, think that if he addressed the actual story, you know, I'll probably find it really funny, and then I'll enjoy most of the show.

The following quotes provide additional insight into why viewers watch *TDS*: the program offers relief from the negativity of traditional news programs. As Aaron said,

I watch it for comedy. It makes me laugh. I don't get my news from it. I'm a pretty avid news junkie myself, I follow the news all day, I get my news from a number of different sources—TV, Internet, radio. But I love to get, now since the news is always so serious and usually depressing, it's nice to be able to laugh at it. But it's just a funny show, it makes me laugh.

Paul shared similar sentiments:

It's really nice after listening to the news and reading really serious books about how this is going to have serious impact on not just you but the future of your whole country . . . it's nice to watch issues lampooned on *TDS* and it helps you to breathe a sigh of relief to think, you know what, it's going to be alright, because if they can show Dennis Hastert<sup>5</sup> in a dress, then it's all good."

As discussed, some viewers regard *TDS* as primarily an entertainment program, despite the fact that they may acknowledge that the show may contain information. They consider the show primarily as escapist entertainment. This perspective contrasts with others who responded that they watch *TDS* "to get my news" (Bert), and "to get the 'real' news" (Marion). While some respondents expressed doubt over people potentially using *TDS* as a main source of news, others clearly stated that they do consider the show as a legitimate outlet. As Jeff said, "Honestly, it's [*TDS*] my primary news source. It's the only honest news show I've ever seen." And Daniel commented, "I'd say if you add it

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<sup>5</sup>Current Speaker of the House of Representatives.



all up they've [*TDS*] got less bullshit than the rest of the news." Within this group a number of respondent also commented that they were heavy news consumers; however, for these respondents, the show is more than an entertaining supplement to mainstream news. They consider *TDS* to be a unique program that offers an alternative perspective on current issues. As Leslie said, although it borrows from familiar genres, ie: news, sketch comedy, and late-night talk shows, the format is an innovative one that breaks new ground:

I wouldn't put it in the same category as like a CNN or something like that. It's kind of like it's own separate entity in that sense. Because it is mixing a lot of pop culture and a lot of comedy and news, all being intertwined into one...I feel like it's almost this bastardization in between news and comedy, because the two seem like such separate realms to me—I really see it as creating a new little path for news.

Catherine voices this perspective almost verbatim, "I think it's [*TDS*] kind of like, breaking ground for a new type of show and a new like, viewpoint on media today, definitely." That the show doesn't fit neatly into a preexisting format seems to fuel the difficulty in classifying it as a news program. Echoing the sentiments of others who consider the *TDS* as a new genre of programming, Don commented, "I don't think they should say it's real news, I don't think they should say it's fake news, I think they should just bill it as *TDS* and put it out there." Or as Robert proposed, "I mean I guess you could argue that it's redefining what a news show is." In this vein, some respondents voiced the belief that despite being labeled as "the fake news," *TDS* provides a better context of political issues for their viewers. As Julie said,

I would say he's as analytic, if not more, as the political pundits you watch on CNN. He [Stewart] says some pretty deep stuff. Just the other day he was talking about the contradictions in one of George W. Bush's speeches and it was something that I don't think people at CNN or Fox would even want to approach.

It is interesting to note that in this context a number of respondents referenced the notion that the show has evolved over the course of time into more of a political show.

Respondents gave three reasons for the evolution of the show into a more political forum: Jon Stewart taking over as host, the current political climate, and the sense that the show provides an appealing format that politically engages younger viewers.

Respondents clearly commented on the notion that *TDS* has evolved into more of a politically relevant show since its launch. This change is largely credited to Jon Stewart taking over the show from the original host, Craig Kilborn. As Jeff explained,

I'm just surprised at how much the show has evolved. And like become respectable I guess, and such a great source for news. I remember watching it in the early days, like back before they had the audience and back when they had Craig Kilborn and it was like really just a much different kind of show.

Catherine addressed this issue partly in terms of the caliber of guests the show has now as compared to when Kilborn hosted:

Even though Craig Kilborn is funny I don't find him to be as smart [as Jon Stewart]—before it was more entertainers it seemed like. Or it was more like a talk show kind of thing, kind of format. And it had really great contributors and all that kind of stuff, but now it seems to be more political because Jon Stewart has that knowledge to make it like that.

Others contrasted Stewart's experience as a politically oriented stand-up comedian, with Kilborn's sports-anchor roots. As Julie noted:

I was just taken aback by how intelligent he [Stewart] is, and political and knowledgeable . . . I like that it's [*TDS*] getting more and more political. Because a few years ago, you know with Craig Kilborn on the show, you couldn't really tell what his political opinion was, but I like that Jon Stewart, more of him comes out in every show.

Another factor in the show's evolution that respondents commented upon was the impact of the current political climate on the news industry as a whole. Respondents highlighted several issues that have affected the topical content of *TDS* and respondents

views concerning media coverage: the fact that data were collected post 9/11, during a preelection period, and during a period while the country was at war. Some viewers expressed the opinion that these issues have played a role in transforming *TDS* from more of an entertainment-oriented show into a more politically-oriented one. Elsie has watched the show for a number of years and said, “I think, like, especially for this election it’s definitely part of the news. Like it seems more news oriented and politically, than just entertainment lately.”

During the final focus group, which took place the night before the 2004 Presidential election, Kaya voiced her opinion that during the political season it seemed more appropriate for *TDS* to have political figures as guests, as opposed to entertainment guests:

[I prefer] the political figures, however, because this being, you know, the time where it’s like voting, and the whole voting season, it’s almost odd when you see someone outside of the political [world] on it. Like if someone’s promoting a movie, you’re like, “Oh, OK,” and it’s kind of weird, just right now because you’re just so used to the political heads.

Kaya’s view expressed the sense among some viewers that the more entertainment-oriented, punchline-driven coverage was a luxury that the country could not afford during that time. As Eva noted, “people are more politically engaged today because of what’s going on in the world.” Or as Harry said,

Clearly it’s filling a niche. There’s a demand for it. There’s a space where people want to be entertained, yet they want to have somewhat factual information and have somebody explain to them in a very funny, poignant way—eloquent way, what’s going on. And I think a lot of those folks, you know, probably fit in our shoes. You know, we’re curious about what else is there, we’re not really seeing that from CNN or especially Fox, so he [Stewart] does do something that someone hasn’t done. I don’t know if ever. So it seems like a really new animal as far as entertainment and politics is concerned.

Within this dimension of *TDS* as a “new animal,” many respondents expressed the view that the show potentially could be a positive force to engage younger people in the political process. As Fred said,

It’s a good way for people who don’t watch the news, particularly young people, to be introduced to what’s going on in the world and make them want to be more involved in reading the news and watching the news—discussing the news. He’s [Stewart] very good at you know, sucking people in with the funniness, and then actually making a serious point once in a while to you know, keep the brain working.

Jeff agreed:

I guess to like people like me and to people my age, I don’t see anything wrong with using them [*TDS*] as a legitimate news outlet. I mean it’s not too much different to me than reading a politically slanted news magazine. Everything you get with news comes through a filter, so I’d rather have it through a really funny filter.

And Tade pointed out that the show offers politicians a platform to reach the younger demographic:

This is their opportunity [politicians], because like most people our age aren’t watching politics, and this is like their chance, to like you know, I mean it’s a shame, but this is their chance to reach out. If this is what’s going to get young people in politics, I hope this is what facilitates it.

As Eva said,

I think that *TDS* appeals to this whole segment of the population that used to be sort of the young, who-gives-a-fuck generation. Politically disengaged, in a way that does take them in, and engage them politically and I think that that is good. I mean there’s so much out there. Obviously yes, people should be getting their news from other sources but like, *SNL*, is not particularly political. This is humor that is informative, and I think that is a really good thing. So in that sense, I’m glad that they’re playing a political role.

In fact, some participants credited the show with getting them more involved in politics.

Veronica is 21-years-old and shared the following:

I really just started watching the news. I put it on once a day for like 15-20 minutes, to get a feel of what’s going on, actually like more toward the tail of the Clinton administration, and then up and coming Bush’s presidency, so . . . I think

the Monica Lewinsky thing was such a big deal, and they parodied it so much on *TDS* it kind of like drew me in, and then after that, I stuck with it.

Sarah, a 21-year-old college student had a similar experience:

Yea, it sort of filled me in on certain things, because I didn't pay very close attention to the news before, before I could vote, and when I started watching it [*TDS*] in 2000, when they did the election coverage back then. And as I've progressed as a person who watches it, I've become more involved in current events and things like that, so I know who the big politicians are, and the big people in our government.

Fred, a 19-year-old college student, suggested that the show's success in motivating its viewers to become more active political participants stems from its ability to expose the inconsistencies and absurdities in the system. "I think it [*TDS*] kinda makes fun of the system so bad you'll think about it more and want to be involved and see how stupid the system is and want to do something to get out there and make it better. At least in my opinion."

### **Theme #3—Credibility**

For this study the data revealed three overall categories that define how credible viewers perceive *TDS*: Respectability, Bias, and Program format. They are reviewed below.

#### **Respectability**

Respectability was operationalized via two primary constructs: legitimacy through press coverage and increased caliber of political guests. In the August 11th focus group, Jerry discussed the fact that a number of news organizations have begun rerunning clips of *TDS* on their nightly newscasts. He said, "I think that the reason for that is it's such an accurate representation of the news media in general." The rest of the group voiced agreement, and raised an interesting point: if so-called "news" shows are showing clips of *TDS*, does that legitimize it as news?

Certainly the show has become more prominent in recent years, and received a good deal of attention from the mainstream media prior to the 2004 Presidential election.

As Jeff said,

I think they've made themselves surprisingly important. Like I mean they definitely have the Indecision 2004, and their Presidential coverage is fantastic—it's biting, acerbic and wonderful and exactly what I'd like to see from like coverage as something as ridiculous as the presidential election usually turns out to be . . . I think they've also become surprisingly respectable, I mean considering that they are the fake news, and they call themselves the fake news. They get all sorts of political guests on there.

Respondents made a number of references to the higher caliber of political guests on *TDS* as an example of the show's increasing respectability. In the following quote

Aaron commented on this phenomenon:

It's definitely had an impact. It's absolutely had an impact. And you can tell when you see the Tim Russert's and what's his name . . . Bob Kerry, I think he was the Democratic head of the 9/11 commission, if not he was a prominent Democrat on the 9/11 commission. When the 9/11 commission was in the news big time, right after Condoleeza Rice testified, and you know the stories every day were coming out about what they were finding, he was on *TDS*, you know . . . he wasn't on Meet the Press, he wasn't on, you know any other show, he went on *TDS*, which I thought was fascinating, this was a serious issue in this country and a serious news story. And he's going on *TDS*, because he knows he can reach . . . a good number of young voters that way. Whether that's a good or a bad thing, I'm not sure, you know? But during the Democratic primaries they all went on *TDS*. John Edwards, Howard Dean, Al Sharpton . . . I've seen Ed Gillespie, Karen Hughes, people from the Bush administration, on *TDS*. So the politicians are using it to get some message across—they're using it to reach some people. So that tells you that it's definitely had an impact.

Tade expanded the scope of this construct to include the fact that *TDS* is now operating in the same arena of political coverage as the more traditional news programs, and that this access helps legitimize the show. He said, "They get big guests, they got front row at the conventions. They've got some pull. I guess if they have some viewers they can have some influence." And as Catherine commented,

They've gotten so much great praise, I mean they've won for their writing, and their writers have all won awards . . . I think their viewership is so high right now, because the election is coming closer, and because they've won so many awards recently. I mean, that's a big thing too—once you get the respect from the community and the media, I think that more people will respect you as a news source as well.

But not everyone thinks that the show's newfound respectability is positive thing.

When asked where he thought *TDS* fits into the current political environment, Jerry stated that, "It's [*TDS*] more important than it should be." And Aaron commented, "It's absolutely changing the media, which troubles me, but it's probably not a bad thing in that they don't take themselves too seriously." Rich acknowledged the momentum the show has generated, and commented that the increasing attention directed at the show was likely unintended by the producers and principals. "It's kind of snowballing. It's become this thing bigger than they thought it was going to be. They probably thought they were just going to do this little comedy show."

Rich's comments came on the heels of a highly publicized appearance by Jon Stewart on CNN's *Crossfire*.<sup>6</sup> On October 15, 2004, Jon Stewart was a guest on the pundit-style debate show. Initially the *Crossfire* hosts, Tucker Carlson and Paul Begala, went on the offensive, attempting to minimize Stewart's credibility and egging him on to be funny. The situation turned on them, however, when Stewart accused the show and its hosts of being irresponsible journalists and failing the American public in their duty to keep them informed about important matters of public policy. The exchange ignited a hailstorm of publicity and placed Stewart in the center of a national debate concerning media credibility and responsibility, and the current state of the news industry. Respondents' comments concerning Stewart's *Crossfire* appearance are included in the upcoming source credibility section.

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<sup>6</sup>The *Crossfire* transcript can be found at <http://politicalhumor.about.com/library/bljonstewartcrossfire.htm>

## **Bias**

Many of the respondents commented on the issue of media credibility in general and whether most news organizations practiced objective journalism, or tended to provide more ideological coverage. This construct concerns respondents' perceptions of bias, first concerning the news industry in general, and *TDS* in particular.

With regard to the news industry in general, many respondents voiced strong opinions that disputed the traditionally held view of news organizations presenting “objective” reports. In particular, Fox News and CNN were cited numerous times during discussions of media bias and credibility, and used as a basis for comparison against *TDS*. Jeff talked about the issue:

I think the industry is changing. It's very weird to me to go home and visit my dad, and he watches fake—I mean Fox [slip unintentional] News, and he thinks there isn't any bias in Fox News when I think there's an extremely clear bias in Fox News, but Fox News of course claims that it is the only unbiased one. I always thought CNN tried to be a non-biased news organization, and it seems, I don't know, it seems Fox News with all its vitriol, and clear stance maybe attracts more viewers.

Some respondents admonished the news programs and networks for presenting the company line, either in an ideological sense, or as corporate entities, and said that reduced their ability to trust the reports. As Leslie said, “The actual news is supposed to be unbiased, which I mean, you kinda know that that's not really the way that it is, but there are a lot of things, whether the anchors feel it or not, that they can't say.” Don also expressed concern over the effect of corporate concentration when he said, “I don't even watch the news anymore to get my facts, because I know it's all BS and I know the way that they portray things is like, to influence people, not to really educate people.” While most respondents felt that corporate concentration in the industry resulted in a more



conservative bias, Jose expressed the minority view and said, “The bulk of the media, other than Fox News, is pretty much liberal one way or another.”

Respondents generally agreed that mainstream media was biased: the majority perceiving a conservative bias. However, when discussing the issue in regards to *TDS*, opinions varied greatly. Overall, the issue of viewer’s perception of bias in regards to *TDS* were sectioned into four categories: *TDS* is biased to left, *TDS* is biased toward the incumbent administration, *TDS* has a bias of humor, and identification influences bias perception.

When asked to describe the show, some respondents considered *TDS* to have a liberal bias. For example, Julie said that it was “liberal political news.” However, responses did indicate a range of perceived extremity. For example, Jose felt that the show was extremely biased. “I would say that it’s [*TDS*] more than liberal. I would say it’s far slanted to the left.” Others felt that the bias was more tempered. As Rich said, “it’s slightly to the left.”

Judgements also varied regarding the issue of bias. Some respondents, like Ricardo, felt that the news media are more conservative, and that a liberal media show helped to balance the broadcast lineup:

I think the left-wing bias, at least in television media is a myth. It’s just not so. And maybe even in print. I do think *TDS* has a slight left-wing bias and I welcome that . . . I’m glad there is a Daily Show to counter what I think is really a right-wing bias in the mainstream media.

Chris agreed:

I think they try to remain really objective, and make fun of both sides, but there are definitely days where they’re scrapping for a token liberal joke, I guess, where it seems like they’re kind of starved for a way to make fun of somebody whose Democratic. I know Jon Stewart has an agenda, and personally I would say that he’s left leaning, not that that’s bad.

Some respondents voiced frustration about the fact that although they considered *TDS* to have a liberal bias, they did not find that to be a negative quality, per se, but they resented that the show tried to operate within the objective format. As Leanne said,

What I don't like about it is that it's almost like—I think it's pretty liberal, but they'll do anything but say that they're liberal—as though it's wrong to take a stance. It's not wrong to take a stance, but if you have a stance, you might as well just take it, you might as well say, “You know we really don't like Bush, he's stupid,” but it's like everything but that.

Robert compared the phenomenon to reading the opinions page in a newspaper, and said that like other news outlets *TDS* editorializes, which audiences should expect from any source.

Others, like Paul, considered the liberal bias of the show to be much more insidious:

When they invite McCain on, they say, “Ok, we'll invite both sides on, we'll invite McCain on, he's a funny guy.” And they'll talk about really commonplace kind of stuff, and not let them get into their politics, and just keep it kind of causal, and not let them have their platform, but other people, especially [Michael] Moore, and other people not even as fanatical as Moore, they'll just let them have their platform.

And Harry indicated that the liberal bias is so prevalent on the show that he is uncomfortable watching it at times:

It's hard to watch a really staunch Republican go on there and have a completely different viewpoint than Jon Stewart. It just seems like they clash the whole time or Stewart manipulates, or not manipulates, but pushes them into a corner that he can't seem to get out of and ends up sticking his foot in his mouth—and they don't seem to really get along, but he seems to somehow smooth it over to make sure it works.

Similarly, bias seemed evident against the incumbent administration to some respondents. Some respondents commented that the incumbent President, and his political party will be attacked more. Therefore, because this is an era of Republican dominance, *TDS* is skewed more toward a liberal bias. As Leslie explained,

Well I think it has to do a lot with the times. Like right now if you watch *TDS* it'd be easy to see that they're only making fun of Republicans because it's Republicans in office and the people getting the attention.

Veronica offered a similar view:

I wish they were a little more balanced, but I think you have to look at the perspective of who's running the country right now. I think if we were back watching *TDS* back while Clinton was in office, I think they'd be bashing the left just as much as they're bashing the Right right now, because that's who's there. So you know, they see them, they see all their faults. I'm sure liberals have just as many faults, but they're not in the spotlight right now. I think if John Kerry gets elected, then they'll, you know, 1-2-3-4 bam, bam, bam, they'll be bashing them as much as they can, because they can. But right now, nobody's there. You know, so many people, so many people in the House of Representatives, Senators, are mostly Republicans. But if it would switch, if they were mostly from a liberal point of view it would be the same thing, but right now, and for the past three and a half years it's all been Republicans, so that's who they're going to bash.

There was some opposition to this view however. Respondents commented that the humor directed at the previous administration on *TDS* seemed to be less personal than the jokes made about the current administration. For example, Ed countered Veronica, and said, "To some extent I agree that it's the incumbent who gets all the heat, but I remember it more against his policies and it's more like a mission this time around than when Clinton was in office." And Greg voiced a similar opinion on the issue in a later focus group:

When Clinton was in office . . . I don't remember him [Stewart] poking directly so much, at like the President or the President's cabinet, or the people that work with the President, so I don't know if it's the administration, or the slant on the show, or it could be a combination of the two, because they are easy to poke at, and it could be the fact that they are easier to poke fun at, but it does happen more.

This dimension also appeared in the data via comments regarding the potential outcome of the then ongoing Presidential race. Many respondents wondered if the show would maintain its level of satire if John Kerry were to win the election. Ricardo speculated, "I think there is a danger that if John Kerry becomes President the show will

be less funny.” And Fred commented that the Bush administration has been an easy target for the show:

It depends on the material he’s given to work with though, because it’s been a busy four years, politically. I mean, President Bush took us to war. We’ve been desensitized, but that’s still big news. So you know, President Bush, for good or for bad, made a lot of very big, and a lot of very loud, and very controversial decisions. So that’s just, you know, gasoline on the fire, that Jon Stewart and all the writers of *TDS* can stoke. You know, the success of his show, yea, it’s dependent on the skill, and the wit, and the cleverness of the writers, but it’s also dependent on what’s happening.

Other members of the focus groups contradicted the prediction that the show might not be as funny if President Bush were to lose the election. Also the general opinion appeared to be that the comparison between the type of humor directed at Bush and the type directed at Clinton was skewed because of the Monica Lewinsky sex scandal during Clinton’s administration. As Veronica pointed out,

Clinton was so barraged . . . I’m sure if Bush had a sex scandal right now, that’s all that would be all over the news. Nobody would be talking about the abortion ban, nobody would be talking about gays getting married . . . that’s what would then be the limelight at the time of Clinton’s presidency, if something like that were to happen now, it would be just the same.

In contrast to those who believed that *TDS* presents a leftist biased viewpoint, and treats conservative guests and issues more harshly than their liberal counterparts, the following statements reflect another viewpoint: that *TDS* is an equal-opportunity offender, and that its only bias is to find the humor in the absurd. As Bert said, “I see it more as an objective viewpoint because he bashes both sides equally.” Sarah agreed and said, “It’s not just conservatives or Republicans. Everybody gets made fun of on that show. Nothing is sacred.”

Several respondents commented that the show’s, and Stewart’s, bias is toward acts of “stupidity,” rather than aimed at ideological targets. As Leanne said, “I think the

whole jist of *TDS* is that America is dumb. And that is always the joke.” Or, as Kaya said,

I like the fact that you definitely know his viewpoint and what he thinks about things, but everything is just full range to be made fun of. He is fair about, no matter who it is, if someone says something dumb, he’s going to point it out. And I like that—the fairness about it.

Leslie discussed the issue directly in terms of bias:

*TDS* feels unbiased in a different way. They’re just ragging on absolutely everybody, but to have somebody out there that’s calling people out on things that they’re doing that are ridiculous or politically corrupt and letting people become aware of it and yet be able to laugh at it.

Or as Chris said, the bias of *TDS* is to make things funny:

Some people it seems to me, they get their news from *TDS*, which, as funny and as entertaining as I find it, you know, I think every other news show is biased, and some people are like—“Oh, *The Daily Show* makes fun of everybody” and that’s just it—they don’t have a bias, but their bias is to make things funny. I don’t think it’s a funny way to get the news, I think it’s a way to watch things that are funny. So I think it appeals to a broader range of people.

Don stated that this humor bias may actually serve to increase credibility compared with more traditional newscasts:

You know though, I think you get a lot more reality out of that show than you do out of watching Fox News, or CNN even, or any of those things because when he’s making a joke on these things, you know he’s making a joke, and you know where he’s coming from, but these people put on news that portrays things not the way they really are, and portray it as real news, and so by watching that you’re going to be totally skewed a whole lot more than you are watching *TDS*.

Robert voiced a similar opinion, and said that the reason *TDS* works so well is that they use humor to expose inconsistencies in public policy:

[Here’s] an example. A lot of times they’ll [*TDS*] have Donald Rumsfeld on there and he’ll be saying something about the way the war is going and they’ll

juxtapose it against the reality of it. That's the brilliance of it. They're not coming out and saying we don't think this is true. They're taking what Rumsfeld, or an official source, a corporate head, or whatever, is saying, and then they're juxtaposing it against what real people are experiencing or some other unrefutable evidence, and the gap between those things is both funny and really real . . . [So I think *TDS* distinguishes itself ] by calling that stuff out basically. It's like when your sitting around with your friends and someone says something that's obviously not true . . . and your like, "That's bullshit, stop lying." That's what Jon Stewart does with the news, he's like, "Wait a minute Bush, you're saying one thing, but you're doing the exact opposite, you know?" and makes fun of it . . . their success in some degree is because they're willing to say bullshit when they see it.

However, some respondents charge that the show does stray from this course, that is, at times it is more political than humorous, and when that happens *TDS* fails in its primary mission: to be funny. As Jose stated, "You can only carry a political agenda so far before it stops becoming humorous to everyone." Ricardo echoed this viewpoint and said that when the show becomes too political it alienates him:

I don't like it when the show gets too serious. I think it's a comedy show. I don't like it when he has guests like Madeline Albright or John Kerry. Because it ties into this whole CNN/*Crossfire* controversy recently. Is it an entertainment show, or is it an interview show? Um . . . I think he's trying to have it both ways and I think that's difficult to do. Uh . . . I prefer it when it's straight comedy.

Ricardo then referenced a particular episode when Ed Koch, a prominent Democrat, and the former mayor of NYC was on *TDS* to promote a children's book that he had written, and the conversation turned into a political battleground when Stewart learned that Koch supported the candidacy of Republican George W. Bush for President. "I think that episode was an example of the awkwardness that I find between the show trying to be serious and funny . . . [because] all of a sudden, it wasn't a comedy show—it was a show on CNN."

Paul commented that sometimes when Stewart is interviewing a guest who shares his ideologies the entertainment value of the show suffers while he provides them with a platform to present their views. "He [Stewart] kind of brings them all through their

politics and all that, and I'm sitting there thinking they haven't told a joke in like three minutes, they're just going through the politics."

Ed contended that the show has become more polarized, in favor of the left, and that its humor has suffered as a consequence:

Over about the last year I've seen him [Stewart] kind of drift left and left, and for me, being kind of conservative, I mean, I can take it from both sides, but when it's all one side, he kind of loses the humor that is on the other side. I mean, it exists on both sides, and he's kind of losing out on that half of the humor, plus it's kind of getting biased, and you don't really need that in an entertainment show, you know, and I think he would probably keep more viewers for longer if he would you know, lampoon both sides.

Comments from others contradict Ed's characterization that the show has lost its balance and its edge, despite its liberal leanings. As Catherine said,

I mean I guess they're on the Democratic bandwagon in a way, but I don't think they're so far on the Democratic bandwagon that they won't make fun of them while they're in office. . . . Democrats are really funny too. I really appreciate that they make fun of both sides. And that they're not so Democrat that they can't see what's funny about like John Kerry tanning. I mean, that's funny shit. And I don't care what party you're in—John Kerry naked in a tanning bed is some funny shit to think about [laughs].

Olga agreed and explained, "Humor uses exaggeration to make it more funny, if it was just normal, it wouldn't be funny. But if you distort it a little bit, it becomes funny."

Respondents also commented that ideology influences a viewer's perception of the material presented on *TDS*. As Veronica explained, some people will find the program humorous, and others might find it offensive, depending on their level of identification:

Well, when you're watching a political show or a show like *TDS* that has a lot to do with politics—politics is personal. You can't talk about politics and not offend someone . . . I don't think it has anything to do with the show's content, it just has to do with the people that are watching it. If you're offended by the show sometimes then that's going to happen, but it doesn't have anything to do with the content, it has to do with your own personal point of view.

Harry echoed Veronica sentiments:

It also depends on your political affiliation. I mean what you really believe in. If you're talking about pro-choice, then maybe something on there [*TDS*] could offend you, or a lot of what Bush has been doing, if you're a big supporter and you hear something on there it probably would offend you.

Overall, respondents felt that the humor on *TDS* is successful with its audience because, as Catherine said, for the most part the show "preaches to the choir." Leanne expressed the viewpoint well:

I think *TDS* begins with, you're going to appreciate this if you come from a certain point of view, and to a degree it becomes acceptable to distort certain things, because if you already kind of agree with things they're saying anyway you accept the distortion and recognize that it is distorted, but its still making fun of the truth. So if they have Bush, you know, saying something, and then they have him saying something else that's really stupid, or he said it at a different time, the point isn't like, he really didn't say this, it's not real news media, the point is, Bush is stupid, and if you go into the show thinking that, you're going to find that funny, but if you go into the show [thinking] this is our President, we don't make fun of the President, he represents the country, W-2004, you're not going to find that funny.

Daniel's self-evaluative remark underscored the other respondents' comments.

"Most of what I've found is that I agree with pretty much everything he [Stewart] says. Even if he's making fun of a politician that I happen to like, I can definitely see where he's coming from." However, despite the fact that a viewer identifies with the show, and Stewart in particular, Peter's diary entries showed that he is a although he is a "huge *Daily Show* fan," he sometimes has trouble watching guests with which he does not relate. For example, when Republican National Chair Ed Gillespie was a guest on the show, Peter wrote, "It's hard for me to stay tuned to any Republican point person for any extended length of time. Thankfully the show ends—that guy makes my skin crawl."

Some respondents clarified that it may not be strict left or right ideology that guarantees whether a viewer appreciates *TDS*. Aaron, classified himself as a



conservative, and said that although he considers the show to have a leftist bias, he likes the show, and finds it humorous; however, he acknowledges that a viewer with a more rigid ideology might be offended by the show's humor:

I view the show as probably more appealing from an ideological perspective. Someone who is really serious about their ideology, I would imagine that conservatives would get offended more often than liberals. [But] I'm a conservative, and yea, I watch it and I love it. Yea, I mean most of my friends are fairly conservative, but not just a hard line ideological stance. And we all watch it and like it. I think it all depends how seriously you take your ideology and your views of the world.

Don addressed the issue of ideology and viewership as well and said, "Most people I know watch it [*TDS*], but I know a lot of people, like my roommates are Republican and they won't watch it." Julie offered an interesting perspective on the issue of ideology and *TDS* program use:

Maybe there's a difference between who watches it for entertainment and who watches it for political reasons and what their political standing is. Maybe people who are in the middle watch it for entertainment, and people who are really liberal watch it for politics, maybe conservatives watch it for entertainment, I don't know. Maybe it depends on what your political views are?

Another interesting dimension that arose in terms of humor, bias and identification was the notion that *TDS* caters to their core demographic: educated, middle-class urbanites. As Peter wrote, "It takes a well-informed educated audience to get the real wittiness produced by the show." Leanne echoed this belief:

We're kind of the market for *The Daily Show*. I don't think that the people who they're making fun of, the 40-year-old Southerners without a college degree [are watching]. It's obviously targeted almost against them. And it's not just that one segment. Kind of like, what part of America are you catering to, versus what part are you making fun of?

Others supported Leanne's view that *TDS* producers discount certain demographics because they are not the show's target audience. However, as Catherine's comment shows, this superior attitude makes some viewer's uncomfortable:

Sometimes, when they make fun of somebody that really doesn't get it, I feel bad for them, like I've seen some redneck, or they go to some town and someone is kind of dumb and then the contributors are kind of making fun of them to their face, and I don't get it. I feel really bad for them at that point. I think that on occasion they can push it too far. But they know their audience is not those people, so I think that's why they do it. Because I think their audience would also make fun of those people in a way. I mean you'd want to . . . but they actually do it, you know. Like you're talking to that person and you want to go, "Oh God that guy is so stupid, I just want to run him in circles, because he's so retarded he's not even going to know that I'm making fun of him." But they [TDS] actually do it, which you know is a little over the top sometimes—and they [the subjects] just don't get it, you know. And they watch it later, the way they edit it, and they do the voiceovers, and all that stuff to it, and they must be going "Oh my God, I look like such a dumb ass." Well, they're probably not going to watch the show anyways.

Robert also expressed discomfort over the show's tendency to ridicule some segments of the population:

Sometimes I think he [Stewart] sometimes makes . . . I don't know how to say this . . . he makes fun of, you know, average people, working people, sometimes, and that sometimes makes me cringe. And again, sometimes it comes across as sometimes he feels he needs to balance that out, like, making fun of Southerners, or making fun of like working women, or something like that, and I'm like, that's done all the time in the mainstream press, you don't need to do that to be funny.

### **Program Structure**

This final construct of credibility concerns the structure of the show itself, and two dimensions emerged from the data: program source credibility and show format. Respondents were highly favorable toward Stewart and frequently commented that they "loved" him (Veronica) and that he was very "likeable" (Paul). Or as Leslie said, "He's very easy to watch, super easy to watch and very charismatic." Many also respondents commented that they consider Stewart to be a very knowledgeable source. As Aaron remarked,

It's either Jon himself or the people doing the writing are very astute they know what's going on, and you can tell they read a lot of, they get their information from a lot of different sources, not just your mainstream headlines or 15 seconds news blurps that you get on TV half the time. They're very good at tying stories

together, the past stories that most people probably have forgotten about how they relate. They're very well read, very well informed, very sharp and quick-witted. That's my impression of them all across the board.

Or as Kaya said,

He's just very witty, you can tell that's he's politically savvy. And he's not always willing to just make a joke, if it's going to lessen the point he's making. For instance when he was on Crossfire. He said you know, "I 'm not going to be your little puppet to bring on this show." He knows that he's a comedian, but at the same time he does take certain things seriously.

The following comment from Jeff reflects the attitude of some respondents, that in addition to being an enjoyable source to watch, Stewart is also trustworthy:

I think it would be really cool if eventually someday he [Stewart] was like an anchor on CNN or something like that, because I think he has a great attitude—and he's funny and he seems very trustworthy. You know, a lot more so than a lot of the other talking heads who it's kind of hard to connect with on like a normal news channel . . . Jon Stewart is like very engaging and just seems like a very genuinely nice guy who you can trust to get an opinion on something from.

Or, as Catherine said,

He's a good interviewer. Regardless of his style of humor, he's a good interviewer. He asks good questions because he's informed about the topics, so he asks good questions. Like the questions I would ask if I was going to interview so and so or John Kerry.

Catherine's comments reflects a connection between her level for affinity for Stewart and her level of identification with him. Other respondents commented that the host's perspective on issues mirrored their own. For example, Robert compared the program's correspondents to himself and his friends when he said, "The way they [Stewart and correspondents] talk about stuff is often very times similar to the way me and my friends talk about aspects of politics." Sarah also aligned the show's personalities with her group of friends. "The thing that I've gotten from him, especially about his personality sort of, is that he's a very likeable guy. It's hard to hate Jon Stewart in my opinion, like my friends."

Some respondents believed that Stewart's role on *TDS* is less character playing, and more representative of who he is in real life. As Jerry commented, "Based on Jon Stewart's stand-up and other interviews I've seen him in—he seems very much himself on the show. There's not much acting involved in his performance on *TDS* . . . it seems kind of like, what you see is what you get." This perception of Jon Stewart as an "ordinary guy," as Catherine said, may go a long way in terms of engendering the viewers' credibility. As Robert explained, "It allows them [*TDS* audience] a way to understand politics and current events, that fits with their lives . . . it allows people a way to look at, to talk about what's going on, that reflects how they think about it."

However, while Stewart elicited natural, ordinary, guy-next-door descriptions, many respondents commented that the correspondents seemed like they were actors playing a role. As Leslie said:

When it comes to the correspondents and even Lewis Black, it's almost like it comes across as an act. Like they're just playing a role to be on the show. I think, I don't know, I think there's something natural about Jon Stewart where I feel like it'd be fun to have a conversation with him. Like that's just kind of like how he is. Whether or not the super witty remarks are coming out of his mouth every second, like you can just tell there's something very natural about the way that he is.

Bob also made the distinction between Stewart and the other correspondents.

"But Jon Stewart aside, you have to remember the rest of them are just actors. They're just drawing a check, you know? I'm sure if you put on a suit and a red tie and sit next to Rush Limbaugh, they'd do the same thing." And Jose commented on the over-the-top technique the correspondents use when they are reporting a story:

As far as his correspondents go, I have to say that they add to the whole flavor of the show, the whole idea of it being like a comedy news show and all that, because the voices they use, it's almost like they're sort of trying to have an emulation of like the old world, like the 30s and 40s news reporters. Their voices heighten, they coarse it a little more, "So it sounds like they're always saying

something very important [said in character].” Whether or not it’s something completely idiotic, like, “I’m talking about my armpits here Jon [said in character],” things like that.

A few respondents did disagree with this perspective however, and felt that Stewart was as much a part of the “cast” as the rest of the correspondents. As Ricardo said, “They’re all actors. Jon Stewart’s playing an anchorman.” And Veronica commented that Stewart is a more successful host of *TDS* than Kilborn was because “he [Stewart] was an actor. Because that’s what you’re trained to do.” Other comments lend further insight into the dynamic. As Chris noted, “It’s fun to watch him [Stewart] play the straight man, especially during the features.”

During the October 26, 2004, focus group, a discussion concerning Stewart’s appearance on *Crossfire* took place. This group met 11 days after the show aired, and Stewart’s appearance was a very prominent mainstream news item during that time. The group engaged in a discussion about the repercussions of Stewart stepping out of an “objective” anchor role and simultaneously jeopardizing his comedian persona:

Eva: I think there’s some issues with the way that Jon Stewart’s positioning himself outside the show right now. I think he’s in danger of coming off as really arrogant. Um . . . and I think that’s going to be really difficult for him to handle increasingly, now that the show’s getting more and more press about this stuff. He’s turning into a caricature, potentially, and I think that that’s a problem.

Ricardo: I really think that the CNN/*Crossfire* appearance really ties into all of this. What we were talking about was Jon Stewart running into the danger of becoming too serious, too arrogant, positioning himself as more of a commentator, less of a comedian. When I first saw that segment on *Crossfire* I was on his side, and I thought, “Good for you.” But then the more I thought about it and I looked at the segment again, because you can see it online, I really thought that he made a big mistake. And I really thought that he made a big mistake endorsing John Kerry.

Greg: Well I don’t know. As a political satirist you have to pick a side. You really can’t be really good at the satire for either side if you’re like, split down the middle all the time. Most decent political satirists are always like, either strong right or strong left, to be able to make fun of the other side. So, he is a moderate,

I mean in that sense, but you tell that does pull a lot of . . . like in the stories he chooses, in the guests that he has . . . I do see . . . that's one thing that always kind of bothered me about the show—that it always gave the appearance of being very moderate, very in the middle, very centered, but you gotta also think of the audience that is watching it—who are usually younger, comedic oriented—like, they're not like conservative people watching CNN every day.

Ricardo [later]: Lenny Bruce toward the end of his career got so obsessed with his legal fight that instead of coming to see a comedy act people would show up at the nightclub and he would sit and read transcripts from the court trials. And I really think, I mean, that's an extreme example, but I really think that's the danger in being a comedian, and a satirist and espousing—and trying to get too serious.

The only other focus group held after Stewart's *Crossfire* appearance took place on November 1st, and *Crossfire* did not emerge specifically as a topic of conversation. However, as Sarah's comment shows, concerns of Stewart taking himself too seriously and losing his appeal were not supported in this group:

He's [Stewart] sort of very humble, and he'll always say like "Oh, this is my little show" and he doesn't have an ego, and he doesn't feel like he's this huge thing, and he's very self-deprecating. I don't know, it's just—he always makes jokes about himself and I think that makes him more human than some other people you see on other television programs.

Respondents made a clear distinction between their perceived credibility regarding the "Headline" section of the show and the subsequent, "Other News," both hosted by Jon Stewart, and the field report feature segments. The feature segments are conducted by various correspondents on the show, such as Stephen Colbert, Mo Rocca, Samantha Bee, and Rob Cordry. The format of the first category for both the "Headlines" and "Other News" segments has Stewart sitting in-studio at an anchor desk presenting topical news items, followed by a joke, or interspersed with some sort of humorous element, such as a funny face. Oftentimes a video clip is also included in the presentation. In contrast, the feature segments are usually prefilmed interviews with random people from around the nation. The featured interviewees are occasionally well-

known figures, but more often they are ordinary citizens that have an unusual story to tell.

While most respondents said they did not have difficulty determining whether Stewart's "Headline" and "More News" formats were "real," virtually everyone said that they were often unsure about the credibility of the feature field reports. Viewers said that they did not have trouble discerning where the storyline ended and the punchline began in the "Headline" section of the show because the stories concerned real news events, and followed a standard "news item-punchline" format. Jose explained the structure of the show:

For the most part they have somebody speaking—have a clip—pause—then he just says something funny, then it goes back to the report. And then basically it just goes back and forth like that. You can tell what the report is, because it's actually videotape of them saying something.

Robert also commented that credibility increases when *TDS* uses real news footage:

I think the most effective stuff they do is when they use footage from real events, you know, so they lead into it by showing a press conference or testimony before a panel, or something like that, and skewer that, and that's when I think they're most effective, so you know it's real when they're doing that.

However, respondents noted that there might be a learning curve for newer viewers to appreciate the satirical format. As Kaya said, "You just have to learn how the show flows." In fact, some respondents shared that when they first began watching they had difficulty understanding what was going on until they "got the flow of the show." As Sarah said,

The sense of humor that they're using. The kind of humor—the cynicism, and the sarcasm and whatnot, like, I mean I'm sure when I first started watching it, I was a little reluctant and I wasn't sure if I could trust what I was hearing because he takes the news and puts in it in this comedic context, but after you watch it a couple of episodes, you're kind of like [you get it] . . . [she gets interrupted].

And Latisha reminisced in a diary entry about how she began watching the show:

I started watching the Jon Stewart show by accident. It was a little over a year ago, that I happened on it while browsing through the TV stations. I watched it and I remember laughing a lot but at the same time being a little bit confused. I couldn't figure out if the stories themselves were real or if they were making fun of real stories. I watched the show a little while after and it was only then I realized that most of the stories themselves were real and were just kind of being poked at. I only realized this after seeing a news report on the show that I had seen earlier on the news.

Latisha's comment highlights an important dimension of credibility that emerged in this construct: the viewer's level of news consumption. Respondents commented that for the "Headlines" and "Other News" segments viewers with a higher knowledge of current events would have an easier time determining what was real and what was fabricated. As Eva said, "Well I think they rely on people having a certain amount of knowledge. I mean the jokes depend on—it's not a very high level of knowledge, but a certain amount of knowledge of current events." And Fred stated, "I think if you keep up to date with the world at all you shouldn't have any trouble knowing what's real and what's fake on headlines." Peter also noted that a familiarity with current events helps the viewer to appreciate the humor in the show and said, "If you went to *The Daily Show* void of current events and what's going on in the world then the jokes and commentary would go right over your head. But if you know what's going on, then it's hard to find a funnier show on television."

Some respondents directly compared their own high level of news consumption against hypothetical less-informed viewers, saying that although they themselves did not have difficulty determining what legitimate, someone less informed about current events could get into trouble. As Aaron said,

No, I never find myself unsure, but like I said, I'm a news junkie. So I can always tell just from what I know of the stories beforehand what they're talking



about. Although I'd imagine it was someone's primary source of information that, I could see instances where they may be confused of where the joke begins and the news ends.

Similarly, Catherine said that her high level of news consumption ensures that she'll know about a story before she sees it spoofed on *TDS*:

[I'm never really unsure what's real] because usually I'm such a news freak that I'm on news sites all day, like everyday. So usually what they're talking about I know already that it's a joke. I mean, I don't think that the show is good for people that aren't at least a little bit in tune with what's going on in politics, because it would completely go over their heads and they probably would believe, you know, half the stuff that wasn't true.

In contrast to the matter-of-fact responses concerning the *TDS* "Headlines" segment, the "Features" segments elicited rampant uncertainty among the respondents, even from long time viewers and heavy news consumers. Many commented that the extreme nature of the field reports, the editing techniques, and the deadpan delivery of the correspondents often made it difficult to determine whether the pieces were legitimate or not. As Ed commented, "Their reports though, I have a hard time with, because some of those reports . . . when they actually go and interview people—I don't know if they're always real. Some of them are a little out there." Jerry expressed similar reservations about the believability of the material covered on the feature segments. "These stories are so off the wall that on one hand you can certainly believe it, but on the other hand, you're like 'whoa,' they could be completely making it up. I wish they were a little more obvious sometimes."

Editing techniques also made respondents question whether they could trust the feature reports. As Veronica said, "Sometimes they kind of cut-edit-paste it. You'll see the back of the guy's head talking, and then you'll see Mo Rocca interviewing him, but

he's really not saying it to him, he's saying it to someone else." Fred also voiced skepticism regarding the correspondent pieces:

I think some of those field reports are bogus though. Because you'll see the camera shot- you never see both people. It'll be like, the camera will be focused on him, and you'll be able to see my ear, and then it'll be focused there and you'll see his glasses and his hat, and then my face. I think some of them are totally bogus.

Jerry said that the issue is complicated further because a portion of the material may be legitimate, but not all of it:

A lot of times you can tell when it might be real comments from the guests, but their reactions are fictional. Like they dub them in later. Like you know they didn't say that to the guest sometimes.

In contrast to Stewart's more obvious techniques of presenting information, respondents commented that it was less clear sometimes when the correspondents were being truthful or not. As Jeff lamented,

Some of the correspondents are really deadpan, like really do the straight man bit. So . . . I don't know . . . I think people probably could confuse it . . . if they saw it out of context and just saw some of the straight faced correspondent bits about various news items they might reach the wrong conclusion about it and assume that it's really news, or [he searches here to explain, figure out what he means] assume that it's like...like straight up facts, and not an interpretation of them.

Respondents wondered whether people being interviewed for the field reports knew that they were being interviewed for a show on which they would be subsequently ridiculed. Following is an exchange from the focus group on October 26th regarding this issue:

Eva: I almost always know what's a joke, except when they're interviewing people and you see them do the shot with the head. And they're talking and I'm like—"Did they script this? Or you know, What are they thinking? Do they know it's a comedy show?" Sometimes the people react really well, sometimes they don't at all, and I keep thinking, "Wow- I don't know how they get people to do those interviews."

Rich: Yea, that's something I haven't figured out either. Sometimes you can tell people will smile, and you can tell, playing along. And other times they seem a little annoyed so I've often wondered that, unless you know . . .

Ricardo: I think most people know they're doing a segment for *The Daily Show*, on Comedy Central Because they came nearby to a local town that had officially outlawed Satan. It was Levy county, some little town in Levy county and they came and did a segment on that. And they actually got a councilman to go to the city limits, and shoo-away the Devil. They're in on the joke, I think.

Greg: Well a good example of what's coming up, would be my hometown, Inverness, is having the Cooter Festival, on the 30th, which I wish I could be back for, but unfortunately I won't be, yea, so they knew that *The Daily Show* was coming, they got a phone call, and they actually printed it in the paper, so they knew what's about to happen to them, so I'm kinda curious to watch that one, from what I know from what I've read in the paper beforehand—they know that they're coming, they know what the deal is with the show, and they understand why it's funny, and now they understand what things they're going to make fun of, so I'm kind of curious how take off them. Because at this point I know, that they know what the situation is going to be, as opposed to somebody who invented something stupid and they don't know that, and they just go and get interviewed and like yea, this helmet keeps me alive forever. And you know, you don't know if they know what type of show it is. It's a lot of situation. Because if you get interviewed by somebody—I mean there's a good idea, like an intelligent, knowledgeable person is going to know if it's going to be legitimate or if something goofy is happening, but in some cases, like how many people actually get interviewed? If you're sitting there and somebody comes up to you and somebody comes up to you and says, "Can I have an interview with you?" You're like, "Oh yea, yea, I'm going to be on TV—OK, sure." The first thing in their mind—legitimate. The thing is you've got a news camera there, you've got somebody with a microphone, they're going to interview you. But at the same time, if someone asks you a weird question are you really going to call them out on it? Because they're the ones with the camera, the one with the microphone, so you're either going to try to play along as straight as you can, and not question it, because the thing is, you don't want to blow your chance to be on TV, so that's kind of my thought too on that. That's what I think of when I watch those interview shows. Put yourself in their position. You don't know if it's legitimate, and you think it is.

Respondents also showed different levels of comfort regarding their uncertainty regarding whether the interview feature segments were real or staged. Some commented that they did not care if the feature segments were real or not, as long as they were entertaining. As Marion shared, "I like the fact that you don't know whether it's a

fictional interview or real interview. That just makes it even funnier to me.” When asked if he was ever unsure if something was real on the show Ricardo replied,

It doesn't matter to me. Because I view it as solely an entertainment show, not a source of news. And so, whether, and I'm thinking about the taped segments, which are heavily staged—they're sort of journalism, but I don't know if these people are in on the joke, or not, and I really don't care. If it's funny, then I enjoy it.

Others, like Francine, expressed discomfort over not being able to distinguish the intent of the piece:

That's my whole problem with it. Like, it's cool if it gets people to actually watch it, that's cool and everything, but I don't like watching things and not knowing if it's true or not. Like, I don't like second-guessing myself and wondering is that true or is it not? Like I like watching the news and knowing—this happened—I don't want to sit here and you change the information and wonder, well I don't know what happened.

Robert voiced concern that because the features are less credible than the headlines, some viewers may look at features and think the whole show is a joke:

One thing I don't like is that, sometimes I really don't know if they're joking around or not, especially like their fake news stories, the correspondent pieces, and I'm really like, “OK is this serious?” Like they had one about this guy who voted and they put a sticker on his jacket—an “I voted” sticker and then he was upset and trying to get them to pay for it, and I was like did that happen, or are they making that up and it's supposed to be funny, and I mean it was funny, but I could see that happening, so sometimes I'm like, “are they making that stuff up?” The thing I worry about that is, because I'm thinking that can't be for real, this is just a sketch, like Saturday Night Live, or whatever, but then I worry that other people will see that and say, oh well other things they say are sketches too. They did as great a job on the G8 summit as I saw in any of the other limited news stuff that I did. And part of it was they had, I think, Rob Cordry live from Brunswick, and you know they do the live things outside these video shots, and then they're like, “Hold on Jon they're asking us to move back a little.” And then they do it in front of the arch in St. Louis, you know, to poke fun at the fact that they had basically, not let anyone within miles of the G8 summit. And I worry that someone else will see that and say, “Oh well that I voted sticker story was a joke, so they can't be serious about this G8 stuff,” when it really was. They were exaggerating it obviously, but the point was very serious. So I sort of worry about that in some broad sense.

Leslie expressed similar reservations:

I don't know if that phrase, actually saying the fake news show. It kind of detracts from it. Because there is some real news there. That's what they're basing it on. But I don't know. I feel like the word fake is so strong, you can't listen to anything that they're saying and I don't know. I think it's almost discrediting themselves to some extent, but I guess they have to stay out of trouble with those politicians that are out there on the edge. They can throw certain things out to be comedic, and if you don't straight up say to people, by referring to part of a story being fake I guess you have to refer to the whole thing as being fake. Does that, like if one thing is not correct about a story, if one bit of information is - do you just have to discredit it all as being fake? I mean I can see maybe that's why they would say I, but I think it's easy to see that it's based on real news stories.

Chapter 5 presents a review of the data, implications for future research and the study limitations and conclusions.

## CHAPTER 5 DISCUSSION

The overarching aim of this study was to learn more about the meanings *TDS* viewers attach to the program. Specifically, the investigator was interested in discovering if the show is perceived as a more of a news or entertainment program, if the material presented on the show is considered credible, and whether viewers identified with a larger symbolic community. In addition, it is hoped that this investigation will contribute to the growing body of research concerning the relationships between humor, information gain and source credibility. This final chapter discusses the data results from Chapter 4, and then addresses the theoretical implications for both academics and programmers. Limitations, avenues for future research, and conclusions are then presented.

### **Discussion of Results**

In determining how viewers evaluate *TDS*, it is imperative to incorporate how television audiences perceive the current state of the media industry as a whole. As referenced throughout the paper, the news and media industries are undergoing a transformation. The lines between traditional news and entertainment programming are becoming less clear and this evolution is crucial to this discussion. In addition to the changes happening within the traditional news network structure, alternative sources of commentary, such as web-blogs, are continually emerging, and are more readily accessible than ever before. Furthermore, trends such as reality programming are

increasingly blurring the line between what audiences perceive as real and fake in the televised medium. As Rich noted, “I mean look at TV—you used to have to write a script, and hire people who could act. Not anymore.” While his comment does not directly relate to the news genre, it highlights the overall transformation that television programming as a whole is undergoing, and seems to be contributing to people’s perceptions of the concepts of reality and credibility. Comedy and humor are traditionally more associated with play than with information gathering, and this analysis is further compounded by the fact that the show’s principals abdicate responsibility for their coverage by contending that *TDS* is “fake news.” It appears that audiences are wrestling with these multiple dichotomies and this sense of ambiguity is crucial to understanding how *TDS* fits into their schema.

### **Myth of Objectivity**

The news media has historically portrayed itself as an “objective” source for information. While this meme may not be completely internalized by all audiences, most Americans have been socialized to expect a certain level of objectivity in their news reports. However, as the data indicate, respondents perceive the news media to be biased in their representations: this includes traditional network reports, as well as *TDS* coverage. They express beliefs that increased concentration and an increasingly polarized political climate have affected their ability to trust news reports. While none of the participants proposed that the news media were objective per se, an interesting issue did arise from this query: the discussion as to whether aiming for objectivity was a proper or realistic goal for news organizations. Within this theme the concept of “editorializing” emerged over and over again, and respondents generally seemed to agree that news shows do take an opinion, and that is not necessarily intrinsically negative. Their issues

have less to do with the idea that news shows are sympathetic to a particular agenda, rather, they resent that the outlets try to maintain the veneer of objectivity.

Respondents also stated that individuals selectively seek out programs that align with their points of view: those they identify with.

### ***TDS* and Identification**

With which elements of *TDS* does its audience identify? Predominately viewers watch and enjoy the show because they find it entertaining. They appreciate the nature of the humor expressed on *TDS*. As discussed in the literature review social identification theory proposes that humor reinforces membership in a group through an inclusionary process of shared meaning. For *TDS* viewers, the common characteristic that appears to unite them is their collective frustration with the traditional news media. Respondents repeatedly voiced concern over the news media's failure to provide analytical coverage of issues and the success with which *TDS* satirizes this phenomenon. As Chris said:

I think that they're [*TDS*] an example of the slogan "dissent is patriotic" because especially in the last couple of years too many people are like don't say anything bad, don't criticize the President, don't criticize anybody in power, because we need to be united. Too many people I think mistake being united for being quiet and submissive, and so *The Daily Show*, they're there to make you stop. And even if it's just that they make you stop because they told a joke and you're laughing—they made you stop and think about it, if only for a few seconds.

Chapter 2 reviewed the research on Generation X regarding both their distrust of establishments and their marginalization within mainstream media. *The Daily Show*, and its host and correspondents, reflect a reality with which its viewers can identify. The *TDS* audience seems to identify with the cynicism attributed to Generation X: that is, cynicism of the media, of big business, and of politics. The program capitalizes on its audience's belief in the "myth of objectivity" that currently exists in the news industry. In addition, it courts the Generation X viewer through its use of in-group humor. The



satire on *TDS* directly challenges the guise of objectivity within the existing system and lampoons the industry that has marginalized them and about which they have been socialized to be skeptical. Whereas the majority of news outlets are promoting themselves as fair and balanced, and claiming that viewers can trust their reporting because they have “no-spin news,” *TDS* is saying trust no one—not even us. The program acknowledges and exposes the inherent bias in newsgathering and reporting: a bias of which its audience is aware.

Goffman (1959) popularized the notion of collective representation, and maintained that for most people, positive self-image is an important goal. Belonging to a group provides status and acceptance within a community (Leary, 1996). This notion has particular relevance for the Generation X demographic, particularly within the political realm. For a generation that has been marginalized and talked down to politically, Generation X viewers may experience a sense of validation in *TDS*'s coverage: both in the manner that the show reports news, and accolades the show has received in the mainstream press. Respondent data for this study show that most viewers identify with Jon Stewart, and in many cases said that Stewart, and his sense of humor, were similar to their friends. As Latisha wrote in her diary about the show, “I have to make the comparison to my friends, because when we get around each other this is how it goes. I can't help but think this must be why I watch, because he [Jon Stewart] shares the same sense of humor.” This identification also appears to extend to a larger symbolic community of perceived others. As Robert said, “Just about every time I watch it [*TDS* ] I'm like, it's funny and also I think it's like—it makes me feel like, OK, I'm not crazy for thinking that way . . . it's like, wow, there are lots of people who feel this way.” Respondents categorized the *TDS* demographic as similar to themselves: educated, and

intelligent and open-minded. Ten respondents specifically expressed Paul's view that, "I think their target audience is at least partially educated, if not some college, than having a degree, because a lot of the jokes are sophisticated. If they [*TDS*] make fun of Dennis Kucinich for example, you need to know who he is before you can get the joke." Or, as Kaya put it,

I think you have to be an intellectual to enjoy the show. Not necessarily the highest this or that GPA, but I just think you have to be open-minded to enjoy the show, and you have to be able to know what's going on, and you're well-educated, and in order to sit there and watch a show that makes fun of politics you have to have some interest in politics, and that's usually why you're more up to date and stuff like that.

For *TDS* viewers, Stewart seems to represent Goffman's ideal generalized other: the class clown who is smarter than the teacher, and in the end, comes out on top. It would seem that a humor superiority effect is in effect here. *The Daily Show* and Stewart call the mainstream networks to task. As Ted commented, "they [*TDS*] say the stuff that we think and we can't say. You know, you watch something and you're like, that was stupid. They [*TDS*] actually say it. That's why I like it." Watching *TDS* seems to provide viewers with a vicarious sense of empowerment. They are able to observe what they perceive as justice being executed (ie: the media is evaluated) without any personal risk.

Platt (1996) found that Xers desire an emotional connection with their media. It appears that *TDS* provides this on a number of levels. The show lampoons the system that marginalized them and that they have been socialized to be skeptical about. Viewers identify with the show's message, which predominantly is the mainstream media is failing in their duty to objectively inform the public about important policy issues. *The Daily Show* says yes, the current situation is bad, but let's at least talk about it, and laugh

about it, and then see what we can do. *The Daily Show* is the holy grail for a generation that wants to be entertained while they get information. It is a cost-effective method of acquiring political information, which is also in line with research on Gen X media habits (ASNE, 1997).

### ***TDS*—Entertainment or News?**

The data clearly showed two groups of *TDS* viewers: those who consider the show as strictly an entertainment program and those who consider it as a new genre of news program. Overall, nine respondents said that they considered the program strictly within an entertainment realm: Veronica, Ed, Paul, Suzanne, Rich, Ricardo, Chris, Ted and Peter. Despite the clear categories that emerged in the data, the reasons behind the distinction were less obvious. Media use was not determined to be a significant factor in this evaluation. Both groups contained respondents who were heavy news consumers as well as light news consumers. However, the majority of respondents reported fairly to extremely high overall levels of news consumption and 13 respondents specifically referred to themselves as news junkies. In fact only one respondent said that she did not actively consume news at all. Her comment is particularly relevant because she also said that the reason she watches *TDS* was that her husband watches it, and she always watches it with him, never alone; thus, she may experience a reduced level of identification with the show. Elsie, Laura, Olga, Jeff and Veronica also commented that they were not heavy news consumers. Jeff stated that other than watching *TDS*, his only other source of news gathering was Yahoo news online, although he also later commented that he does try to keep up to date on current events, so his self-reported data was ambiguous on this issue. Veronica said that she had only recently begun to start turning on television news for 15 to 20 minutes a day, “to get a feel of what is going on.” And Veronica and

several others (Sarah, Kaya, Elsie, and Chris) directly credited the show with getting them more interested in keeping up to date with current events.

Although some respondents said that a viewer needed to be knowledgeable about current events in order to appreciate the humor on *TDS*, others discounted this, saying that the entertainment aspect of the show would appeal to viewers regardless of their level of political knowledge. The following exchange from the July 26<sup>th</sup> focus group expressed this position well:

Jose: They still have the mass appeal because they do have celebrities going in there and they do have celebrity news and all this other stuff.

Ed: Their fake news stories about hair braiding or someone with a large porn collection or something. You don't have to be greatly educated for that.

Jose: Exactly. There are several levels you can watch it on—political, entertainment, and just flat out silly stories.

Although neither the questionnaire nor the survey asked about political affiliation or ideology, many respondents did mention that they were either liberal or conservative. Three respondents specifically stated that they were conservatives (Aaron, Ed, and Jose) and 15 others (Robert, Jeff, Ricardo, Rich, Bert, Eva, Greg, Don, Leanne, Veronica, Julie, Daniel, Marion, Harry, and Chris) expressed that they were left-leaning. And again, like media use, this dimension did not seem to be a predictor of how an individual categorized the show. From this data analysis, no clear factors could be determined as to why a *TDS* viewer would differentiate the program as entertainment or a new genre of news programming.

### **Credibility**

The data showed three overall categories for how respondents judged credibility in regards to *TDS*: respectability, which includes an increased level of status conferred by

the mainstream media, as well as a higher caliber of political guests appearing on the show; bias perception; and program format, which encompassed the construct of source credibility as well as the distinction between the show's headline and feature segments.

As mentioned earlier, *TDS*, and Jon Stewart in particular, became high profile topics of discussion in the mainstream media over the course of the data gathering. Following a highly controversial appearance on CNN's *Crossfire* on October 15, 2004, Jon Stewart and *TDS* generated an enormous amount of publicity. Among multiple other media coverage, during the month of October 2004, Stewart appeared on the cover of TV Guide, on the cover of *Rolling Stone Magazine* and was also featured on *60 Minutes*. In addition, in September 2004, *America (The Book): A Citizen's Guide to Democracy Inaction* (Stewart et al., 2004) was released, and quickly became a best seller. *America (The Book)* was a collaborative effort by *TDS* producers, writers, and correspondents, and Jon Stewart appeared as a guest on numerous shows to promote *America* and attracted a high level of media attention for his involvement in the project throughout the Fall of 2004. Overwhelmingly, the nature of the coverage was highly favorable and characterized the show, and Stewart, as the title of the *Rolling Stone* article put it, "The Most Trusted Name in News" (Colapinto, 2004).

In addition, a significant amount of media attention was directed at Generation X for the 2004 presidential election. Therefore, in line with Conover's findings (1984) salience should have been activated and heightened for this group. This did seem to be the case. Respondents commented on the media attention the show was receiving, and appeared to be devoting thought to how the program should be evaluated. However, while the press was highly favorable toward the show, *TDS* itself worked hard to undermine its own credibility. In interviews Stewart repeatedly claimed, "We're a

comedy show” (Colapinto, 2004, p. 60). By characterizing themselves as an entertainment program and couching their critiques in humor, the *TDS* principals achieved some success in avoiding the criticism directed at overt news programs. Respondents seem to find this strategy acceptable and even necessary in the current political environment. As Bert explained,

I think because they say this is a fake news show, they can still present facts that aren't being presented by the national media, but still do it under the umbrella of the corporation that owns all of these other media outlets and get away with it. And do it by saying—hey we're the fake news. That's the safety net to be able to have free speech—to have a voice.

However, although they did not voice it per se, the laissez-faire attitude presented by *TDS* might be a significant factor for respondents who characterized the program as strictly entertainment.

In addition, while most respondents perceived mainstream news to promote a conservative bias (Ed and Jose voiced the opposite view), there was significantly less consensus regarding the issue of bias on *TDS*. Four categories emerged concerning perceived bias on *TDS*: *TDS* is biased to the left, *TDS* is biased to the incumbent administration, *TDS* has a bias of humor, and identification influences bias.

Like the issue of why one viewer perceives the show as entertainment, and another as a new genre of news programming, no clear factors were evident in determining how a viewer would perceive bias in the show. Partisanship, a common indicator of perceived bias for news consumers, was not a decisive factor. Although respondents who identified themselves as conservative did tend to view the program as having a liberal-bias, some liberals also considered the show to be skewed in that direction. Although it was evident that a liberal bias was considered to be the main bias of the program, 21 respondents specifically stated that the show favors a leftist

perspective, oftentimes the categories were not exclusive. A respondent might perceive the show as having a liberal bias, as well as an editing bias, or might perceive the show to have a liberal bias, but also be an equal opportunity offender, thus supporting a bias of humor.

However, an interesting pattern did emerge regarding respondent's perceptions of Stewart's objectivity in the wake of publicly announcing his support for then presidential nominee John Kerry. Attribution theory says that two factors will influence a recipient's perception of objectivity: knowledge bias and reporting bias. The data indicate that after Stewart endorsed Kerry, respondents' perceptions of Stewart's objectivity were significantly impacted and confirmed knowledge bias expectancies. This reduced message validity manifested itself in respondents voicing concern over whether the show would be able to maintain its comic edge if Kerry were to win the 2004 Presidential election, thereby increasing some respondents' perceptions of potential liberal bias. This issue was specifically raised in the focus groups from August 11th and November 1st, and the issue of the incumbent as a target was raised to a more general degree, in the other two focus groups. Two interview subjects, Robert and Catherine, also questioned how the show would be affected if Kerry won the election. Robert, Chris, and Daniel each said that they feared that the program would suffer if Kerry were to win the election. However, the reasons they gave reflected more of a belief that Stewart would have less material to work with, primarily because the nation would be less polarized if Bush was not in office. Catherine, Sarah, Kaya and Marion dismissed this viewpoint and said that there would always be sufficient material to satirize, and that Stewart would not fumble the opportunity he had been given in the wake of the show's increased exposure.

And while respondents were impressed with the caliber of political guests on *TDS*, it was evident that some respondents perceived bias (knowledge bias and potentially reporting bias as well) in Stewart's handling of guests who he disagreed with ideologically. Six respondents (Ricardo, Ed, Paul, Jose, Harry, and Daniel) shared that at times they felt Stewart was biased toward guests, such as Ed Koch and Republican National Chair Ed Gillespie, and claimed that he offered liberals, such as Michael Moore, a more open platform.

Hovland and Weiss (1951-1952) cited two primary dimensions of source credibility: perceived trustworthiness (operationalized as objectivity) and perceived expertise. Markham (1968) later expanded this construct to specifically address newscaster credibility and included dimensions of message factor validity, a showmanship/entertainment factor and trustworthiness. Respondents were cognizant of Stewart's role as both a stand-up comedian and an actor. Some respondents perceived Stewart as embodying more of a credible persona, in that he was not playing a role; rather he was just being himself. Twelve respondents voiced this perspective (Paul, Jeff, Daniel, Bob, Jerry, Marion, Catherine, Eva, Elsie, Leslie, Robert, and Sarah). Others (Veronica, Ricardo, and Chris) said they perceived Stewart as more of an actor, playing the role of anchorman. Although all respondents considered Stewart to be a knowledgeable source, they seemed to wrestle with his ambiguous role as newscaster, an issue further complicated by the inconsistent nature of the show format. Marc (1997) contrasted the role between stand-up comedian and dramatic comedy and said that stand-up comedy challenges the status quo more directly because it minimizes the lines between fantasy and reality. Stewart's appearances on other programs, where he shared



his personal belief system, seem to contribute to respondents' inability to categorize Stewart's role neatly and thus fuels their difficulty in evaluating his source credibility.

All respondents in the study made a clear distinction between perceived credibility of headline news and feature segments. They cited numerous rationales for determining validity within the "Headlines" and "Other News" sections, including the use of real news footage, familiarity with the show format, and prior familiarity with topics. In contrast, for the feature segments, respondents cited unfamiliarity with topics, the extreme nature of topics covered and questionable editing techniques as the primary reasons for questioning credibility in this section of the show.

This dimension created a particularly interesting line of investigation in the data—respondents debated whether credibility has to be absolute. That is, if one portion of a report, or a show, is questionable, does that negate other portions that are true? While a definitive answer did not emerge from the data, it presents a constructive opportunity for additional investigation.

Volgy and Schwarz (1980) found television entertainment programming to be a powerful agent of socialization because of less critical viewer evaluation and less audience exposure to the issues it presents. However, to some degree the data seem to refute these hypotheses. Overall, *TDS* viewers appear to be moderately- to well-informed about the news issues covered in the headline sections. Despite the fact that humor is incorporated, they find the headline information credible; in fact, respondents who consider the show to be a new genre of news programming state that they find the information presented in the Headline and Other News segments as more credible than traditional news programs. However, because they have no context for evaluating the validity of the feature stories, respondents were highly critical of the material presented

in this section of the show. Again, it is important to remember that the coverage presented on *TDS* was a prominent topic of commentary in the mainstream media at this time. In addition, within the show itself, ambiguous messages about the show's own validity were being conveyed to the audience. As such, the inconsistent messages surrounding the material presented in the show appear to have activated a heightened sense of content evaluation for respondents.

### **Theoretical Implications and Avenues for Future Research**

Earlier research examining the interaction between humor and information gain has been inconclusive (Gruner 1965, 1967; Markiewicz, 1972a, 1972b, 1973, 1974). However, these quantitative studies did not test the relationship using a source with whom the audience had developed a relationship over time. The data from respondents in this study seem to indicate that viewers identify with Stewart and that this identification increases over time. This phenomena activates the inclusionary aspect of humor: audience members learn to distinguish what is a joke and what is not. Thus, examining individuals' retention levels in cooperation with their level of source identification may be a much more effective method of measuring inculcation than simply executing a standard joke—information gain measurement.

A persistent query of research in humor theory is whether satire supports or subverts the existing power system. For example, critics of *SNL* charge that the show supported rather than subverted due to the superficial nature of its humor. However, the majority of respondents stated that they felt that the satire on *TDS* is more analytical in nature than that of *SNL*. Certainly, this is fertile ground for future study, and *TDS* provides an interesting and challenging example for examination of this construct.

Festinger's (as cited in Infante, Rancer, & Womack, 1997) cognitive dissonance theory proposes that individuals yearn to organize their experiences consistently. *The Daily Show* viewers are educated individuals. They know that they should be informed citizens; however, they are cynical of a political system that marginalizes them, as well as a media industry that they perceive as prioritizing corporate financial gain over public interest. Cognitive dissonance theory also advocates selective exposure, "seeking information which supports your opinion but avoiding information which is unfavorable toward your opinion" (Infante et al., 1997, p. 162). A level of identification is intrinsic here, and support for selective exposure seems to be a viable effect. *The Daily Show* voices the beliefs of its viewers by saying, "You are being cheated—the big money companies that got the valuable spectrum and created media monopolies that are not holding up their end of the bargain of objectively informing you." With *TDS*, viewers acknowledge that they are getting information; however, they are simultaneously being told by the show's principals that the show is "fake" news. Examining information gathering from entertainment media within a dissonance framework might be a productive method to better understand the some of the relationships explored within this paper.

Because of the ambiguous role *TDS* plays in the media, the show's principals are able to get away with more than a traditional new program. But will the audience eventually tire of them having it both ways? Some respondents voiced frustration with the dual role Stewart plays on the show, as both news anchor and comedian/talk show host, and concern over his ability to maintain his persona under the increased media scrutiny generated by the show's success. As Eva worried, there is already some evidence of a backlash against Stewart in this context. On November 2, 2004, *USA*

*Today* ran a feature story titled, “Look out Jon Stewart: Now that you’ve become a media darling, you just might lose your countercultural credibility.” More recently, *The Providence Phoenix* featured an article, “Jon Stewart: Too smart for his own good,” and charged that despite the program’s biting satire, “seriousness, pomposity, overexposure—these are three of the deadly sins that might bring down Stewart and *The Daily Show*” (Kennedy, 2005, p. 12).

As such, another interesting avenue for investigation would be to conduct a longitudinal study measuring Stewart’s source credibility. As there is already speculation about Stewart’s role in the 2008 Presidential election, this research might be especially informative if conducted prior to and after the political campaign season begins and ends. Political and media analysts both have investments in learning whether viewers continue to watch the show, and how they continue to evaluate its content. In addition, it would be interesting to understand what attracts new viewers to the show and how their levels of identification and credibility compare to viewers who have watched the show for a longer period of time.

In addition, considering the intense discussion the issue of ideological bias generated, it also may have been interesting to include this dimension in the survey questionnaire in order to examine how political affiliation might impact *TDS* viewing and identification, and credibility constructs. Future investigations should examine the relationship between political affiliation, ideology, and these dimensions. It would also be interesting to include an older cohort of *TDS* viewers in these studies for comparison to the Generation X demographic.

Finally, another interesting pattern in the data emerged in relation to respondents’ reactions to how subjects were treated in the feature segments. Differentiation humor

theory predicts that people will enjoy humor directed at reference groups with which they have negative associations. However, the data showed that some respondents experienced discomfort when targets did not know they were in on the joke and felt like the correspondents had an unfair advantage over the interviewee and made them look ridiculous. These findings contradict superiority theory and do not seem to be covered under Lafave's (1972) conclusions regarding identification with similar groups. One explanation may be that because viewers want to be perceived as "good people" they do not want to enjoy mean-directed humor, albeit vicariously. It may be instructive to direct future research toward understanding how audience members respond to different types of humor on the show in order to better help construct a more thorough profile of *TDS* audience member identification.

### **Implications for Programming Practitioners**

Economic viability is a good indicator of a genre's influence on future programs. The success of *TDS* suggests that the program is poised for the highest degree of flattery: imitation. Generation X is a desirable demographic, and therefore producers would be well served to understand what elements of the show are effective in courting this market segment, and why.

As referenced in the literature review, Rouner et al. (1999) proposed that journalists should function in more interpretive roles, rather than attempting to maintain objective fronts. Rouner et al. also say that journalists may need to take a more educational approach to news delivery in an age of increasing issue complexity. The data suggest that part of the success of *TDS* is a result of its ability to connect with its audience through humor. However, the data show that this is a precarious relationship. While there is potential for cultivating this approach in other programs, producers need to

take care not to alienate the audience they are courting. In addition, respondents clearly stated that they appreciated the analytical nature of the show. There is an enormous amount of potential for a new genre of programming that can effectively educate audiences about current affairs and political issues. However, research needs to better understand how audiences are determining information credibility, and what variables influence and whether an individual uses this type of programming for entertainment or news gathering. Effective theoretical modeling can inform producers not only about Generation X habits, but ideally, lend insight into other demographic viewerships as well.

Unlike some of *TDS* predecessors (*The Week That Was*, *The Smothers Brothers*) that were more constrained by broadcast regulations of the time, *TDS* enjoys a less restrictive media environment. Multiple distribution networks have eliminated the need for broadcasters to appeal to the mass national audiences of decades past. On cable, *TDS* enjoys a forum on which they can provide more alternative, edgy programming that can target a more specific audience. And the producers can afford to engage in exclusionary humor. Respondents commented that *TDS* is an innovative, unique program, and that is part of its appeal. It is pushing the existing industry envelope and attracting media attention and an audience. The television industry has a tendency to replicate programs. One lesson from the success of *TDS* should be that experimentation, especially during this time of transition, may be worth the gamble.

Toward this end, one avenue producers might consider pursuing is a newsroom reality show. Audiences could witness the process of how a story goes from concept to execution, and the hurdles encountered in bringing a story to the public. In addition to the educational potential such a program would offer, the popularity of the current reality genre and dramatic programming that utilizes real-world issues and political realms, like

*The West Wing*, make it an attractive commodity. A reality news show might be the next logical step in this genre trend, although certainly some of the elements that would lend drama to such a program, such as gatekeeping and agenda-setting issues would also make it a difficult program for networks to produce.

In addition, it would be interesting to try to produce a television show with a similar format to *TDS* that truly is a daily show. Currently, *TDS* produces four shows per week, Monday through Thursday. With a few exceptions for special event coverage, such as the presidential election, the show is taped in advance. Occasionally, the show also broadcasts reruns, sometimes for an entire week. This practice severely limits the ability of the program to provide the real-time commentary that is necessary in a 24-hour news cycle industry. However, perhaps the reduced burden is also one of its strengths. The more relaxed schedule may provide the producers with the flexibility to compile information and construct more in-depth analysis that the 24-hour cycle shows cannot afford.

### **Methodological Implications**

Qualitative methodology was an excellent choice for this avenue of investigation. Allowing respondents to speak about their experiences and opinions and beliefs in an open-ended forum provided a more thorough landscape for data analysis. Certainly in this investigation a more strict quantitative methodology would have omitted significant issues that arose, in particular, the issue of bias in media and in *TDS*.

As McCracken (1988) stated, the purpose of qualitative research is “to gain access to the cultural categories and assumptions according to which one culture construes the world (p. 17).” This study benefitted from using qualitative, inductive approach, and

insight was gained into areas of research that have formerly been limited by strict quantitative analysis.

### **Limitations**

The researcher self-funded the project, and therefore, the data collection was extended over a period of time for financial reasons. Also, as noted previously, one diary participant did not complete and return a diary, so the final number of diarists was three, instead of the four intended. And one participant in the first focus group did not complete a survey because she left right after the discussion. As such, only her gender and ethnicity were included in the final survey data because they were the only known variables.

In addition, several hurricanes hit the Florida region during September and October of 2004, so several attempts at coordinating participants for interview and focus groups were postponed. However, overall, respondents were very motivated to discuss *TDS* and excited to participate in the study. Another relevant issue was the explosion of media coverage about Stewart and *The Daily Show* during the course of the data gathering period. Respondents' perceptions may have been influenced by the reports, and the durability of these attitudes cannot be evaluated from this study data. This phenomenon may also have been exacerbated by the fact that data were collected during a prepresidential election period that heavily targeted the Generation X demographic, thus skewing respondents' salience levels.

Finally, this study was an initial exploratory study of the perceptions of *TDS* viewers. Considering the substantial references made to bias and ideology, it would have been constructive to include these dimensions in the questionnaire and data gathering to see if and how they impacted viewers' perceptions of the show.



## Conclusions

Prior audience research has determined that one of the most important factors of media impact is an individual's own socialization schemas (McCroskey & Jenson, 1975). The attitudes, beliefs and perceptions that an individual brings to a particular communication experience will greatly influence his or her perception of the message. For Generation X it is has also been suggested that *how* the electronic media communicate and emotionally engage people is a more important element of successful message transmission than *what* they communicate (ASNE, 1997).

The use of humor requires an element of shared perspective. The humorous communication relies on the receiver to solve the puzzle that the sender has constructed (Mulkay, 1988). This exchange requires common symbolic referents, as well as similar perspectives for a successful negotiation to occur. In addition, recent research shows that audiences desire to see themselves reflected more directly in mass media discourse and suggest that journalists work to cultivate mediated identities with which individual's can identify (Rouner et al., 1999).

It is apparent that the producers of *TDS* are adept at using humor to target their audience. In large part, they capitalize on the cynicism their viewers have toward the media, big business and politics. By doing so, *TDS* is successful in its use of differentiation humor. Viewers perceive themselves as members of a community, and distinguish between their attitudes and perceived others. But while this technique is effective in attracting viewers, it also may be the program's Achilles heel. The fact that viewers symbolically identify with the message of *TDS* also may help to explain the reluctance of some respondents to confer status and credibility to the program: it may reflect an underlining lack of faith in their own political efficacy. Research shows that

group identification, formally or informally, is a powerful influence over perception and “can act as a guidepost in dealing with policy questions” (Lazerfeld et al., 1948).

However, because *TDS* abdicates responsibility in terms of framing itself as a news show, it may significantly reduce its ability to influence viewers about the issues it raises concerns about. This message may reinforce the images that the Gen X audience already holds about themselves: that they cannot overcome the powerful capitalist forces that control the airwaves. This phenomenon echoes the historical legitimization issues satire has faced.

As Robinson alleged back in 1976, “television journalism may be . . . the missing link in our understanding of contemporary political change” (pp. 425-426). This prediction may be more appropriate now than ever. As Jose said, *TDS* is “definitely a response to the times.” Despite how people categorize *TDS*, like the Lear comedies of the 1970s, the forum provides a platform for commentary on the current state of affairs for a more sophisticated audience that wants their information to be entertaining, relevant, and poignant. By employing a “bait and switch” technique, *TDS* seems to lure viewers with entertainment and provide an element of current event information.

Since its creation, *TDS* has steadily grown its ratings and recently has enjoyed an enormous amount of critical and public acclaim. Successful television programs spawn imitators. As such, it is important to learn how audiences perceive the show and what types of influences it wields. If research finds that the format of *TDS* is an effective way to target particular segments of the population and politically engage them, new ways of educating viewers may emerge. Information overload is a common complaint of the modern citizen and convergence, and deregulation and technology are transforming the media industry. Understanding the relationships between emerging media and modern

audiences, and determining new and effective ways to engage individual's in this multi-media environment are important responsibilities of the mass communication researcher.

APPENDIX A  
SURVEY

Gender: \_\_\_\_\_ Male \_\_\_\_\_ Female

Age \_\_\_\_\_

Ethnicity:            White  
                          Black  
                          Hispanic  
                          Asian  
                          Indian  
                          Other

Occupation: Undergraduate Student: \_\_\_\_\_ (field)  
                 Graduate Student: \_\_\_\_\_ (field)  
                 Professional: \_\_\_\_\_ (field)  
                 Service Industry  
                 Military  
                 Unemployed  
                 Other

How often do you watch *The Daily Show*? Please use the following scale below.

1	2	3	4	5
almost never		regularly		frequently
less than once a month		at least once a week		several times a week

How long have you been watching *The Daily Show*?

Less than 6 months  
6-12 months  
1-2 years  
More than 2 years

Would you say that you watch *The Daily Show*:  
for news  
for entertainment  
for both news and entertainment

APPENDIX B  
QUESTION GUIDE FOR FOCUS GROUPS AND INTERVIEWS

1. Tell me about the Daily Show. How would you describe the show to someone who had never seen it?
2. Why do you watch the show?
3. Tell me what you like/dislike about the show.
4. How do you know what's real news, and what is a joke? Are you ever unsure if something is real?
5. Do you think that a new viewer or some viewers might have difficulty discerning what is real and what is not on the show sometimes?  
Prompt -> Why? Who?
6. Tell me about Jon Stewart and the other correspondents on the show.  
Prompt->Do you think that you could be friends with the correspondents/host?
7. Describe your impression of the average TDS viewer to me.  
Prompt -> What/who do you think the target audience (demographic) of TDS is?
8. Do you know other people who watch the show? Tell me about them
9. Do you ever not understand the references made on the show? If yes, approximately how often? How does that make you feel?
10. Are you ever offended by jokes made on the show?  
Prompt -> Can you think of an example.  
Prompt -> How does it make you feel?
11. Do you think that some people who watch are offended by some of the comments?  
Prompt – Who, why
12. Do you make a particular effort to watch TDS? (please elaborate)  
Prompt -> The Daily Show is broadcast several times a day, do you usually watch it at a usual time?
13. Tell me about how you usually view the program, for example, alone, with other people?

14. Do you ever discuss the show with other people? Who? What do you discuss?
15. Do you prefer entertainment or more political news oriented guests?  
Why?
16. Tell me about any related activities you engage in regarding the show.  
Prompt - listserv, website, etc.
17. Have you ever accessed information about the show online (elaborate) – is that common/uncommon for you?  
Prompt: Do you generally go online for television programs? For news? for entertainment?
18. Where do you think TDS fit in today's political environment? In today's media environment?  
Prompt: Do you think that the news industry is changing overall? How so? Do you think that it should?
19. Are there any other comments you would like to make regarding the Daily Show or related to this discussion?

APPENDIX C  
INTERVIEW AND FOCUS GROUP DATA

Table C-1. Interview data

Name Date of Interview	Age	Gender	Ethnicity	Occupation	Watches TDS 1 (infreq)–5 (freq)	How long watched TDS?	Watch TDS for News/ Entertainment/ Both
Aaron 5/27/04	31	M	White	Profes	5	More than 2 years	Both
Jeff 6/7/04	23	M	White	Student	4	More than 2 years	Both
Robert 7/8/04	31	M	White	Other	5	1-2 years	Both
Tade 7/20/04	22	M	White	Student	3	More than 2 years	Both
Don 7/20/04	20	M	White	Student	4	More than 2 years	Both
Leslie 9/19/04	21	F	White	Student	4	1-2 years	Both
Elsie 9/27/04	20	F	White	Student	5	More than 2 years	Both
Catherine 10/12/04	26	F	white	Grad stud	4	More than 2 years	Both



Table C-2. Focus group #1, July 26, 2004

Name	Age	Gender	Ethnicity	Occupation	Watches TDS 1 (infreq)–5 (freq)	How long watched TDS?	Watch TDS for News/ Entertainment/ Both
Leanne	24	F	White	Student	4	More than 2 years	Both
Veronica	21	F	White	Student	3	More than 2 years	Entertainment
Jose	22	M	Hispanic	Student	4	1-2 years	Both
Ed	24	M	White	Grad stud	3	More than 2 years	Entertainment
Paul	25	M	White	Grad stud	3	More than 2 years	Entertainment
Olga (no survey data)		F	Other				

Table C-3. Focus group #2, August 11, 2004

Name	Age	Gender	Ethnicity	Occupation	Watches TDS 1 (infreq)–5 (freq)	How long watched TDS?	Watch TDS for News/ Entertainment/Both
Suzanne	25	F	White	Professional	3	6-12 months	Entertainment
Julie	25	F	Hispanic	Grad stud	5	More than 2 years	Both
Jerry	26	F	White	Grad stud	4	More than 2 years	Both
Bob	30	M	White	Professional	3	More than 2 years	Both
Harry	33	M	White	Other	5	1-2 years	Both
Marion	33	M	White	Professional	5	More than 2 years	Entertainment
Daniel	20	M	Other	Student	5	1-2 years	Both

Table C-4. Focus Group #3, October 26, 2004

Name	Age	Gender	Ethnicity	Occupation	Watches TDS 1 (infreq)– 5 (freq)	How long watched TDS?	Watch TDS for News/ Entertainment/Both
Eva	35	F	White	Grad stud	5	More than 2 years	Both
Rich	34	M	White	Professional	4	1-2 years	Entertainment
Ricardo	40	M	Hispanic	Professional	3	More than 2 years	Entertainment
Greg	30	M	White	Professional	2	More than 2 years	Both
Bert	34	M	Hispanic	Grad stud	5	More than 2 years	Both

Table C-5. Focus group #3, November 1, 2004

Name	Age	Gender	Ethnicity	Occupation	Watches TDS 1 (infreq)–5 (freq)	How long watched TDS?	Watch TDS for News/ Entertainment/Both
Kaya	18	F	Bi-racial (B/W)	Student	5	Less than 6 months	Both
Francine	19	F	Other	Student	2	6-12 months	Both
Sarah	21	F	White	Student	5	More than 2 years	Both
Fred	19	M	White	Student	4	1-2 years	Both
Chris	20	M	White	Student	3	6-12 months	Entertainment
Ted	23	M	White	Student	5	1-2 years	Entertainment

Table C-6. Diarists

Name	Age	Gender	Ethnicity	Occupation	Watches TDS 1 (infreq)–5 (freq)	How long watched TDS?	Watch TDS for News/ Entertainment/Both
Denise	24	F	White	Professional	5	More than 2 years	Both
Latisha	22	F	Black	Student	5	1-2 years	Both
Peter	20	M	White	Student	4	More than 2 years	Entertainment

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Kathleen Sohar received her bachelor's degree in mass communication sciences from the University of Connecticut in 1989. Sohar then worked in the satellite telecommunications industry until returning to graduate school at the University of Florida in 1997.

She received her master's degree in telecommunications in December 2000, and in 1999 she joined the Department of Communication Services at the University of Florida's Institute of Agricultural and Life Sciences (IFAS) and helped to establish Radiosource.NET, a collaborative online university radio news network.

While a graduate student, Sohar also cofounded a band, Bound~, and produced two albums, *Proto* and *Mirth*. Bound~ also performed in the University of Florida's School of Theatre and Dance Mod Project 2005.