media/rep/

Repositorium für die Medienwissenschaft

MEDIA ACTIVISM IN SEARCH OF 'TRUTH'?
QUESTIONING THE MISSION TO RESTORE SANITY

by Claudia Schwarz and Theo Hug

For a young, media savvy, radically globalized generation, television as a platform for news has lost momentum. Ironically however, in a media landscape with a variety of news providers competing for audiences and trust, television news parodies like *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* and *The Colbert Report* attract new audiences as they seem to fill a gap. They succeed not only in entertaining and informing (even educating) a previously 'deactivated,' relatively young target audience, but also in initiating activism by using old and new (social) media. How is it possible that a comedy show succeeds in promoting reason and gets young people to stand up for more sanity in politics and culture?

In this case, critical (subversive) practice comes from within the mainstream, that is: television—a platform criticized for "dumbing down" audiences (Postman, 1985). Could television, thus, actually become part of the solution for commitment? In this constellation, what is the role of self-determined (intrinsic) and acquired (extrinsic) practices in relation to mobilized practices and practices determined by other factors? And, how do they work differently in comparison to the subversive practices of tactical media and media activism, which question the methods of biopower?

This paper examines several responses to the (more and less serious) calls for action of the two shows and discusses their delicate role as entertainers, watchdogs, and activists for reason, sanity, and what is left of 'truth' in the media. Furthermore, implications for critical media studies are considered by questioning the claims of "education towards truth" (Mitterer, 1991, p. 67). Finally, the paper questions whether we can talk about news parodies as a form of media activism and why the Rally to Restore Sanity and/or Fear has and has not had an impact.

Standing up for Sanity

On October 30, 2010, approximately 215,000 people gathered at the National Mall in Washington, D.C., for the Rally to Restore Sanity and/or Fear, a joint venture by Jon Stewart, the host of Comedy Central's news parody *The Daily Show*, and Stephen Colbert, the host of its spin-off *The Colbert Report*. The official rally website opens with the famous call for action from the 1976 satire *Network*: "I'm mad as hell, and I'm not going to take it anymore!" In the announcement of the rally on the show, Stewart asks, "How did we get here?" pointing to the voices of the fifteen percent of Americans that dominate the agenda and are covered by the 24/7 newsreel. In the rally, he wants to "send a message to our national leaders and our media that says 'We [the rational eighty percent of Americans] are here!'" (*The Daily Show*, September 16, 2010).

The rally was a great success. It was much bigger than the organizers had anticipated; yet, its impact remains unclear. It was covered on all major news channels, however many in the audience did not quite know what to make of it (Easley, 2010). This might be due to two things: first, the event combined two very different rallies—the quite serious Rally to Restore Sanity (team Stewart) and the ironic March to Keep Fear Alive (team Colbert). Second, the media themselves were one of the main targets of criticism in the rally, which put them in an awkward position and hit their blind spot.

Nevertheless, as a piece of media activism, the rally proves that a television show can, in fact, mobilize people "who've been too busy to go to rallies, who actually have lives and families and jobs (or are looking for jobs)" (Rally to Restore Sanity, 2010), that is, people who were generally believed to be passive consumers. The rally also proved that people are disappointed with politics and the media to the extent that they are willing to publicly express their frustration. Moreover, it shows that people are able to differentiate between actual (truthful) information and what Harry Frankfurt infamously terms "bullshit" (Frankfurt, 2005).

In the following, a rough outline of the search for 'truth' in the media (understood as truthful reporting) helps to establish news satire as a genre that criticizes politics and the media on a meta-level and speaks 'truth beyond facts.'

Who to Trust in the News Media

The acceptance of the news media as an authority in terms of truth telling has been challenged for some time now, especially with the advent of new technologies and new channels of information processing in Web 2.0. Interestingly, a general mistrust is apparent in almost all parts of civil society, ranging from the political to the economic.

Seymour Lipset and William Schneider (1983) argue that there is a correlation between the decline of confidence in the media and the decline of confidence in politics (see also Hetherington, 2005). According to this line of reasoning, the criticism of the

news media in news parodies has a negative effect on people's trust in politics. As the collected data shows, watching *The Daily Show* leads to distrust in the media and significantly decreases ratings of news media coverage of politics (Morris and Baumgartner, 2008, p. 324). Cynicism, Morris and Baumgartner claim, results in an "unhealthy distrust for all aspects of politics" (p. 328). Even though an explanation for these findings is not provided, it is not difficult to come by: first, information about any aspect of civil society is communicated through the media. If people do not trust the media, they cannot trust the content reported. Secondly—and in this context more significantly—the mechanism and style of communication (and deception) are shared by all, media as well as politics: form rules over content, which means that information is scripted rather than authentic and 'hyped' rather than rationalized.

The style of communication we find in all matters today is based on what comedian Stephen Colbert famously termed "truthiness," a term reminiscent of what Harry Frankfurt calls "bullshit": "The essence of bullshit is not that it is *false* but that it is *phony*" (Frankfurt, 2005, p. 47). Similarly, "truthiness" is defined as "truth that comes from the gut, not books" (*The Colbert Report*, October 17, 2005); and, "the quality of preferring concepts or facts one wishes to be true, rather than concepts or facts known to be true" (American Dialect Society, 2006).

As Frankfurt describes the dangerous development, people are not concerned with the difference between the truth and a lie anymore. They are busy chattering, regardless of what might or might not be true. Possible reasons for this development especially in the media can be found in the 24/7 news cycle that requires continuous news-chatter; the emergence of new jobs and fields of work like PR, consulting, and lobbying; Web 2.0 technology, wherein people are invited to share their thoughts, and many more. This idea of 'bullshit' in communication resonates with Neil Postman's famous line: "Americans are the best entertained and quite likely the least well informed people in the Western world" (Postman, 1985, p. 106).

In the long run, a perceived lack of respect for the truth leads to general mistrust, which is only legitimate—even sane. It requires careful deconstruction to re-establish a common ground from which to rebuild trust. The question remains who, other than media critics, sociologists, media pedagogues, and philosophers, is up for the task and influential enough to spread this message. As argued here, ironically this deconstruction might be provided by successful news parodies within traditional television.

In a news media system like the one in the United States, where there is a firm belief in a 'truth' to be found—hence the slogan in the "Code of Ethics" by the Society of Professional Journalists (1996): "Seek Truth and Report it"—the question of who is able tell the truth, almost seems legitimate. After CBS anchor Walter Cronkite, the unrivaled 'most trusted man in America' died in 2009, speculations about the new most reliable newsperson arose. Surprisingly, the anchor of a satirical news show, Jon Stewart, was not

only suggested for the position in an article published in the *New York Times* (Kakutani, 2008), he also won the *Time* online poll for most admired journalists against 'real' news people like Dan Rather, Brian Williams, and Anderson Cooper (*Time* Poll Results, 2009).

During the run-up for the 2008 elections, *Newsweek* featured Stewart as one of the most powerful media figures in the elections. In 2010, they called him a "Media Watchdog," placing him second on a list of the "New Thought Leaders" of the decade: "For the past several years, however, there's been another step added to the end of the process: being held to account for our faults by a comedy show with a sharp eye and a sharp tongue" (Williams, 2010). The *New York Times* described Stewart as "Mr. Common Sense, pointing to the disconnect between reality and what politicians and the news media describe as reality" (Kakutani, 2008).

Fake News Shows on a Mission to Restore Sanity (and/or Fear)

In *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, Neil Postman describes a subversive TV program that is highly reminiscent of *The Daily Show*. However, he thought it would not attract an audience large enough to have an impact (Postman, 1985, p. 161; Erion 2007, p. 13). Quite obviously, times have changed.

The Daily Show and its spin-off *The Colbert Report* are news show parodies aired on weekdays on Comedy Central. Apart from their most obvious mission, to entertain people and make fun of things, and the slogans mentioned on their websites, like "unburdened by objectivity, integrity, or even accuracy," "zero credibility," "truth that comes from the gut, not books," and "time for a truth injection," they obviously fill a gap created by their 'real' counterparts. With a nightly audience of approximately one and a half million for *The Daily Show* and approximately one million for *The Colbert Report*, the shows have gained momentum, especially among audiences between eighteen and thirty-five years of age.

By making fun of both current events and the way mainstream news media report them, they reveal 'truths' beyond a mere fact checking or fact and opinion-reporting. They have proven their role as watchdogs of media watchdogs by upgrading their 'fake' reporting to the level of critical, satirical news reporting (Schwarz, 2008, pp. 245–277).

The importance of both shows can probably best be measured by the media attention they receive, the studio guests they attract (including the sitting president, which was a first in the US), and the fact that especially young audiences name them as one of their prime *news sources* and who—in research studies—turn out to be among the best-informed group of people (Erion 2007, p. 10, referring to an Annenberg Public Policy Center poll; Pew Research Center, 2007).

From two different angles, the two shows take on their mission: while Jon Stewart is the authentic, critical, stand-up comedian-anchorman; Stephen Colbert impersonates a conservative, republican pundit. While Stewart aims to make people think and/or laugh

about matters, Colbert seeks to mobilize his audience, for example, getting people to change Wikipedia articles and asking them to support his 'idea(l)s.' Given both shows' incredible success and impact, together, they are the perfect team to provoke change.

In a reaction to the Tea Party movement in the US, and the immediate danger of politicians and their media bullhorns that they believe were systematically stupefying and hence disempowering citizens, the mismatched team set out on a mission to restore sanity (and/or fear). In a rally speech by Jon Stewart called, "A Moment of Sincerity," he pointed to the challenges of our time and criticized the media for hyping unreal fears and polarizing citizens, what he calls the "24-hour politico-pundit perpetual panic conflict-inator." However, his primary message was a call for social cohesion.

Moving Masses with Old and New Media:
Between Couch Potato, Political Lethargy, and the Search for Meaning and Identity

The rally has shown that traditional media such as television—generally believed to de-activate people—have the power to activate them, to get them to go to places, do things, even make them think and reflect on issues. Ironically, however, it is not only the 'real' or sincere programs on television that seem to have this impact.

Of course, new media supplemented the movement: there were iPhone apps, tweets, and other social media that also called for people to attend the rally. However, the initial starting point of the movement was a critical and thoughtful parody of an anchor-man—who, by breaking his routine of sticking to his anchor desk—motivated people not only to think critically, but to show others that they care and want to do something—in this case participating in a rally—demonstrating concern for a society and politics that they believe should be more sincere and solution-oriented. "On this one day, regular people wanted to show that media may be broken, but America isn't" (Easley, 2010).

All across so-called 'Western' countries, one of the main concerns in politics has been that younger generations seem to be particularly disinterested, disenchanted, and disillusioned with politics and the 'establishment.' The main question is how to motivate young people to care about politics and the world at large, beyond the virtual realms into which they have retreated. The success of *The Daily Show* proves that—if issues and topics are presented adequately—young people do care. One of the reasons why celebrities and politicians are happy to be interviewed on those shows, even at the danger of being ridiculed, is the fact that they reach out to a young audience, which is almost impossible to access through other, let alone, traditional media. The two news parodies are the format that gets young people involved; that presents what is significant in a way that also helps people differentiate between what is important, honest, sincere, and trust-worthy, and what is not.

With Great Power Comes Great Responsibility

The impact the two shows have on young populations—and this is especially true for *The Daily Show*—is systematically denied or played down by the anchors. Jon Stewart has the power to inform, entertain, and educate people, yet he emphasizes that he is 'only' a comedian. Even as arguably the 'most trusted man in America' he sticks to this image, which suggests that he does not misuse his power. Maybe this is part of his success, but it is also a point he is criticized for.

At issue is his responsibility, which he sometimes takes and often denies. In this sense, the Rally to Restore Sanity and/or Fear was a one-time event, the impact of which quickly declined. However, it was a rather radical step outside of their (or at least Stewart's) comfort zone. So, are Stewart and Colbert moving from comedy into political activism?

News Parodies as Forms of Media Activism?

In his chapter on media activism, Matthew Lasar (2007) begins with an historic example predating the establishment of the United States (Lasar, 2007, p. 925). He refers to the case of the newspaper printer John Peter Zenger (NY, 1732) who accused the British colony's governor of corruption and was sent to jail for libel. However, the jury ruled that no libel was committed since Zenger printed the truth.

As Lasar writes, the "Zenger case both advocated and paved the way for independent media" (Laser 2007, p. 925)—an idea still at work, for example, in the context of Indymedia.

> Media activism can be defined as two related kinds of activity. One creates media that challenge the dominant culture, structure, or ruling class of a society. The other advocates changes within that society intended to preserve or open up space for such media. Often media activism encompasses both these activities in the same historical moment; or it quickly moves between the two modes of action. (Lasar, 2007, p. 925)

Clearly, the two shows challenge the dominant media and they encourage action and discursive activities (for example, in the context of [re-]mediation in social media). They encompass these activities and they attract a wide and increasing audience, but there is no intention to create open spaces in terms of platforms.

A similar ambivalence is noticeable if we look at other characterizations of media activism. For example, Graham Meikle (2002), who addresses the basic distinction between open and closed systems in his book *Future Active: Media Activism and the*

Internet (Meikle, 2002, p. 13). He relates openness to incompleteness (open source or open content developments). Here, media activism is used as an umbrella term for various intervening forms of media appropriation (with characteristics such as open, incomplete, spontaneous, and temporary forms). More recently (2010), he distinguishes four dimensions of Net activism: intercreative texts (for the concept of interactivity, see Tim Berners-Lee, 1999), tactics, strategies, and networks. As for the two shows, they can be regarded as intervening forms, but they are part of a closed system. Robert Huesca refers to activist media as a key phrase and defines it as follows:

> Activist media are radio, television, and other media practices that aim to effect social change and that generally engage in some sort of structural analysis concerned with power and the reconstitution of society into more egalitarian arrangements. Many activist media practices are also committed to principles of communication democracy, which place at their core notions of popular access, participation, and self-management in the communication process. (Huesca, 2008, p. 31)

The shows also aim to effect social change to some extent, and they focus on high quality products (not on processes and grassroots developments). But there is no core notion of participation in a political sense.

Wolfgang Sützl's (2011) characterization focuses on carnivalesque cultures as media of resistance or disobedience. In view of the explicit self-portrayal in the case of Jon Stewart as an authentic, critical, stand-up comedian, the show can be located clearly in this tradition, but at the same time, it is part of the mainstream media.

With reference to the concept of variations (Goodman and Elgin, 1988) the theme of media activism can be described in terms of perspectives that appear in different ways such as: the unconventional use of media in the context of creative re-framings or social orientations; the strengthening (fortification) of minorities, questioning and criticizing mainstream developments, structural constraints, regimes and dominant cultures (cultures of dictatorial rights); and, cognitive autonomy in (partial) cultures of resistance. However, the two shows appear as ambivalent forms when applying these perspectives.

In the case of the Rally to Restore Sanity and/or Fear, there is a questioning of the mainstream media and its attempt to 'hype' unreal fears and polarize citizens, thus promoting biopolitical regimes. This questioning suggests a form of media of resistance in the sense of biopolitical activism. Although the case is not aiming at cutting edge developments like the activities of artists such as the Critical Art Ensemble or Stelarc and scientists such as Beatriz da Costa who began developing projects that intervened in a new, engineered (technological) form of exercising power on the body itself, the case is a

good example for effectively challenging the workings of biopower by introducing discontinuities in a new hegemony of knowledge.

Show Masters as Truth Tellers?

In the case of our examples, the activists emphasize that they have no agenda of influence. They rather question issues and—for all intents and purposes—this kind of questioning is not explicitly, but implicitly challenging processes of governmentalization, the 'art of government' in a Foucauldian sense.

With the concept of 'governmentality,' Foucault aims at a new understanding of power beyond the problematique of consensus, will, or conquest: "The relationship proper to power would not therefore be sought on the side of violence or of struggle, nor on that of voluntary linking (all of which can, at best, only be the instruments of power), but rather in the area of the singular mode of action, neither warlike nor juridical, which is government" (Foucault, 1982, p. 221). Foucault advocates a concept of power that focuses on various forms of social control in disciplinary institutions (for example, schools or hospitals) as well as on different forms of knowledge in contrast to widespread concept-ualizations of power in the sense of the hierarchical, top-down power of the state. Accordingly, the concept of 'government' is not limited to state politics alone.

It includes a wide range of control techniques that apply to a variety of phenomena, from one's control of the self to the 'biopolitical control' of populations. Foucault defines governmentality as the 'art of government' in a wide sense, which includes organized practices (attitudes, rationalities, and techniques) through which subjects are governed, and which is linked to related concepts such as biopolitics and power-knowledge (Foucault, 2006a, b).

On the other hand, if we understand these creative acts in terms of an 'ethics of de-governmentalization,' we should be aware that the analytical potential under the auspices of Foucault are somehow pruned and finally turned into moral stances. In other words: the concept of de-governementalization emerges as concept of re-governementalization on other levels (Hug, 2008).

However, 'truth-oriented' activism may be related to claims of clarification and enlightenment. But whatever the "truthometer" (Politifact.com) or other authorities will tell us, we are depending on a sense of trust in the respective agencies. Although we might successfully refer to differentiated philosophical concepts of truth such as *veritas est adaequatio intellectus ad rem* [truth is the correspondence of the intellect to the thing], consensus, evidence, coherence, or pragmatism, we should be aware that "education to-wards truth is always education towards the truth of the educator" (Mitterer, 2001, p. 67).

References

American Dialect Society. (2006) "Words of the Year 2005." Press Release. January 6, 2006. <http://www.americandialect.org/Words_of_the_Year_ 2005.pdf> [Accessed 8 May 2011].

Berners-Lee, Tim. (1999) "The Future of the Web." Transcript of the talk to the LCS 35th anniversary celebrations, Cambridge Massachusetts, 14 April 1999. <http://www.w3.org/1999/04/13-tbl.html> [Accessed 8 May 2011].

The Colbert Report. (2005) Comedy Central. 17 October 2005.

Critical Art Ensemble (2009). Critical Art Ensemble. <http://www.critical-art.net> [Accessed 8 May 2011].

da Costa, Beatriz and Philip, Kavita. (eds.) (2008) *Tactical Biopolitics: Art, Activism and Technoscience*. Boston: MIT Press.

The Daily Show. (2010) Comedy Central. 16 September 2010.

Easley, Jason. (2010) "The Rally To Restore Sanity Causes a Mainstream Media Meltdown." *Politicususa*. <http://www.politicusa.com/en/restore-sanity-media> [Accessed 8 May 2011].

Erion, Gerals J. (2007) "Amusing Ourselves to Death with Television News: Jon Stewart, Neil Postman, and the Huxleyan Warning." Holt, Jason (ed.) *The Daily Show and Philosophy*. Malden: Blackwell, pp. 5–15.

Foucault, Michel. (1982) "The Subject and the Power." Dreyfus, Hubert and Rabinow, Paul. *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics*. Brighton: Harvester, pp. 208–226.

Foucault, Michel. (2006a) *Geschichte der Gouvernementalität*. Bd. 1: Sicherheit, Territorium, Bevölkerung. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp.

Foucault, Michel. (2006b) *Geschichte der Gouvernementalität*. Bd. 2: Die Geburt der Biopolitik. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp.

Frankfurt, Harry G. (2005) *On Bullshit*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Garcia, David and Lovink, Geert. (1997) *The ABC of Tactical Media*. <http://www.ljudmila.org/nettime/zkp4/74.htm> [Accessed 15 April 2010].

Goodman, Nelson and Elgin, Catherine Z. (1988) *Reconceptions in Philosophy and Other*. *Arts and Sciences*. London: Routledge.

Hetherington, Marc J. (2005) *Why Trust Matters*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Huesca, Robert. (2008) "Activist Media." Donsbach, Wolfgang (ed.). *The International Encyclopedia of Communication* (vol. 1). Malden, MA: Blackwell, pp. 31–33.

Hug, Theo. (2008) "Education Towards Truth? Reflecting a Sentence of Josef Mitterer." Riegler, Alex and Weber, Stefan (eds.) *The Non-dualizing Philosophy of Josef Mitterer, Constructivist Foundations*, vol. 3, no. 3, pp. 249–253. <http://www.univie.ac.at/constructivism/journal/articles /3/3/249.hug.pdf> [Accessed 8 May 2011].

Jon Stewart's Final Speech at Rally to Restore Sanity. (2010) *YouTube*, 31 October 2010. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6JzGOiBXeD4> [Accessed 8 May 2011]

Kakutani, Michiko. (2008) "Is Jon Stewart the Most Trusted Man in America?" *The New York Times* August 17. <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/08/17/arts /television/17kaku.html> [Accessed 8 May 2011]

Lasar, Matthew. (2007) "Media Activism." Anderson, Gary L. and Herr, Kathryn (eds.) *Encyclopedia of Activism and Social Justice*. Vol. 3. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, pp. 925–927.

Lipset, Seymour M. and Schneider, William (1983). *The Confidence Gap*. New York: Free Press.

Meikle, Graham. (2002) *Future Active: Media Activism and the Internet*. New York: Routledge.

Meikle, Graham. (2010) "Intercreativity: Mapping Online Activism." Hunsinger, Jeremy; Klastrup, Lisbeth; and Allen, Matthew (eds.) *International Handbook of Internet Research*. Dordrecht: Springer, pp. 363–77.

Merriam-Webster's Words of the Year 2006. "Truthiness." Merriam Webster Online. <http://www.merriamwebster.com/info/06words.html> [Accessed 8 May 2011].

Mitterer, Josef. (2001) *Die Flucht aus der Beliebigkeit*. Frankfurt am Main: Fischer.

Morris, Jonathan S. and Baumgartner, Jody C. (2008). "The Daily Show and Attitudes Toward the News Media." *Laughing Matters: Humor and American Politics in the Media Age*. New York: Routledge, pp. 315–331.

Network. (1976) Directed by Sidney Lumet. USA: MGM.

Pew Research Center. (2007) "Public Knowledge of Current Affairs Little Changed by News and Information Revolutions." Pew Research Center for the People and the Press. <http://people-press.org/2007/04/15/public-knowledge-of-current-affairs-little-changed-by-news-and-information-revolutions/> [Accessed 8 May 2011].

Politifact.com. (2011) Politifact National. <http://www.politifact.com/truth-o-meter/statements> [Accessed 8 May 2011].

Postman, Neil. (1985) *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business*. New York: Penguin.

Rally to Restore Sanity. (2010) *The Daily Show*. <http://www.rallytorestoresanity.com/> [Accessed 8May 2011].

Schwarz, Claudia. (2008) *The Ethics of Storytelling: American Media and the Quest for Truth*. Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Innsbruck.

Society of Professional Journalists. (1996) "SPJ Code of Ethics." <http://www.spj.org/pdf/ethicscode.pdf> [Accessed 8 May 2011].

Strauss, Neil. (2009) "The Subversive Joy of Stephen Colbert." *Rolling Stones*, Sept. 17, pp. 56–110.

Sützl, Wolfgang. (2011) "Medien des Ungehorsams. Zur Geschichtlichkeit von Medienaktivismus." <http://www.medienimpulse.at/articles/view/290> [Accessed 11 March 2011].

Thacker, Eugene. (2004) *Biomedia*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Time Poll Results. (2009) "Now that Walter Cronkite Has Passed on, Who Is America's Most Trusted Newscaster?" *Time*. <http://www.timepolls.com/hppolls/archive/poll_results_417.html> [Accessed 8 May 2011].

Williams, Brian. (2010) "#2 Jon Stewart." New Tough Leaders. *Newsweek*. <http://2010.newsweek.com/top-10/new-thought-leaders/jon-stewart.html> [Accessed 8 May 2011].