

Political Culture Jamming: The Dissident Humor of *The Daily Show With Jon Stewart*

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Contemporary politicians have wholeheartedly embraced commercial branding techniques, saturating the public sphere with market tested, emotional messages designed to cultivate trust in their political “brand,” thus working against the ideal of a democratic public sphere. *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* “jams” the seamless transmission of the dominant brand messages by parodying the news media’s unproblematic dissemination of the dominant brand, broadcasting dissident political messages that can open up space for questioning and critique. *The Daily Show* works, not by rational argumentation buttressed by facts and logic but by using an aestheticized (and very funny) parodic discourse to combat the aestheticized (and very serious) political branding techniques. Consequently, it is uniquely positioned to make its rebellious voice heard.

There is the possibility of a cultural politics that deploys a postmodern political aesthetic—which would confront the structure of image society as such head-on and undermine it from within ... undermining the image by way of image itself, and planning the implosion of the logic of simulacrum by dint of ever greater doses of simulacra. (Jameson, 1992, p. 409)

Armed with branding techniques honed and perfected in the commercial marketplace, politicians and political parties have attempted to drown out dissident messages to better “sell” their own political policies, a dagger in the heart of deliberative democrats who argue that democracy cannot survive without open, ongoing, and rational political conversation. In fact, much of contemporary democratic theory rests on two propositions: (a) the public sphere is populated with multiple and disparate voices who can and will engage each other and (b) these conversations

will be rational. Jurgen Habermas's (1962/1989) *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* is perhaps the most important of the recent statements of this position (Habermas, 1973/1975, 1998; see also Bennett & Entman, 2001; Carey, 1989; White, 1995). Indeed, many scholars posit some version of accessible, public, substantive, rational conversations among numerous and diverse participants as *the* prerequisite for a healthy democracy.

Exactly who defines which particular voices are "rational" enough to participate in these deliberations was and still is a matter of debate.¹ We know that this type of public sphere is a normative construct rather than an empirical reality (Schudson, 1998), but even so, relatively few theorists argue that the conversation *should* be further limited and that more voices should be excluded. In fact, the vast majority of the criticism comes from the opposite direction—that the public sphere is too limited. These scholars criticize the public sphere (both practically and theoretically) for variously restricting participation in the conversation (e.g., discussions in Calhoun, 1992; Macedo, 1999).

Political elites and their consultants have no such concerns. Rather than fretting over possible barriers confronting marginal voices, politicians instead want their voices, agenda, and framing of issues to crowd out divergent voices because such dominant status helps contribute to the success of their specific political agendas (Lakoff, 2002, 2004). In the past two decades, politicians have increasingly utilized what are known as "branding" techniques of commercial marketers to just such an end, in the hopes of persuading the citizen/consumer to trust their "product"—their platform and policy positions—to the exclusion of all others. These branding techniques, relying on emotional rather than rational appeals, are used in the attempt to achieve automatic, unreflective trust in the branded product, whether that product is a Popsicle, a Palm Pilot, or a political party. Although such brand hegemony is obviously profitable in terms of money and/or power for the hegemon, it works to the detriment of the tenets of democratic theory both by talking over viable voices and conversations in the public sphere and by operating through calculated emotional appeals. How, in the name of the healthy democracy described previously, can one *disrupt* the transmission of the dominant political brand messages so competing conversations can occur?

One intriguing model comes from the same realm as the original branding techniques, the media saturated world of consumer capitalism, where an insurgent movement known as "culture jamming" is at the forefront of this type of disruption. Culture jammers are a loose collection of media activists who are rebelling against the hegemony of the messages promoting global capitalism. Spearheaded by media activist Kalle Lasn of the Media Foundation and his *Adbusters* magazine, culture jammers utilize a wide variety of tactics to destabilize and challenge the

¹See the Dewey-Lippman Debates of the 1920s (Dewey, 1922/1982, 1925/1982, 1927; Lippman, 1922/1934, 1925) for the classic argument on the potential rationality of the public.

dominant messages of multinational corporations and consumer capitalism. Rather than simply using factual information, rational argumentation, legal language, and traditional political tactics to oppose capitalist institutions directly, culture jamming turns the commercial techniques of image and emotion back on itself through acts of what Christine Harold (2004) calls “rhetorical sabotage” (p. 190).

As politicians and political parties increasingly utilize the branding techniques of commercial marketers to “sell” their political agendas, it follows that similar jamming techniques could be employed to call those branding techniques into question. In this article, I argue that the comedian Jon Stewart and his fake news program, *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*, act as *political* culture jammers. Through their own humorous version of news parody, *The Daily Show* writers and comedians disseminate dissident interpretations of current political events, potentially jamming the transmission of the dominant political brand message. Like other culture jammers, *The Daily Show* subversively employs emotional and aesthetic modalities similar to those employed by political branding itself, thus interrupting it from within. Unlike many culture jammers, however, *The Daily Show* reliance on a humorous version of parody means that they can add their voices to the conversation in a seemingly innocuous way. (After all, it is *just* a joke.)

I turn now to an analysis of the rhetorical context that makes Jon Stewart’s political culture jamming possible. In what follows, I first look briefly at the concept of “branding” and how political parties and their candidates use the techniques of commercial marketers to their advantage. Next, in an effort to better understand how *political* culture jamming works, I discuss the philosophy behind culture jamming, as well as one important tactic employed by culture jammers: “subvertisements.” Finally, I argue that *The Daily Show* operates as a political culture jammer, employing techniques similar to those of culture jammers to disrupt dominant political brand messages. Specifically, I examine in-depth three jamming techniques used on *The Daily Show*: parodic format, strategic use of video, and Stewart’s Socratic interview style.²

THE FETISH OF POLITICAL BRANDING

See, in my line of work you got to keep repeating things over and over and over again for the truth to sink in, to kind of catapult the propaganda. (George W. Bush, quoted in Fromkin, 2005)

²To analyze *The Daily Show*, I drew on observations developed from regularly watching the program from 2000 to the present, as well as detailed and systematic reviews of specific video clips available online. Specific examples and illustrations in the text come from my transcription of video clips available on *The Daily Show* Web site, as well as journalistic accounts of the show and interviews with *The Daily Show* writers and comedians. The three jamming techniques were gleaned through an inductive approach.

To better appreciate how and why *The Daily Show's* comic style of political culture jamming functions, it is first necessary to briefly expand on the current advertisement driven nature of contemporary, media saturated politics. This ethos is permeated with the concept of branding, arguably the most important advertising strategy in late modern consumer capitalism (Carter, 1999; Light & Morgan, 1997; Vaid, 2003). The basic assumption behind branding is simple: Consumers are not "rational" shoppers. Instead, they are busy people, possessing neither the time nor the inclination to do detailed comparisons of sneakers, sunglasses, or fabric softeners. This time crunch creates an opening for marketers. Knowing that many consumers cannot or will not do research based on quality and/or price, marketers instead strive to cultivate a *relationship* with consumers that inspires loyalty for that particular brand. Trust in a particular brand allows the consumer to take a time-saving shortcut at the supermarket or mall, as well as get the supposed value, and, hopefully, the status that marketers strive to attach to the brand. Thus, the key to establishing this lucrative connection with consumers is through the play of emotion, rather than the dissemination of information: "Marketing is no longer about selling. It's about creating relationships with customers that cultivate an emotional preference for your brand" (Travis, 2000, cited in Hiebert, 2001; see also Gobe, 2001, 2002). The particular relationship to be cultivated with consumers depends on the type of image that marketers believe will best sell their product to its target demographic: dependable, practical, good value for the price, safe, or the much coveted yet ever elusive "cool."

Politicians and their political consultants have fully embraced the logic and tactics of branding in the political arena. Although the normative value of the migration of these marketing tactics into the political sphere via the media has been widely disputed, its efficacy has not, at least from the point of view of the politicians themselves (Newman, 1999). It is obvious why parties and politicians would see brand loyalty a desirable outcome. Citizens, like consumers, are busy people, and cultivating trust in the "Republican" or "Democratic" brand works to save the citizen/consumer time in the form of information costs while providing the politician or party a solid base of support. Many of the same branding techniques used to sell soap and MP3 players are exploited for political gain, including market research techniques, the proliferation of emotional messages across various media through the use of sound bites and talking points and repetition/saturation strategies within each medium. In addition to creating a sense of familiarity, an important part of building trust, repetition of carefully researched emotional messages (e.g., talking points) helps locate a party or politician as one of the "top of mind" or "dominant" brands—the first or, hopefully, the only brand that comes to mind in response to a particular stimuli (Carter, 1999, cited in Karlberg, 2002, p. 7). The ultimate goal in political branding is the same as in commercial branding: the cre-

ation of such unquestioning trust in the brand that the citizen/consumer allows the brand do the “thinking” for him or her.³

CULTURE JAMMING

How does one call these very effective branding techniques into question so alternative voices can get into the conversation? The success of global consumer capitalism and the marketing techniques that go with it, specifically the branding techniques mentioned previously, have spurred many internal and external critiques and rebellions, often lumped together under the term culture jamming (e.g., Klein, 2000, 2002; Roddick, 1994; Talen, 2003). Current culture jammers, such as media activist Kalle Lasn, place themselves on a “revolutionary continuum” with anarchists, Dadaists, surrealists, the Situationists, the Sixties hippie movement, and early punk rockers, among others (Lasn, 1999, p. 99; see also Dery, 1993). According to Lasn, the primary goal of culture jammers is *détournement*, a French term borrowed from the Situationists of the 1950s and 1960s. Translated literally as a “turning around,” Lasn (1999) defines the concept of *détournement* as “a perspective-jarring turnabout in your everyday life” (p. xvii), which is instigated by “re-routing spectacular images, environments, ambiances and events to reverse or subvert their meaning, thus reclaiming them” (p. 103).

Specifically, Lasn and his fellow culture jammers want to reverse, subvert, and reclaim our identity as brand trusting pawns of consumer capitalism. For example, Lasn’s Web site (www.adbusters.org) constantly runs multiple ongoing antibrand campaigns, and these do utilize traditional, rational techniques such as boycotts and petition drives against heavily branded corporations such as Nike and Tommy Hilfiger. However, *Adbusters* is perhaps best known for its attempts to jam the dominant brand images with alternative images, what Lasn calls subvertisements. These images use the same branding technologies and design layouts that advertisers do, with a problematizing twist: “A well produced print ‘subvertisement’ mimics the look and feel of the target ad, prompting the classic double-take as viewers realize what they’re seeing is the very opposite of what

³Although both the Republicans and the Democrats use these types of branding techniques, Douglas Kellner (2001) makes the argument that conservatives have been better than liberals at strategically utilizing emotional rhetorical techniques, what he terms “postmodern sophistry.” He contends that the Florida recount in the 2000 presidential election was stopped in large part because of these types of rhetorical tactics employed by Republican operatives. Interestingly, Kellner notes that these emotional rhetorical tactics cut against traditional conservative principles, such as the insistence on “truth”: “For a good philosophical conservative, ‘the ends justify the means’ is the height of philosophical relativism and amorality, undermining those core values and principles that conservatives supposedly cherish above all” (p. 142).

they expected” (Lasn, 1999, p. 131). Successful *Adbuster* subvertisements include those parodying alcohol, cigarettes, and the fast food industry, as well as the fashion establishment.

One of *Adbusters*’ best-known subvertisements revolved around the Calvin Klein *Obsession* ads of the 1990s. The original and very successful print ads for the perfume featured close-ups of young, beautiful, tan, taut bodies with the words “Obsession for Men” or “Obsession for Women” across the top of the ad. Exploiting what Lasn calls “leverage points” or logical contradictions in the underlying logic of consumer capitalism, *Adbusters* attacks Calvin Klein, not with facts and figures demonstrating how the empty quest to buy beauty and status is dangerous but instead with perverted mirror images (1999, p. 130). Their subvertisement of the *Obsession for Women* ad has a close-up of a beautiful woman like the original ad, except this time the woman is demonstrating a different type of “obsession”; she is vomiting into a toilet, suggesting an eating disorder. Similarly, the subvertisement of the *Obsession for Men* ad features a well-built young man standing in Calvin Klein underwear like the original ad, except he is holding open the top of his briefs, peering inside, insinuating that this is men’s real obsession. Another subvertisement in this series has the text “Reality for Men” across the top of the ad. Instead of featuring the taut, tan, muscular chest highlighted in the original *Obsession* ads, the “Reality for Men” subvertisement features a close up of a portly, hairy, pale, flabby male chest. These types of images counteract the dominant image—not by way of dispassionate, logical critique, complete with empirical evidence of the possible harm caused by such ads—but by offering provocative counter images that use incongruous words and images designed to jolt the viewer into reexamining the dominant brand message.

In what follows, I argue that *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* functions as what I call “political culture jamming” by working in much the same way: disseminating dissident images with messages designed to provoke the same type of *détournement* or subversion of the dominant meaning that Lasn and his fellow culture jammers seek. Specifically, the show employs three interconnected techniques that can work together to create *The Daily Show* version of a subvertisement, exposing leverage points in the dominant political message: (a) parodic news format, (b) strategic use of video, and (c) Stewart’s Socratic interview style.

POLITICAL CULTURE JAMMING: *THE DAILY SHOW WITH JON STEWART*

You can’t just rush in there. The federal government can’t just usurp the power of the states—unless New Orleans is in some type of persistent vegetative state. (Jon Stewart on the federal response to Hurricane Katrina, 2005)

In January 2004, the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press released the results of a survey designed to discover where Americans get their political news. One of the most interesting findings involved a relatively new phenomenon: 21% of those 18–29 regularly learned about the presidential campaign and its candidates on comedy programs (compared with 23% who said they regularly learned this information from network news). Overall, 50% of the 18–29 demographic said that they at least “sometimes” learn about the campaign from these shows, compared with 27% of the 30–49 demographic and 12% of people 50 and older. This was a serious increase in the comedy category since 2000, when only 9% of young people reported learning political and campaign information from comedy shows, whereas 39% reported learning this information from the network news (“Cable,” 2004).⁴

One of the most popular of these comedy shows—with an estimated 1.3 million viewers per night—is *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*, a 30-min “newscast” that airs Monday–Thursday at 11:00 p.m. EST on the cable network *Comedy Central* (Hall, 2005). Although the show has been on the air since 1996, the addition of Jon Stewart as anchor in 1999 prompted a spate of prestigious entertainment awards.⁵ *The Daily Show* has also made journalistic waves, winning two prestigious Peabody Awards for its “Indecision 2000” and “Indecision 2004” election coverage. In addition, *The Daily Show* won the 2004 Television Critics Award for Outstanding Achievement in News and Information, beating out *60 Minutes* (CBS), *Frontline* (PBS), *Meet the Press* (NBC), and *Nightline* (ABC; “Television Critics,” n.d.). *Newsday* even listed Stewart as the most influential media player in the 2004 election, beating out the likes of Ted Koppel, Sean Hannity, and Tim Russert (Bauder, 2004).

However, unlike its competition for these news awards, *The Daily Show* is a funny and often sharply critical parody of a television news broadcast; the entire cast is made of up of comedians. In fact, in his videotaped acceptance of the Television Critics Association Award mentioned previously, Stewart recommended that one of the other, legitimate nominees, *60 Minutes* perhaps, should investigate how a fake news program won the award for “Outstanding Achievement in News and Information” (Kurtz, 2003). It is this seeming lack of seriousness within the serious format of a cable/network news broadcast, however, that makes *The Daily Show* both a popular and a cogent critic. Like the *Adbuster* subvertisements, *The Daily Show* inserts its voice into the political conversation by plagarizing the aes-

⁴For further discussion of the use of humorous political satire by and on individuals in the 18–29 demographic, see Calavita (2004).

⁵Specifically, *The Daily Show* has won four Emmys for Outstanding Writing (2001, 2003–2005) and three Emmys for Outstanding Variety, Music or Comedy Show (2003–2005). Stewart himself was on the cover of the January 5, 2004, *Newsweek*. *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart Presents America (The Book): A Citizen’s Guide to Democracy Inaction*, written by Stewart and other *Daily Show* writers (2004), was a *New York Times* Bestseller.

thetics of the media, in this particular case, the news media. It is a copy, but a copy that has been strategically altered to highlight political “leverage points”: factual errors, logical contradictions, and incongruities in the dominant political brand messages and the media that disseminates them.

Matter Out of Place: Parodic Format

The first political culture jamming technique employed by *The Daily Show* is a metatechnique, one that most explicitly resembles the aesthetics of the *Adbusters*’ subvertisements discussed previously: news parody format. This twisted mimicking of the newscast format is the first and most important jamming technique and the entire show makes sense only within this format. Just as the subversive parody of the *Obsession* ad must closely approximate the actual ad to be effective, the news parody must closely resemble an actual news television broadcast, and *The Daily Show* does. The anchor, Jon Stewart, presents the top stories of the day, complete with the video over his right shoulder, and conducts interviews. Correspondents, many of whom are now becoming celebrities in their own right, do segments and interviews on current events. Watching the show with the volume turned down might not alert you to the fact that this is anything other than one of the myriad news options now available. Turning the volume up should let you in on the secret. Here Stewart is interviewing “senior media analyst” Stephen Colbert about the media coverage of the U.S. invasion of Iraq in March 2003:⁶

Stewart: What should the media’s role be in covering the war?

Colbert: Very simply, the media’s role should be the accurate and objective description of the hellacious ass-whomping we’re handing the Iraqis.

Stewart: Hellacious ass-whomping? Now to me, that sounds pretty subjective.

Colbert: Are you saying it’s not an ass-whomping, Jon? I suppose you could call it an “ass-kicking” or an “ass-handing-to.” Unless, of course, you love Hitler.

Stewart [stammering]: I don’t love Hitler.

Colbert: Spoken like a true Hitler-lover.

Stewart: I’m perplexed. Is your position that there’s no place for negative words or even thoughts in the media?

Colbert: Not at all, Jon. Doubts can happen to everyone, including me, but as a responsible journalist, I’ve taken my doubts, fears, moral compass, conscience, and all-pervading skepticism about the very nature of this war and simply placed them in this empty Altoids box. [Produces box] That’s where they’ll stay, safe and sound, until Iraq is liberated. (Miller, 2003)

⁶Colbert is also senior war correspondent, senior religious correspondent, senior UN analyst, senior White House correspondent, senior psychology correspondent, senior “death” correspondent (for stories that report on the death penalty), and senior child molestation expert (for stories on the Catholic Church).

This is obviously not a typical network or cable news interview.

The “news” portion of *The Daily Show* usually lasts (with commercials) for 20 min of the half-hour program, with late night talk show-like interviews occupying the last 10 min. During the shorter interview segment of the program, Stewart has interviewed actors, Muppets, comedians, and musicians, as well as more “serious” media and political guests such as Senators Rick Santorum, John McCain, Tom Daschle, and Joe Biden; former President Bill Clinton; and New York Mayor Michael Bloomberg. Other guests are media notables such as CNN correspondent Wolf Blitzer; filmmaker Michael Moore; and political commentators Pat Buchanan, Al Franken, Bill O’Reilly, and William Kristol. Like both network and cable news, the show has its own recognizable theme music. Stories with ongoing coverage also have their own titles complete with special music and graphics: “Indecision 2000” and “Indecision 2004” for its coverage of the respective presidential elections; “Operation Enduring Coverage” for its coverage of the media coverage of the military strikes in Afghanistan following 9/11; “Mess O’Potamia” for its coverage of the war in Iraq. These coverage titles are (obviously) puns, again designed to exploit political or media-focused leverage points that are further deconstructed during that segment.

What are the consequences from choosing to intentionally misuse the newscast format? Parodying the sober and seemingly impartial language and layout of a newscast gives the content an air of legitimacy and respectability. This seemingly weighty format then allows an automatic contrast with the humorous content—out of which incongruity, a prerequisite for most humor, can flow.⁷ The idea that incongruity has the potential to disrupt the dominant interpretation of events is not a new idea. In *Purity and Danger*, anthropologist Mary Douglas (1966) argued that incongruity has this power to defamiliarize—with both positive and negative results. Culture needs, according to Douglas, a relatively stable system. Disorder or what she calls “matter out of place” is potentially disruptive to the system and thus is often regarded as dangerous, as some type of pollution which then needs to be expunged or purified and returned to order, bringing back the normal state of affairs (p. 35). However, this is not the only possible reaction. Stuart Hall (1997) argues that the dangerous nature of matter out of place is also what makes it “powerful, strangely attractive precisely because it is forbidden, taboo, threatening to the cultural order” (p. 237). Thus, these “explicit structures of our normal experience” provide the basis for incongruity’s parasitical nature, as well as its promise; we must know what the rules are in order to know what rules are being broken (Douglas, 1966, p. 37). There must be a shared, understandable, *normal* background context for any type of incongruity to be disruptive, or, to use Douglas’s

⁷George Test (1991) calls this technique the “irony of misused form” (p. 169). For a detailed discussion of the role of incongruity in humor, see Morreall (1987).

terminology, matter must be “in place” the majority of the time for matter “out of place” to be remarkable.

Thus, the highlighted discrepancy between the hegemonic interpretation of events and *The Daily Show*'s interpretation of those same events provides the potentially disruptive incongruity. In fact, utilizing this type of humorous “matter out of place” is actually quite popular among current comedians. *Saturday Night Live* has included a segment entitled “Weekend Update” since the 1970s, in which comics such as Chevy Chase, Dan Akroyd, Bill Murray, Dennis Miller, Norm MacDonald, and now Amy Poehler and Tina Fey take on all the accouterments of news anchors and report on real stories in a comedic way. The satirical newspaper, *The Onion*, has also won numerous awards for its “fake” news reporting, done in the style of a newspaper (“*The Onion Mediakit*,” n.d.). The journalistic form, says former *The Onion* editor-in-chief Rob Seigel, is “the vessel. . . . It has to look like real journalism to create the comedic tension between what is being said and how it is presented” (Wenner, 2002).

Matter Out of Time: Strategic Use of Video

The mimicking of the news format at a metalevel, however, is a necessary but not sufficient condition for the specific political culture jamming of *The Daily Show*. There is nothing inherently subversive about parody, which can just as easily be employed in the service of the dominant political message as in the critique of that message.⁸ Within the larger parodic format of the show, however, *The Daily Show* also presents the political content in a way that calls into question the *substantive* claims of the dominant brand message, as well as the media that unproblematically disseminates it. The second technique employed by *The Daily Show*—the strategic use of video clips—thus works inside the meta-technique of the news parody. Similar to the parodic format of the show, the use of video is designed to disrupt the dominant political message by presenting various types of “matter out of time” using video clips. As previously stated, there is usually one video screen above Stewart’s right shoulder just as there is on network and cable news shows. Often Stewart will turn his head and talk to the video clips, stopping the video to pose questions and make comments. Stewart’s

⁸The subversive potential of parody figures prominently in the early works of Judith Butler (1990, pp. 32, 134–141). However, in *Bodies That Matter*; Butler (1993) focuses more on the ambivalence of parody, in this case the parody of gender involved in drag, arguing that there is not a necessary correlation between parody and subversion (pp. 121–140). See also “Merchants of Cool,” a *Frontline* episode that first aired on PBS in 2001 (Goodman & Dretzin, 2001). Rather than having subversive potential, “Merchants of Cool” illustrates how advertisers actually consider parody to be a highly effective marketing strategy for young adults.

response to a video of former President Clinton speaking about the contents of his autobiography in 2004 utilizes this format:

Video clip of Clinton: If there had been no Kenneth Starr, if we had different kind of people, I would have said here are the facts. I'm sorry. Deal with it however you please.

Stewart (to audience): If there had been no Ken Starr, people would have confessed. You know, I'll say this for Bill Clinton, his integrity is at his highest when the situation is at its most hypothetical. (King, 2004)

Here Stewart's own comments provide the matter that is out of time; news anchors do not usually interject such comments during "serious" news programs. The Hurricane Katrina quotation that starts the political culture jamming section of this article also employs this tactic. However, the most effective way *The Daily Show* uses video is to strategically juxtapose video clips to highlight leverage points. If the purpose of branding techniques such as talking points and saturation strategies is to repeat the same message unrelentingly over time with the hope that this message, because of its familiarity, will be accepted as true, taking the talking points out of order temporally can have the opposite effect. The branding techniques are exposed as orchestrated techniques and so can be examined explicitly and critically, rather than operating in the background where they are most successful. The following example illustrates how *The Daily Show* splices together a specific sequence of video to highlight a leverage point—in this case the widespread use of talking points—ignored by the conventional media. Speaking overtly about the political branding technique of repetition, Stewart offered this in a 2004 editorial on the origins of what he calls "conventional wisdom."

Stewart: ... Let's take the addition of John Edwards to the Democratic ticket: I don't know how to feel about that. I don't know what it means. Here's how I will:

Video clip of *CNN* reporter, standing in front of White House: ... This is 28 pages from the Republican National Committee. It says "Who is Edwards?" It starts off by saying "a disingenuous, unaccomplished liberal." We also saw from the Bush/Cheney camp that they had released talking points to their supporters ...

Back to Stewart: Talking points: *That's* how we learn things. But how will I absorb a talking point, like "Edwards and Kerry are out of the mainstream," unless I get it jack hammered into my skull? *That's* where television lends a hand. (laughter)

Fox News: ... He stands way out of the mainstream ...

CNN, Terry Holt, Spokesmen Bush Campaign: ... way out of the mainstream ...

CNN, Nicole Devenish, Communications Director, Bush-Cheney '04: ... that stands so far out of the mainstream ...

CNN, Lynn Cheney: ... that he is out of the mainstream ...

CNN, Terry Holt at Democratic National Convention: ... out of the mainstream

...

CNN, Frank Donatelli, GOP strategist: ... well out of the mainstream ...

Back to Jon Stewart, a glazed expression on his face (laughter): I'm ... I'm getting the feeling ... I think ... I *think* they're out of the mainstream ... ("Conventional Wisdom," n.d.)

By presenting the talking points back to back, the manipulative nature (both the manipulation of the public and the manipulation of the media) of the branding strategy becomes apparent, opening up a space for discussion of this strategy as a strategy.

Another interesting facet of this strategic juxtaposition of video is its indirectness. In the literal sense, Stewart does not give his opinion overtly about the Bush administration and their use of talking points or about the media's reliance on official sources and their lack of critical analysis. He instead presents the audience with the actual words as they appear on video. The only manipulation is temporal; these video clips were not meant to be shown back to back. Technically, the audience is left to draw their own conclusions, although those conclusions are channeled in a certain direction by the specific sequence of video, as the following 2003 segment also demonstrates:

Stewart: ... When you combine the new mandate that criticizing the Commander in Chief is off limits in wartime with last year's official disbanding of the Democratic Party, we're left at the all time low in the good old fashion debate category. Now I know you're thinking: But Jon, every time I want to have a calm, honest discussion about these kinds of issues, I'm shouted down and harassed by the Dixie Chicks and their ilk. Well, tonight it all changes. ... So first, joining us tonight is George W. Bush, the 43rd President of the United States. ... Taking the other side, from the year 2000, Texas Governor and presidential candidate, George W. Bush.

(Split screen of Governor Bush on the left and President Bush on the right. "Bush vs. Bush" logo between them.)

Stewart: Mr. President, you won the coin toss. The first question will go to you. Why is the United States of America using its power to change governments in foreign countries?

President Bush: We must stand up for our security and for the permanent rights and the hopes of mankind.

Stewart: Well, certainly that represents a bold new doctrine in foreign policy, Mr. President. Governor Bush, do you agree with that?

Governor Bush: Yeah, I'm not so sure that the role of the United States is to go around the world and say, "This is the way it's gotta be."

Stewart: Well, that's interesting. That's a difference of opinion, and certainly that's what this country is about, differences of opinion. Mr. President, let me just get specific: Why are we in Iraq?

President Bush: We will be changing the regime of Iraq for the good of the Iraqi people.

Stewart: Governor, then I'd like to hear your response on that.

Governor Bush: If we're an arrogant nation, they'll resent us. I think one way for us to end up being viewed as the ugly American is to go around the world saying, "We do it this way, so should you." ... ("Bush vs. Bush," n.d.)

Again, Stewart makes no direct comment, simply presenting the matter out of time and allowing the audience to decide how to interpret this information. Is this an example of the notorious flip-flopping? Or does this simply represent a wise policy change due to 9/11? Stewart does not say. He simply presides over the clips. Although Stewart will often alternate looking pained or amused as the videos are playing, rarely does he directly offer his own opinion on the video clips. By customarily adhering to this tactic, *The Daily Show* manages to stay suggestive rather than didactic, provocative rather than sermonizing or moralizing.⁹

Dialectics That Matter: Stewart's Socratic Interview Style

Like the preceding tactic, the strategic use of video, the third tactic, Stewart's Socratic interview style, works inside the metatatic of news parody at the substantive level. Although the interview is a common technique used on television news broadcasts, Stewart often employs what is called "Socratic irony" as a rhetorical tactic to point out incongruities, inconsistencies, and internal contradictions in the interviewee's argument without directly offering his own opinion, as well as without appearing confrontational. In the Platonic dialogues, Socrates routinely adopted an ignorant or tentative tone, asking simple and direct questions to his often dense interlocutors with the seemingly innocent goal of getting to the "truth." However, his questions were neither simple nor innocent, and Socrates would use his interlocutors' answers to suggest that they should not be quite so confident in their assertions, as well as to make his own substantive points (Colebrook, 2002, p. 87; see also Seery, 1990; Vlastos, 1991). In addition, Socrates' self-effacing demeanor and rather halting comments add to the perception of his sincerity, a mode of personal presentation that Stewart also utilizes. Discussing the public's perception of the war in Iraq in the summer of 2005 with "senior military analyst" Stephen Colbert, Stewart, like Socrates, plays the straight man, strategically setting up the interviewee to make the substantive point for him:

⁹There are two major exceptions to this. The first is Stewart's long-standing disdain for conservative pundit, Robert Novak. Routinely referring to him as "evil" and "rotting from the inside out," Stewart even questioned Novak's injury at a *New Yorker* breakfast in October 2004: "Novak apparently broke his hip. I think that's not the case. I think his hip tried to escape" (Grove, 2004). The second major exception is Stewart's now famous appearance on CNN's *Crossfire*. In this instance, Stewart was quite direct (and according to co-host Tucker Carlson, not funny) in his criticism of *Crossfire*: "You're hurting America" Stewart told Carlson and his co-host Paul Begala, "... You're doing theater, when you should be doing debate ... What you do is not honest. What you do is partisan hackery" (de Moraes, 2004). According to CNN's President, Jonathan Klein, Stewart's on air comments helped lead to the demise of the 23-year-old show: "I agree wholeheartedly with Jon Stewart's overall premise" (Carter, 2005).

Stewart: ... When the Vice President says that the insurgency is in its last throes and Donald Rumsfeld says that that could mean 12 years, isn't that contradictory?

Colbert: Well, Jon, as a member of the cynical, knee-jerk reaction media, liberal, Ivy League, Taxachusetts elite, I can see how you would find a discrepancy between the words "last throes" and "12-year insurgency." But your mistake is looking at what's happening in Iraq on a human scale. The Administration is looking at it from a *geological* perspective. After all, it took a billion years for the earth to cool ... ("Administrative Discrepancies," n.d.)

Here Stewart plays the calm, polite voice of reason to Colbert's vastly overstated and thus comical position. Like Socrates in the Platonic dialogues, he is *just* asking questions. However, also like Socrates, Stewart already knows the answers to most of the questions he asks, and not just in the prewritten segments in which Stewart is "interviewing" a *Daily Show* correspondent. The following is a lengthy excerpt from a 2004 interview with Harry Bonilla, Republican Representative from Texas, about the much quoted "fact" that Presidential candidate John Kerry was the most liberal member of the Senate. The conversation becomes a test of sorts for Bonilla as Stewart purposively and doggedly steers his questions directly at a perceived incongruity or contradiction.

Stewart: But where do they come up with those rankings?

Bonilla: We're all ranked every year. You have conservative groups on our side, business groups or people who track tax bills and spending bills and things like that.

Stewart: So I turn on the TV and they say he's the first most liberal senator and John Edwards is the fourth most liberal senator, so the only thing—because I watch this stuff at home and I'm *stupid*. How do they figure that?

Bonilla: ... They have, we have votes and bills that we sponsor and ...

Stewart: I'm not *retarded* (laughter). I mean, how do they *compile* ...

Bonilla: They list them. They take a list.

Stewart: Who's "they?"

Bonilla: These groups that I told you about: the conservative ...

Stewart: Who? (laughter) I just want to know like (gets a pen to write down the answer) ... What is the group?

Bonilla: These groups have lists of votes ...

Stewart: Which *group* is that, the one that you guys are quoting?

Bonilla: It's a group that does it. It's not one individual. It's not *just* the trial lawyers. It's not *just* the small business groups. It's not *just* the corporate people ...

Stewart: You're making this up.

Bonilla: No (laughing). I'm not. I'm not ... ("Congressman Harry Bonilla," n.d.)

Stewart then goes on to quote the *National Journal*, which does provide a compilation of all of the various interest group rankings, pointing out that, actually, over their careers, Edwards is to the right of the median Democrat and Kerry is to the right of Ted Kennedy ("Congressman Harry Bonilla," n.d.). As this example

shows, Stewart's protestations of ignorance and stupidity are disingenuous. He knows the correct answers and asks the questions as a tactic to hook into a particular leverage point. However, again like Socrates, his polite, self-deprecating demeanor, coupled with the fact that this is a fake news program, usually work to insulate him from anger on the part of the person being questioned. After all, *The Daily Show* is just a comedy show.

In fact, Stewart consistently downplays the shows possible political effects: "I follow a show about puppets making crank calls," he says about his 11:00 slot on *Comedy Central* (Kurtz, 2003, p. C1). *The Daily Show's* Web site also insists that the show should not be taken seriously.

One anchor, five correspondents, zero credibility ... If you're tired of the stodginess of the evening newscasts, if you can't bear to sit through the spinmeisters and shills on the 24-hour cable news networks, don't miss *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*, a nightly half-hour series unburdened by objectivity, journalistic integrity, or even accuracy. ("About the Show," n.d.)

Despite myriad caveats, many people claim that *The Daily Show* is an important political force, linking the show with directly the "truth."¹⁰ For example, when asked by CNN's Larry King if he thinks *The Daily Show* could influence young people at the polls, Stewart agilely displaces the question with a joke: "The message that we put into the show for the young people is subliminal and it's all about Communism. ... That's what's threaded in there, but at a very subconscious level. Every 8 seconds we flash a picture of Trotsky" (King, 2004). He makes the same type of disclaimer in an interview with Ted Koppel on *Nightline* during the Democratic National Convention in 2004. Koppel states that many people consider *The Daily Show* an actual news source. Stewart, predictably, denies this, arguing that *The Daily Show* is "peripheral. ... We're a sundae bar." When Koppel says that the audience looks to Stewart for the truth and insists that *The Daily Show* has found an "answer through humor," Stewart again (to Koppel's dismay) dismisses the show's importance: "I found an outlet. I found a catharsis, a sneeze, if you will. ... I know my role. I am the dancing monkey" (Koppel, 2004).

By feigning ignorance and constantly insisting that *The Daily Show* is only for laughs, Stewart can operate stealthily. Unlike his culture jamming counterparts who are openly hostile to consumer capitalism and use the violent language of rev-

¹⁰Geoffrey Baym (2005) takes the argument one step further, arguing that Stewart is actually reinventing political journalism. Despite Stewart's protestations to the contrary, Baym contends that *The Daily Show* is only "fake" to the extent that other news broadcasts are "real," a difficult claim to make in today's 24-hour, sensation-driven journalistic universe (p. 261). Although he does not reference Socrates, Baym also argues that Stewart employs humor "to confront political dissembling and misinformation" in the process reviving a "spirit of critical inquiry" largely absent in the "real" media since September 11th (p. 268).

olution in their fight to be heard, Stewart's self-effacing humor fosters both a sense of trust with those interviewed on the show and a sense of camaraderie with the audience. Further, any attempts by those who were the butt of the joke to attack *The Daily Show's* credibility could easily falter, as Stewart would be the first one to agree that he is stupid and that the show means nothing. After all, it is *just* a joke.¹¹ Criticizing *The Daily Show* could come close to admitting that one had no sense of humor, something nobody, especially a politician, would be eager to admit. Employing this Socratic stance—one of Socrates' most famous quotations is "All I know is that I know nothing"—Stewart can create a dissident message that raises questions about both the dominant political and media brands (Colebrook, 2002, p. 87).¹²

CONCLUSIONS

I have argued that *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* provides a particularly cogent example of political culture jamming. Specifically, *The Daily Show* jams the uninterrupted stream of the dominant political images through the proliferation of humorous dissident images, images that exploit leverage points—factual errors, logical contradictions, and incongruities—in both the dominant political discourse and the media that disseminate it. Creating their own version of *Adbusters'* subvertisements through the metatatic of news parody, coupled with the information specific tactics of the strategic use of video and Stewart's Socratic interview style, Stewart and his colleagues add their subversive interpretation of the dominant political brand to the public sphere.

Politicians now use all the available commercial branding techniques to make emotional, rather than rational or factual, appeals to the public in an effort to drown out competing political messages. This is a problem for many contemporary democratic theorists who insist that multiple voices engaging in reasonable, factual, and accessible conversation is a prerequisite for democracy. However, what academic theorists such as Habermas need to recognize and embrace is the potential of fighting the dominant emotion-laden images with alternative emotion-laden images—images that can stealthily disrupt the dominant images from the inside. If the dominant political brand trades on fear—fear of terrorists, fear of weapons of

¹¹In his book chronicling the "new political television" of comedians Bill Maher, Dennis Miller, and Jon Stewart, Jeffrey Jones (2005) argues that Stewart's persona is like that of the court jester or fool, speaking truth to power without fear of retaliation because he has the ability to make everyone laugh.

¹²"All I know is that I know nothing," is the famous version of the quotation. The actual quotation, as translated by Benjamin Jowett (1973), is "Well, although I do not suppose that either of us knows anything really beautiful and good, I am better off than he is—for he knows nothing, and thinks that he knows. I neither know nor think that I know" (p. 451).

mass destruction, fear that an increasingly secularized world will disrupt traditional value system—can the idealized mode of rational, factual, democratic talk always create viable alternative voices? Or does such an insistence on a speech situation devoid of strong emotion narrow the possible range of “legitimate” voices to such an extent that we miss an entire genre of powerful alternative voices. In this article I argue that *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* creates an alternative voice that utilizes emotion-laden discourse, except that the discourse employed by *The Daily Show* writers is not the fear used so effectively in the dominant political brand but, instead, a satirical version of humor and laughter. Perhaps the ostensible levity of *The Daily Show* is exactly what is needed to jam the ostensible gravity that under girds the dominant political brand. Literary critic Mikhail Bakhtin (1981) agrees: “Laughter demolishes fear and piety before an object, before a world, making of it an object of familiar contact and thus clearing the ground for an absolutely free investigation of it.” (p. 23). If we can laugh at it, we can examine it, evaluate it, even critique it. Laughter has the power to disrupt any analytical paralysis engendered by fear. *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* demonstrates that we overlook this powerful and interesting phenomenon at our peril.

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