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Jon Stewart – Fake News, Real Change

“Ipsa scientia potestas est” means knowledge itself is power in Latin, according to Sir Francis Bacon in his *Meditationes Sacrae* (1597, n. pag.). The phrase has remained true throughout the course of human history – mankind has achieved wonders with the knowledge discovered through the ages. Such power has proven to be even more essential in this day and age where information is heavily regulated and controlled by large entities in both private and public sectors. The television and internet media, where most people get their news from nowadays, are no longer effective in terms of having a positive impact on the reported problems nor do they longer have the guts and mentality to pursue such problems, as most of the media outlets are blinded by the monetary factor. Enter Jon Stewart. He is a television host whose show *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* (TDS)[[1]](#footnote-2) on Comedy Central takes a radical spin on the traditional way of news delivery, complete with satirical pieces on the political climate of the United States while maintain a pseudo-format of the everyday newsreel. Even though Stewart’s works are mostly about the US, the messages and meanings embedded in his commentaries and rhetorics are sympathetic of human’s moral compass, attempting to draw a line – dictating what is right and what is wrong in modern society. *The Daily Show* itself is a prank on contemporary news media. Thus, by analyzing the literary and rhetorical devices used by Jon Stewart on his show, one can establish why Jon Stewart is essentially a prankster, have a clearer idea of how Jon changes the way news is delivered, invokes genuine emotions/reactions from his audience, and ultimately spawns a young generation who are enthusiasts in politics and public affairs.

As said, the traditional news delivery is no longer prevalent in this day and age where the internet dominates every aspect of our human life. It means that the sluggish and tone-muted presentation of news obviously loses the attention of its audience, rendering the news useless. The loss of attention may (or may not) result in the decrease of vote turn-outs, especially among the millennials and later generations, but certainly, there has to be some indirect correlation[[2]](#footnote-3). Because to them, politics is seen as a no-fun, lame old people’s activity where there are not many stimulations nor excitements. Therefore, *The Daily Show (TDS) with Jon Stewart* comes in at just the right time, at the turn of the century, roughly 1 year before the Y2K incident. The extensive usage of pop-culture references appeals to younger viewers who can then relate the issues and problems to their everyday life, know about how the huge impact government policies may affect them. This fact is also echoed in *The Stewart/Colbert effect as* “such programs [, TDS and *The Colbert Report,*] provide a “gateway” to increased audience attention to news and public affairs, particularly among less politically engaged audiences” (Amarasingam, n. pag.). Objectively speaking, we, who now retroactively observe TDS, can see the main factor in TDS’s and Jon Stewart’s attraction towards such hard-to-please audiences is laughter. And the source of the laughter comes from the magnificent usage of rhetorical devices (chiefly satire) and appeals. For example, in the piece “FED MED REDEMPTION” (emphasis on “redemption”), TDS appropriates and parodies the shooter game title *Red Dead Redemption* to describe the overly apologetic attitude of the Obama Administration on the Obamacare website crash. The hidden message in this piece is the urging of forming actual action plan to resuscitate the site instead of giving a deadline without concrete infrastructure assurance. The spoonerism is also a pathos factor, as it is something that the target demographic, gamers and young audiences, would be able relate to and have a laugh at, effectively bridging the generational gap between public policies and pop culture. Such connection is something hardly ever seen in traditional news report where the reporter simply states the fact and end the report there, absolutely boring. Looking at a broader perspective, news is now heavily influenced by how TDS performs, resulting in a dynamic and more relatable way of consuming news content for any audience. To name a few results would be *Last Week Tonight with John Oliver, The Colbert Report, Patriot Act with Hasan Minhaj, etc.* where notably the host on each show was once a writer/correspondent for Jon Stewart on TDS. And the ripple effect of TDS is reflected by the tremendous number of late-night shows or other shows of the sort, where the format may vary amongst themselves, but the core idea of producing an engaging show for a larger demographic is still the main driving force for the shows’ writer team and its host. With that massive engaging content and the various successor shows, it is safe to say that TDS and Jon Stewart have opened up a new era of news.

Another reason as to why TDS with Jon Stewart is as the fire bringer to the news industry as Prometheus to mankind is that the show can invoke genuine emotions and reactions from the audience. Instead of the objectively-inclined journalism that is the hallmark for centuries, Jon Stewart actually breathes life into the news pieces with his emotions. Why would Jon break one of the most important rules of journalism? First, it has already been forewarned that his show is “fake news”, as per Jon’s own word in one of TDS episodes. So, it is partly to the audience to subjectively decide for themselves which behaviors are immoral, base on their own standards. The other part is Jon Stewart’s own spin on the fact, mostly hilarious hypotheses. This juxtaposition and satire are used as a ridicule of the subject matter, giving the audience an idea of why the issue/behavior reported on the news is bad. With the giddy attitude of the show, it is much easier to discuss complex matters, matters that have a grey line. And at other times, it is the opposite. An example of Jon Stewart’s display of emotions on TDS is one of the highlights of the entire run of the show and one of the lowlights in US history: “Grief-Stricken: (September 2001) On his first show following the Sept. 11 attacks, Stewart, with his emotions barely in check, delivered a soul-bearing statement of grief, “so that we can drain whatever abscess is in our hearts and move on to the business of making you laugh, which we haven’t been able to do very effective lately.” He went on: “Our show has changed. I don’t doubt that. What it’s become. I don’t know”” (CTV, n. pag.). The emotional statement that Stewart gives echoes with everyone in the audience, an amazing pathos appeal thought doubtful that the appeal is intentional. Then again, Amarasingam reports the effects satirical, “fake news” has on audience and the discussion of complex subject matters by quoting a research: “Mark K. McBeth and Randy S. Clemons explore the impact of fake news…, they believed that TDS best dealt with the complexity of racial relations and that both TDS and TCR were more neutral in their coverage” (Amarasingam, n. pag.). These facts prove that TDS has a strong pathos appeal to the audience which makes the audience easily relate to the reported news.

While it is important to dissect specific episodes to understand the artistical rhetoric used on TDS to see how effective the news propagation mechanism is, the overall setting of the show offers no less insights. Each episode of TDS starts off with a fade-in transition of the set with theme music blaring in the background on top of the live audience cheers and applause. Then comes in the host of the show wearing formal office attire and Jon sits down at his L-shaped desk; there lies a stack of paper supposedly containing content and behind him is backdrop of the Capitol Hill building. All of these meticulous visual arrangements seem normal at first, because it is meant to be “normal.” The normal formality, not to mention segments delivered by TDS’s correspondents, seen here is the normality of any news channel. Thus, it contributes to the ethos of TDS and Jon Stewart, putting more weight and believability (credibility) into the “fake news” that the he and the show heralds and making the effect TDS has more effective. For the purpose of invoking genuine emotions from the audience, it is important to first have the audience feel at least safe-to-express by putting forth a trustworthy guy in a credible setting. Speaking from a production perspective, the pathos appeal is used by the TDS more subtly in this case. Each episode is taped in front of a live audience, so the audience’s reactions to the jokes, puns, sarcasms, satires are also recorded. So, when aired on TV (or other platforms), the viewers are more engaged in the show and its content by the crowd effect generated by the live recording of the reactions.

*The Daily Show* is something most people hold dear to their heart, as it may have been the reason why one chooses to pursue political science or become a politician. Especially for the impressionable youngsters, the effects that TDS has on them would project to be immense (Sears, 1983). It is easy to infer the fact that the viewership of TDS is dominantly youths, because many of the satirical pieces and jokes made on the show are generationally specific. Take for example the various spoonerisms appear on the show as title of a news piece: “FED MED Redemption” on Obamacare is from the game *Red Dead Redemption*, “To Kill a Mockingturd” is from the classic novel “To Kill a Mockingbird” by Harper Lee that anguishes teens at school, or “Parks and Demonstration” on the Wall Street demonstration (Oct., 2011) based on the popular TV show “Parks and Recreation.”[[3]](#footnote-4) According to a research article by Baumgartner et alia for *American Politics Research*, the mean age of TDS’s demographic is 19.38 with a standard deviation of only 2.93 with a sample size of 732 participants. The statistics once again prove that TDS is macroscopically popular amongst young audience who are eligible to vote or to run for at least state-level office (18 to 21 years of age). Thus, one can justifiably draw the conclusion that TDS certainly affects the near-future political climate by influencing the youth generation. However, when look at TDS, it is essential to point out that aside from ethos and pathos appeal to the audience, TDS offers a great deal of logos appeal. Stepping into the future-scape era of human history means that there are increasingly many young people who are well-educated and familiar with the importance of stats and numbers as evidence. So, to convince their audience, TDS and Jon Stewart extensively use verified statistics and/or show primary sources to back up their arguments. For instance, during an episode to expose Mitt Romney’s dire political gaffe of promoting himself for the upcoming presidential campaign using the Olympic event, Jon Stewart intermittently plays and discusses a Mitt Romney interview on the Olympic, showing that Romney repeatedly diverges from simple yes-no questions to accentuates his complex knowledge base instead.

Thanks to technological advances, news is more accessible to everyone. With more open accessibility, come more opportunities for malicious news reporting attempts to forward one’s political agenda. The mainstream media is ridden with such malignance, from both the left and right. That is where *The Daily Show* and other similar shows come into play with a more neutral ground reporting and also a better engagement with the audience across demographic range. Through the analysis done above, we can solidify the major role that TDS plays in today’s political climate where uncertainty reigns at large. TDS has the ability to untangle complex problems and issues with its modern news report method that incorporates ethos, pathos and logos into one package for the viewers. And finally, TDS works for a better future by educating younger audiences about politics and public affairs through its *user-friendly* rhetorical devices. Without a doubt, *The Daily Show* is an iconic prank by the prankster Jon Stewart in an attempt to correct the way media is used in politics.

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1. For convenience and to avoid convolution, TDS is used to refer to *TDS with Jon Stewart* instead of *TDS with Trevor Noah,* the name of the show at the time of this essay. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. That is out of the scope of this discussion. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. The author admits that he does not know about this popular TV show before actually researching the spoonerism and finding out that it has a high rating with a medium-large fanbase. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)