

The Daily Show Indecision 2004: The Republican Voice versus the Democratic Breadth

We Americans didn't want to know, and you had the courtesy not to try to find out. Those were good times, as far as we knew. But, listen, let's review the rules. Here's how it works. The President makes the decisions, he's the decider. The press secretary announces those decisions, and you people of the press type those decisions down. Make, announce, type. Put them through a spell check and go home. Get to know your family again. Make love to your wife. Write that novel you got kicking around in your head. You know, the one about the intrepid Washington reporter with the courage to stand up to the administration. You know, fiction.

- Stephen Colbert at the 2006 White House Correspondents Dinner, April 2006.

Over the past years, the media has been accused of having a liberal bias. The Daily Show faces the brunt of the criticism with their “fake news” program that highlights liberal ideas and openly criticizes policies of the Bush administration. In 2004, the Daily Show created its own series to cover the presidential race entitled Indecision 2004. The Democrat and Republican Conventions were each covered in four consecutive episodes in July and September. Assuming that the “liberal bias” of the Daily Show helped filter the content shown during convention coverage, it could be inferred that the Democrats were covered more favorably than the Republicans. However, when isolating and analyzing the convention coverage from the DNC and RNC, the Daily Show’s coverage better highlights Republican ideals and message.

The DNC was covered from July 27 to the 30th with the series title featuring the Democrat’s “Race to the White House.” The RNC was taped later from August 31st to September 3rd, and was entitled “Target New York.” Each series contained four episodes covering convention highlights and in-house interviews with John Stewart. By analyzing the sound and image bites of the convention coverage, the noted strength of the Republican party to speak in “one voice” was clearly shown. This study provides an analysis of the speakers shown, topics covered, and subsequent commentary. While the clips of Republicans focus on topics related to the war in Iraq, homeland security, and Bush’s promise to keep America safer, the clips of the Democrats fail to produce a unifying theme and message.

Literature Review:

The potential effect of the Daily Show's coverage to influence viewers has been studied in the past years through the presentation of sound and image bites. Scheuer and others agree that "television is the dominant medium of a media-dominated age" and effective because it "manipulates our emotions, numbs us with stereotypes, saturates us with the trivial and the superficial" (1; 6). Scheuer also notes how simplicity drives the television message and "because of this language (sound bites), television favors certain political ideas and disfavors others. The electronic culture fragments information into isolated, dramatic particles and resists longer, more complex messages" (10). Liberal ideas are then naturally challenged, as they appear more complex and progressive. "Simplicity, I will suggest, is epitomically conservative, whereas complexity is quintessentially progressive" (Scheuer, 10).

The existence of televised political coverage then enables journalists and commentators to transmit messages to the common public. They are able to take events and sound bites and treat them "as raw material to be taken apart, combined with other sounds and images, and reintegrated into a new narrative" (Hallin, 9-10). The Daily Show adds a humorous component to its reporting of political news, which diminishes the distance between the viewer and the situations being reported on. "Humor can enable people to confront authority, to diminish it, to reduce its distance and majesty, thereby revealing authority holders as imperfect mortals, error-prone humans, ordinary people unworthy of special respect, deference and continuation in office" (Paletz, 8). Hallin went farther to note the feeling of public efficacy derived from political commentary. "Often it was extremely interesting...to hear a politician, or even once in awhile a community leader or ordinary voter, speak an entire paragraph. We had a feeling of understanding something of the person's character and the logic of his or her argument that a 10

second sound bite can never provide. One also had a feeling of being able to judge for oneself” (Hallin, 19). Bucy and Grabe also emphasized the importance of image bites because “nonverbal emotional displays of leaders can serve as a potent vehicle for expression” (659). The study of these sound and image bites in political news coverage, even the “fake news” of the Daily Show enables valid conclusions to be drawn about the effect of potential communications on the electorate.

Method of Content Analysis:

The goal of the analysis was to find a way to distinguish the content of the Democratic and Republican coverage in a way that was measurable. The best method to do this was to pick out direct points of reference that would occur frequently in coverage of both conventions. The compiled coding sheets are available for reference in the appendix of this paper.

The first thing coded for was the ways to define Democrats and Republicans in the episodes and who made those statements. Examples of this included the Daily Show’s opening segment, which defined the Democratic Convention as featuring “black people, trial lawyers...celebrities who believe in their hearts that they’re helping but really aren’t.” The coded definitions were only those that meant to apply to the party as a whole and not individual people or the nominees. By noting only the generalizations for the party, conclusions can be drawn about a party as a whole, rather than one representative of it.

There was also a distinction made between references to the party rather than the convention. The coding sheet marked references to the Democratic National Convention and Republican National convention. The messages coded in this section noted the themes presented at the convention and general remarks made by commentators about the event. The intent of marking down the ways in which the parties and convention were defined was to note the

differences not only between the parties themselves, but the ways in which the opposition party was referenced by the other.

The third point of analysis for the convention coverage was the references to the nominated candidates, John Kerry and George W. Bush. This type of analysis provides insight to how the opposition party defines the other candidate while also presenting their own. The main point of a convention is to introduce a Presidential candidate to the nation and so the ways they are defined are crucial.

In addition to noting references made to specific candidates and parties, the coding sheet accounted for blatant attacks made by one party on the other, and in some cases, attacks made by one party on itself. Attacks were only marked when one person made a direct reference to a party with a subsequent statement or negative tone. The attacks were labeled as issue or character based. The reason for making this distinction is to note whether there was a significant difference in the type of partisan attacks.

The speaker clips shown in the convention coverage represent the party's message. The coding sheet included the clip of every speaker who was not a correspondent for the Daily Show at each respective convention. The coding for each speaker included their title, talking point, length of time shown in the clip and the context in which they were shown. The context varied in three mediums: either a collection of video clips chosen by the Daily Show, a speech on the convention floor, or an interview in the Daily Show's studio. All of the time measurements were taken in seconds to be able to make comparisons more accurate.

The last two things coded for were the actual length of sound and image bite coverage of the two conventions. Sound bites were only measured when someone who represented the convention, not the Daily Show's representative, was heard. Image bites were taken when a person was shown, but not heard. The measurements do not overlap and adding them would

denote the entire length of time the convention was covered for both parties. Sound and image bites of the convention do not include the studio interviews by Stewart or commentary from the Daily Show correspondents. The intent of this analysis is to show that the message from the clips of actual convention coverage and subsequent commentary from direct party and Daily Show representatives themselves produce a message that can then be interpreted by a viewer.

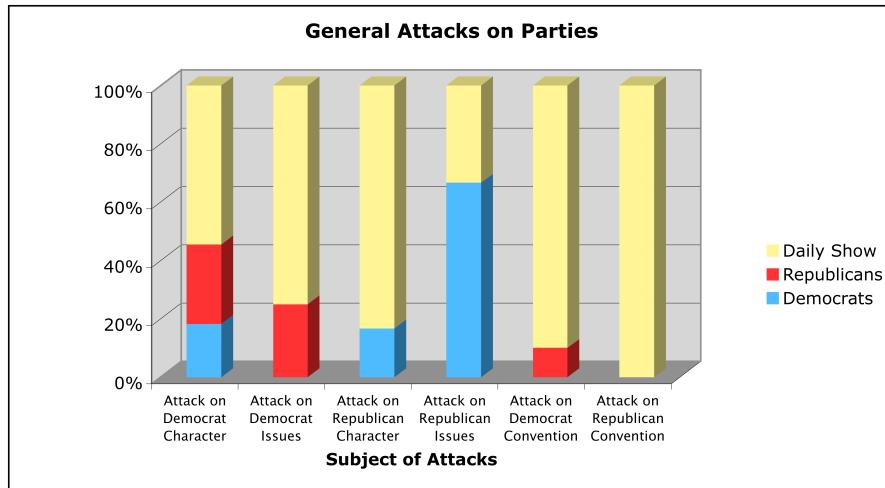
Results:

The results of the content analysis show that there is a more unified message delivered by the Republicans through the Daily Show's convention coverage. The first two references coded for were ways to define the parties and the conventions generally. This analysis was more focused on the rhetoric used by both the parties. In both series of convention coverage, the terms to define Republicans and Democrats came from the Daily Show correspondents and other media figureheads. Every episode in the "Race to the White House" series opened with an announcer proclaiming the convention featured "black people, trial lawyers, unifying anger, organized labor, godless sodomites, and abortion for everybody,..." A serious tone was not associated with the message, but the viewer is introduced to Democratic coverage by their stereotypes. Furthermore, when Stewart is talking about the theme delivered by the Democrats, he mockingly insinuates that they are "laying it on too thick." The viewers are encouraged to view the clips as very rhetorical, so they would possibly then analyze the speeches from a more critical perspective. The statements made generalizing Republicans were much more directed and offensive. Stewart himself made these comments when generalizing the GOP convention to be a lot of "white men." Stephen Colbert also criticized the Republican's management of convention coverage to falsely highlight their small number of minority members, "if you're a non-Caucasian Republican, you got yourself a heaping helping of face time."

The commentary on the Republican's relationship with minorities continued when coding the ways in which the two conventions were described. The opponent's convention was mentioned only once during the Republican convention and not at all during the Democrat's. The attack on the Democratic Convention came from Arnold Schwarzenegger when he described it to be as the same as his movie, "True Lies." All of the other references to the Democratic convention, with the exception of one made by Gov. Bill Richardson were statements made by Daily Show correspondents. John Stewart called the convention a "Dance Party" three times and immediately switched to image bites of delegates dancing in their seats. There was no parallel mention of this jovial spirit during the Republican convention. The constant theme of the message describing the Democratic convention was insisting that the event was a "farce, a scripted stage managed event, it's not news, it's not even fake news." Stewart went further than Colbert to say that both conventions merely resembled "infomercials."

While the commentary for the Democratic convention targeted their energized spirit and mocked the event itself, the Daily Show's commentary for the Republican convention was much more directed towards the Republican character. Steward described the convention atmosphere as a time when "Disneyworld closes for gay couples" and Colbert reminded the viewers that "we're doing the same show tonight – homosexual white men." Five out of the nine mentions by the Daily Show about the Republican convention mentioned homeland security and the Republican theme of a "safer and stronger America." Despite what could be viewed as negative commentary, "is it tonight that they exploit 9/11 or is tonight empty promises for the future?" the constant associations of the Republicans to homeland security issues could also serve to reinforce their talking points.

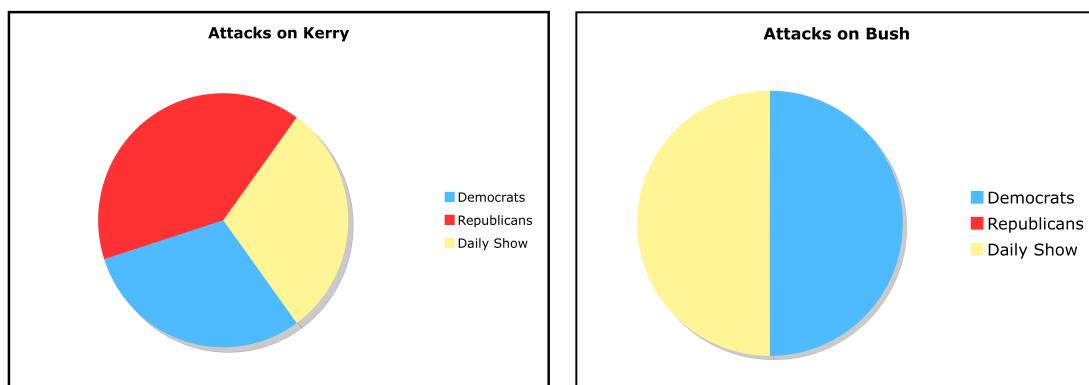
	Democrats	Republicans	Daily Show	Total
Attack on Democrat Character	2	3	6	11
Attack on Democrat Issues	0	1	3	4
Attack on Republican Character	1	0	5	6
Attack on Republican Issues	4	0	2	6
Attack on Democrat Convention	0	1	9	10
Attack on Republican Convention	0	0	3	3



The graph further emphasizes how the Democrats did not make any attacks on the Republican's convention, while the Republicans not only attacked them, but also kept their message about themselves positive.

The following table and charts show the differences in commentary related to the Republican and Democrat nominees.

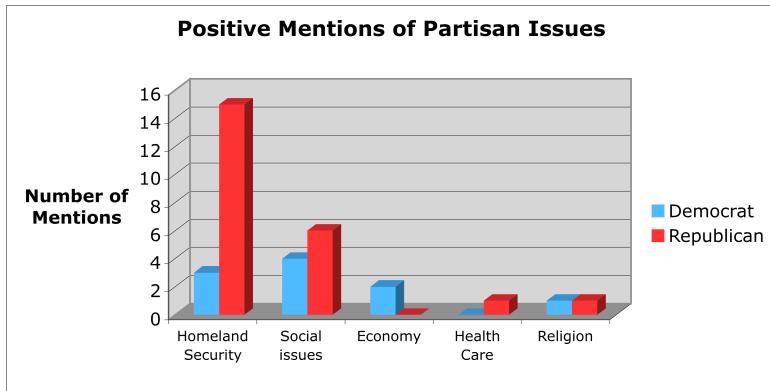
	Democrats	Republicans	Daily Show	Total
Attack on Bush	5	0	5	10
Attack on Kerry	3	4	3	10



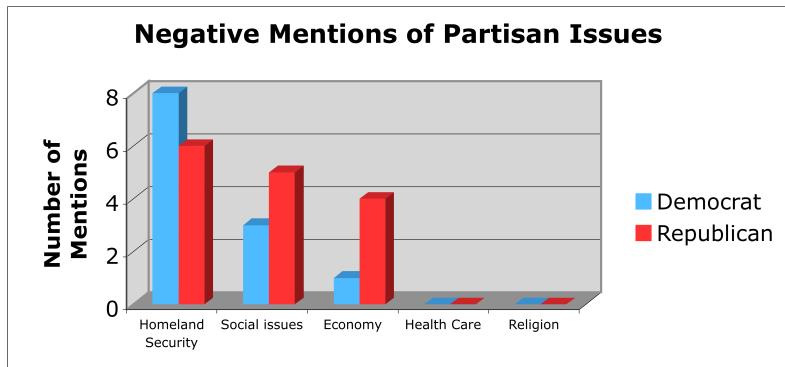
The charts clearly show that the Republicans did not make any attacks on their own candidate, yet the Democrats made three direct attacks on Kerry. Those attacks came from Democratic congressman Zell Miller who spoke at the Republican convention to express his disdain for John Kerry. Miller did not hesitate when describing John Kerry as “more wrong, more weak, and more wobbly than any other national figure” and proclaiming that “Kerry would let Paris decide when America needs defending.” The Daily Show included the clips of Miller’s speech and spent several minutes discussing why a Democrat would attack his own party. Miller further emphasized the Republicans’ talking points against the Democrats as John McCain questioned whether John Kerry had shot his dog. While the table shows both nominees received an equal number of attacks, none of George W. Bush’s attacks came from his own party. The nature of their attacks on John Kerry were about his war record and security issues, while the comments for Bush targeted on his character and intelligence. Joe Biden described how he knows the President “doesn’t read anything, but I think he watches television.” The content analysis showed that while both nominees were described in relation to a war context, the Republican Convention contained more pointed and direct attacks towards John Kerry’s record.

The results issues coded for related to the concept of issue ownership amongst the Democrats and Republicans. The coding sheet accounted for the number of positive and negative mentions between certain issues and the different parties.

Positive Mentions	Democrat	Republican
Homeland Security	3	15
Social issues	4	6
Economy	2	0
Health Care	0	1
Religion	1	1



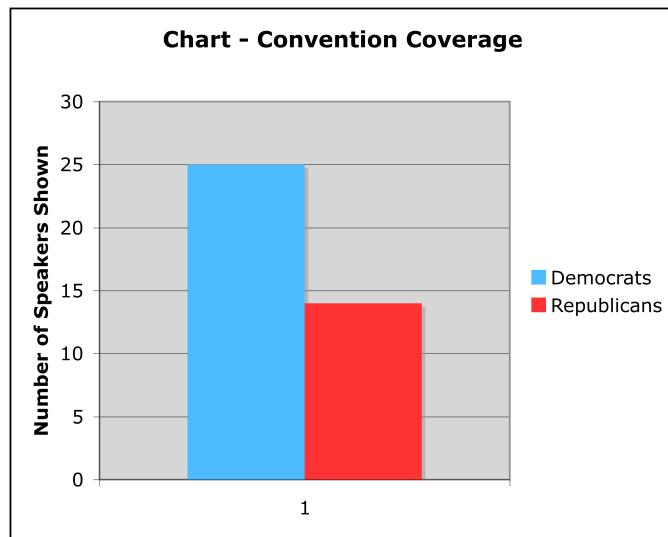
	Democrat	Republican
Homeland Security	8	6
Social issues	3	5
Economy	1	4
Health Care	0	0
Religion	0	0



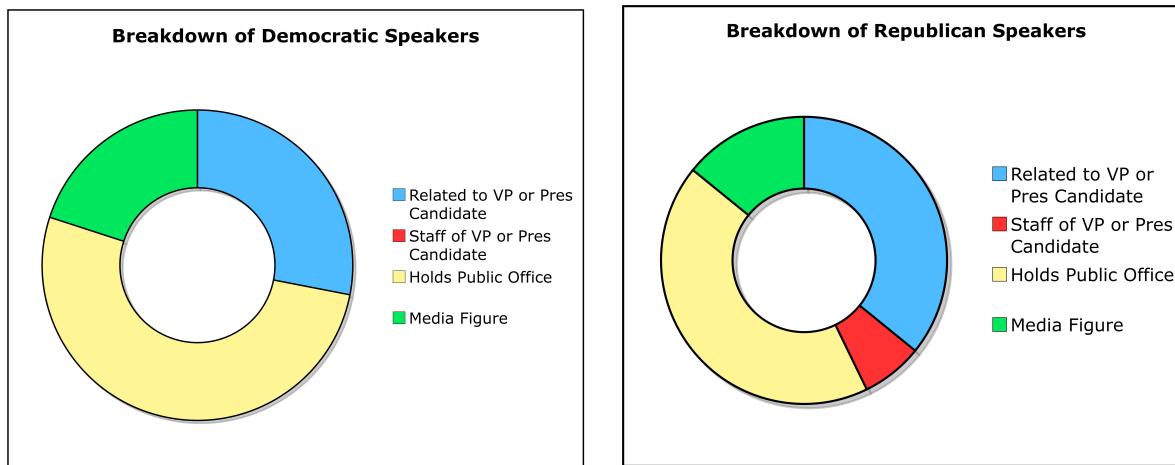
The most notable result is that the Republicans had 15 positive mentions associated with them and homeland security and only 6 negative comments. The Democrats, in relation, had only 3 positive mentions associated with security issues and 8 negative. The issues of health care and religion were not mentioned negatively for either the Democrats or Republicans. Religion was mentioned positively once for both parties and health care once for the Republicans. Social issues covered topics ranging from abortion to gay marriage. The Republicans and Democrats

balanced both their negative and positive associations with social issues so that no party clearly had more significant coverage.

Another main focus of the content analysis was to evaluate the number of speakers clips shown from the convention coverage and evaluate the topics and length of airtime. The graph clearly shows a difference between the sheer volumes of Democratic speaker clips as compared to Republicans.



The Democrats' coverage had 25 speakers, while the Republicans had only 14. The following pie charts highlight greater discrepancies between the types of speakers shown for both types of convention coverage.

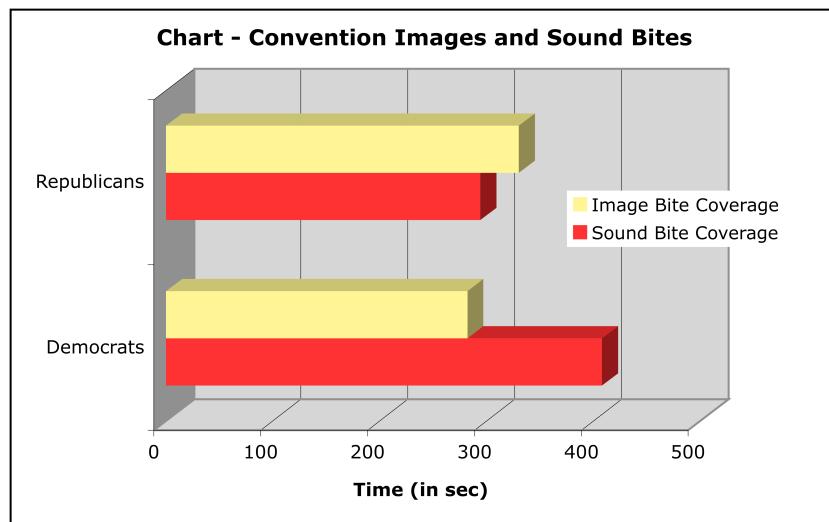


Over half of the Democratic speakers shown held some form of public office, while only six of the Republicans did. Seven of the Democrats were related to the President and Vice Presidential nominee and the remaining were media figureheads, such as celebrities, who spoke in support of the Democrats. In contrast, the Republicans had six of their speakers related to their nominee and one from the President's staff. While the number of speakers for those categories may be roughly the same, the Republicans had a smaller number of speakers overall, thus their percentage of speakers directly associated to the President and Vice President was 50%. It is also interesting to note that roughly one-third of the Democrats shown were candidates for the nomination themselves and five of them including Howard Dean, Joe Biden, Joe Lieberman, Wesley Clark, and Al Gore, openly talked about their attempts to run for President. Governor Dean shared stories from the campaign trail for 20 seconds and Former General Wesley Clark shared his war credentials and history for 14 seconds. The stories shared by elected public officials from the Republican convention evoked memories of 9/11 and the war on Iraq. Senator McCain talked about the Iraq War for 20 seconds while Governor Pataki and Mayor Giuliani referenced September 11, 2001 with a banner with those words in the background. No matter the sound bite shown, viewers would still receive an image of 9/11.

The coding sheets for the Republican and Democratic National Convention also show a difference between the number of in-house interviews Stewart conducted during each series. Stewart interviewed four people during the Republican convention and only two during his coverage of the Democrats. However, two of the interviews during the Republican coverage were with media commentators, Ted Koppel and Chris Matthews. The two other interviews were with Senator McCain and White House Communications Director Dan Bartlett, and they focused almost exclusively on the Republican message and President Bush's handling of the war. The two interviews with Democratic Governor Bill Richardson and Senator Joe Biden covered

some of the convention message, but also focused on the official's personal story and their advocacy issues. There was no significant discrepancy between the time each interviewee was allotted during coverage.

The length of time an image or sound bite is shown on television can be significant. The following graph shows that the Republicans were shown more than the Democrats, with 330 seconds devoted to image clips, while the Democrats had only 282.



The Democratic sound bites were longer totaling 408 seconds, while the Republicans had 330 seconds. The nominees themselves also received an equal amount of coverage with Kerry receiving 77 seconds of image and sound bites and Bush being heard for 61 seconds with no image clips. The majority of the Republican image bite coverage was pictures of delegates on the floor, while many of the Democratic clips were speakers walking out to the podium on stage. Looking only at the length of actual convention coverage, including video and audio footage of the DNC and RNC, the amount of time was roughly equal for both parties. The Democrats were heard and shown for 13% and the Republicans for 11.8% of the Daily Show's total series coverage for each convention.

Discussion:

It seems slightly farfetched to hypothesize that coverage of the Republican and Democratic National Convention on the Daily Show could provide some advantages for the Republican candidate. Especially in a media environment that is constantly accused of having a liberal bias and favoring progressive ideals. The conclusions drawn above are extrapolated evidence from a small sample size of only eight episodes. The size of the sample could have affected the results because only four episodes are being compared with their four counterparts. The Daily Show is a television show that has been established over years and it seems impractical to make general statements about its content on the basis of eight episodes.

Yet analyzing the content of the sound and image bites of the conventions and their subsequent commentaries show that the Republicans had a more focused and more disciplined message than the Democrats. The number of convention speakers shown for each the Democrats and Republicans support the image of a closed Bush administration. Auletta noted in his article in the New Yorker that “what seems new with the Bush White House is the unusual skill that it has shown in keeping much of the press at a distance while controlling the news agenda” (4). After studying the communications and public affairs office of the Bush White House, Martha Kumar explained that, “Bush has a great focus on the structure of his communications operation – advocating for him is not the same thing as explaining his decisions or actions” (15). It is this strength, which shines through the coverage by the Daily Show on the Republican convention. Most of the Republican speakers mentioned the war in Iraq, September 11th, and the ability of George Bush to help make America safer. Most of the Republican speakers were related to or staff for the Bush administration. The administration speaks with one voice and they “never get off their talking points” (Auletta, 4-5).

The Democrats, by contrast, through this analysis, are presented by their depth. Over half of the convention clips shown by the Daily Show were of previous candidates for the nomination and most of them even talked about their own Presidential ambitions. Senator Barack Obama and Congressman Dennis Kucinich talked about uniting America and the “hope of a skinny kid with a funny name who believes America has a place for him too.” But those hopes for unity fell short of the coverage offered by the Daily Show. Democrats attacked fellow Democrats and the coverage of Zell Miller’s speech at the Republican convention was the highlight of one episode. Not one Republican spoke ill of President Bush, and not once did Democrat Zell Miller speak positively about his own party.

The Daily Show commentary played a strong role in influencing the perception of Democrats and Republicans by the viewers. When referencing the nominating candidate, the Daily Show was responsible for the majority of insults against President Bush. Their video montages echoed Bush’s ability to control the media with the headline, “George W. Bush: Because He Says So.” There is no doubt that reporters “see the White House as a fortress” (Auletta, 2). The Daily Show introduced John Kerry in their montage to be the alternative choice, “Because He’s Not George Bush.” Despite the clear insult towards the President’s authority, the viewers associate the images of John Kerry constantly with George Bush. Kerry and the Democrats are unable to dictate the message.

One possible reason for the inability of the Democrats to control the message is the circumstances surrounding the 2004 campaign. The Republicans were facing a re-election year, so President Bush did not have to go through the vetting stage at the same time as John Kerry. The Democratic convention discussed the trials that took place through the nominating process. Joe Lieberman discussed how there was almost a “three way tie” for third place. Governor Dean shared stories about his campaign and the Daily Show highlighted his famous scream. Although

the chair of the convention, Bill Richardson stated that this convention was a “build up to tell the story of Senator John Kerry,” the story was lost amongst the breadth of speakers and inner party attacks.

Another subtle influence on the coverage of the two conventions was their locations. The Democratic convention was held in Boston, Senator Kerry’s home state. The Daily Show had to stay in travel accommodations and did not have their familiar set available. For the Republican convention, the Daily Show was on its home turf. They had more in studio interviews during their Republican coverage, possibly because more people were available to come onto the show and they had more access to other media commentators in New York like Ted Koppel and Chris Matthews. It is also no coincidence that the Republican National Convention was hosted in New York three years after the attacks on the World Trade Center. The President and other Republicans were able to stand outside the twin towers and further emphasize September 11th as the central focus of their re-election strategy.

This militant focus on message is also shown through the analysis of positive and negative issue associations with the Democrats and Republicans. The Republicans had 15 positive messages associated with them and homeland security. Mayor Rudy Giuliani spoke in front of a backdrop of September 11, 2001 that was in bolded white against a black screen. If the Daily Show wanted to clip any of his speech, they would inevitably be fed the image bite of 9/11 regardless of Giuliani’s words. In comparison, three issues, which would normally be associated positively with Democrats, social issues, health care and the economy, did not distinguish them more significantly than Republicans. In fact, the Republicans had more positive mentions in relation to social issues than the Democrats. They also had less negative associations with homeland security than the Democrats. The election of 2004 was arguably a referendum on the Bush administration’s ability to “keep America safer” and by noting the message of the

Democrats and Republicans in relation to that theory, the Republicans message was more emphasized and thus could be more directly extrapolated upon by the viewers.

Conclusion:

The coverage of the Daily Show's Indecision 2004 highlighted the ability of the Democrats and Republicans to present a message through their respective conventions. Although the Daily Show is known as one of the most liberal television programs on TV, the direct convention coverage showed that the Republicans are more organized, more disciplined, and have a more coherent message. This reflects the strategy of President Bush that was also echoed by a senior official weeks after the Republican convention. "We're an empire now, and when we act, we create our own reality. And while you're studying that reality -- judiciously, as you will -- we'll act again, creating other new realities, which you can study too, and that's how things will sort out. We're history's actors . . . and you, all of you, will be left to just study what we do" (Suskind, 2004). The Democrats' attempt to create a coherent message from a nomination field of over seven candidates and the unsure war record of the nominating candidate clearly pales in comparison.

The next question then, is to ask why coverage assumed to be skewed in one direction actually promotes another as a result of its failure to diminish the effects of the Republicans' talking points. It is assumed that "journalists can create importance and certify authority as much as reflect it, in deciding who should speak on what subjects under what circumstances" (Cook, 87), but that is not reflective in John Stewart's coverage of the conventions. The entire Republican Convention reflected a well-oiled machine of speakers and unflinching support for the current President. It would have been difficult for the Daily Show to find footage of the actual convention that showed otherwise. Chris Matthews of MSNBC produced insight into this

phenomenon two years later, after Stephen Colbert gave his speech at the annual White House Correspondents Dinner. He proclaimed that “the president is our head of state, not just a politician” and because of that, is he subject to different rules pertaining to the scrutiny of his campaign strategy and message (Matthews, 2006)? Analysis of the Daily Show’s presentation of Indecision 2004 exposes how the Republican “voice” will effectively and inevitably break through their political coverage.

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