Does fake news give us the real story?

Is Jon Stewart a philosopher?

Can watching The Daily Show make you smarter?

Should The Daily Show play such a prominent role in our news culture?

Where does “Stephen Colbert” end and Stephen Colbert begin?

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Jason Holt is Associate Professor at Acadia University. He is author of Blindsight and the Nature of Consciousness, co-author of Flexibility: A Concise Guide, and editor of The Daily Show and Philosophy and Philosophy of Sport: Core Readings.

William Irwin is Professor of Philosophy at King’s College. He originated the philosophy and popular culture genre of books as co-editor of the bestselling The Simpsons and Philosophy and has overseen recent titles including Superman and Philosophy, Black Sabbath and Philosophy, and Spider-Man and Philosophy.

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Acknowledgments

Thanks to everyone at Wiley-Blackwell, especially Series Editor Bill Irwin, for making this book possible. Thanks also to the contributors, whose patient hard work made it actual. Thanks to The Daily Show (and The Colbert Report) for continuing to give so much to write about, and to those of you fan enough to buy this book.
Introduction
From Wiley-Blackwell’s
World Philosophy Headquarters
in Malden

Welcome to The Ultimate Daily Show and Philosophy. I’m your editor, Jason Holt, and let me just say first off, thanks for not being deterred by the title. How brash to dub this the “ultimate” with the show still in production, popular as ever. Ultimate indeed! Other modifiers—“more,” “2.0,” “TNG,” and such were considered, but here we are at “ultimate.” If you thought the first edition was amazing, or pretty good, or just adequate, brace yourself. This one’s, well, better.

I think we’re okay with the subtitle: More Moments of Zen, More Indecision Theory. Everyone who’s seen The Daily Show knows its practice of ending each show with a clip, the so-called moment of Zen. What could be more philosophical than a moment of Zen? When putting together the original volume in 2006, I supposed one of the contributors would explain moments of Zen, perhaps even devoting a chapter to the subject. Didn’t happen. But, when the call came to put together this “ultimate” edition you now hold in your hand, or “on” your digital thingamabob, or listen to as an audiobook, it didn’t happen either. So, I guess I’ll have to say something about it here. It’s a matter of conscience. So what are moments of Zen? Short video clips, usually of politicians or other public figures, which encapsulate an implicit yet evident point: be it the hypocrisy of the speaker, an obvious truth that’s gone unsaid, criticism that’s been marginalized, and so on. What do such often-poignant clips have to do with Zen? Well, not
much, really. At most there might be a kind of loose acknowledgment by *The Daily Show* of the importance of simplicity, and of not trying to explicitly utter what perhaps can only, or best, be gestured at. Seems a bit “Zennish,” even if it’s not Zen.

As for “indecision theory,” fans of *The Daily Show* are familiar with their longstanding election coverage tag: “Indecision 20__” (there having been Indecisions 2000, 2004, 2008, and 2012, plus midterm Indecisions 2002, 2006, and 2010—although “Democalypse 2012” seems to have proved a more popular label, at least up until Stewart and Colbert’s joint election-night coverage). There’s a branch of philosophy that studies how principles of rationality apply to decision-making: decision theory. As this book is—yes—philosophy, it only makes sense to combine the two, especially as one of *The Daily Show*’s ongoing concerns is how to critically evaluate information sources in making rational political choices.

It has been gratifying that in the years since the original edition was published there has been a palpable increase in scholarly interest in *The Daily Show* and its increasingly significant role in contemporary culture—whether this is seen through the lens of the alleged “*Daily Show* effect” or, more optimistically, that of acknowledging what is truly special—even profound—about the particular humor of the show. You know that *The Daily Show* is funny, really funny, and that the performers and writers are pretty sharp. You also know that it’s much more than run-of-the-mill late night entertainment. In its over fifteen-year run *The Daily Show* has remained topical, and has achieved an undeniable cultural significance, as fit for ranting blogs as for academic treatises.

Why philosophy? Not only does *The Daily Show* tackle issues that interest philosophers and that matter in many people’s daily lives, it does so in instructive ways that deserve and are well-served by philosophical treatment. Contemporary philosophers have even appeared as guests on the show. Each chapter in this book shows why and how *The Daily Show* is philosophically engaging and significant. If you’re hoping that *The Colbert Report* also gets a going-over, you won’t be disappointed.

Like the show itself, this book is divided into five “segments.” We start by focusing on fake news: what’s distinctive about it, what it does, how it works (“headlines”). Then we segue into discussions of Jon Stewart as a (kind of) philosopher figure, reflecting deep concerns
some of which have existed for—literally—millennia (“live report”). Next comes politics and critical thinking (“field report”), followed by religion and culture (“interview”), and finally topics like The Colbert Report that are “Daily Show adjacent” (“moment of Zen”).

On behalf of all the Senior Philosophical Correspondents here—and it’s a cliché, I know, but it’s also true—we hope you enjoy reading the book as much as we did writing it.
Segment 1

HEADLINES

FAUX NEWS IS GOOD NEWS
Chapter 1

Rallying Against the Conflictinator
Jon Stewart, Neil Postman, and Entertainment Bias

Gerald J. Erion

While *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* is certainly entertaining, it can also deliver a deeper analysis of our contemporary media environment. Indeed, hidden within many of host Jon Stewart’s funniest jokes are implicit critiques of the way television tends to conduct its public discussions of important issues. For instance, Stewart’s opening rundown of the news as covered by the 24-hour cable networks doesn’t merely ridicule the day’s major players and events; often, it goes even further, making fun of television’s most basic reporting and presentation techniques. In this way, over-the-top visual and audio elements, attractive but superficial “Senior Correspondents,” and all the other trappings of TV newscasts become fodder for *The Daily Show*’s writing staff. Not simply a “fake news” program, then, *The Daily Show* offers a rare brand of humor that requires its audience to recognize a more serious and philosophical criticism of contemporary television journalism.

From time to time, Stewart takes these implicit criticisms of contemporary media and makes them explicit. Such was the case during his October 2004 appearance on CNN’s *Crossfire*, during which he begged his hosts to “stop hurting America” with their substitution
of entertaining pseudo-journalism for serious reporting and debate. Through this bold, format-breaking effort, Stewart highlighted the difference between thoughtful discussion and the theater of today’s vapid television punditry. Subsequent exchanges with CNBC’s Jim Cramer and Fox’s Chris Wallace allowed Stewart to further advance his argument. And as we will see, Stewart’s analysis echoes that of the celebrated New York University media theorist Neil Postman, whose discerning insights seem to ground some of The Daily Show’s sharpest comic bits.

**Amusing Ourselves to Death**

Postman’s *Amusing Ourselves to Death* is a book that aims to show how the media we use to communicate with one another can influence the content of our conversations. Postman acknowledges a significant intellectual debt to Marshall McLuhan, and sees his own thesis as something of a revised version of McLuhan’s famous pronouncement that “the medium is the message.” However, Postman extends McLuhan’s ideas in ways that are both distinctive and significant.

For example, consider Postman’s discussion of smoke signals. While the medium of smoke might be an effective way to communicate relatively simple messages over intermediate distances, many other types of messages can’t be carried this way. Philosophical arguments, for instance, would be especially difficult to conduct with smoke signals because, as Postman puts it,

> Puffs of smoke are insufficiently complex to express ideas on the nature of existence [or other philosophical concepts], and even if they were not, a Cherokee philosopher would run short of either wood or blankets long before he reached his second axiom. You cannot use smoke to do philosophy. Its form excludes the content.

So, the medium of smoke has a significant influence on the kinds of content it can convey. At a minimum, smoke signaling restricts both the complexity and the duration of the messages it carries. Likewise, we shall see that television influences its content, and that The Daily Show’s jokes often poke fun at these effects.
The Huxleyan Warning

Now, as Postman sees it, all media shape their content, and in a multitude of different ways. He writes: “[Mine] is an argument that fixes its attention on the forms of human conversation, and postulates that how we are obliged to conduct such conversations will have the strongest possible influence on what ideas we can conveniently express.” This goes not only for smoke signals, but also for speech and written language, and even for the electronic media that are so important in our lives today.

Of particular interest is the ubiquitous medium of television, which Postman sees as a historic extension of such earlier media as the telegraph, photography, radio, and film. How does television influence its content, according to Postman? His theory is complex, but in essence it maintains that television’s inherent “bias” implies a tendency to render its content—even its most important news reporting, political and religious discussion, and educational instruction—more entertaining than it would be otherwise, and consequently less serious, less rational, less relevant, and less coherent as well.

The fact that television provides entertainment isn’t, in and of itself, a problem for Postman. However, he warns that dire consequences can result for cultures in which the most important public discourse, conducted via television, becomes little more than irrational, irrelevant, and incoherent entertainment. Again, we shall see that this is a point often suggested by The Daily Show’s biting satire. In a healthy democracy, the open discussion of important issues should be serious, rational, and coherent. But such discussion is often difficult and time-consuming, and thus incompatible with television’s drive to entertain. So, it’s hardly surprising to see television serving up important news analyses in short sound bites surrounded by irrelevant graphics and video footage, or substituting half-minute ad spots for substantial political debates. On television, thoughtful conversations about serious issues are reserved for only the lowest-rated niche programs. Just as ventriloquism and mime don’t play well on radio, “thinking does not play well on television.” Instead, television serves as a hospitable home for the sort of “gut”-based discourse satirically championed by Daily Show alum Stephen Colbert.

When we grow comfortable with the substitution of televised entertainment for serious public discourse, we begin the process of
(to use Postman’s words) “amusing ourselves to death.” As Postman explains, this form of cultural corrosion is like that described in Aldous Huxley’s classic novel *Brave New World*, in which the citizenry is comfortably and willingly distracted by the pleasures of *soma*, Centrifugal Bumble-puppy, and the feelies.8

**Postman and Television News**

To exemplify these points, Postman details some of the many ways in which television tends to degrade the presentation of its news content. Consider his explanation of the ironic title of his chapter on television news, “Now … This”: “There is no murder so brutal, no earthquake so devastating, no political blunder so costly—for that matter, no ball score so tantalizing or weather report so threatening—that it cannot be erased from our minds by a newscaster saying ‘Now … this’.”9 As Postman sees it, then, the use of “Now … this” is a tacit admission of the incoherence of television news, and “a compact metaphor for the discontinuities in so much that passes for public discourse in present-day America.”10

Of course, Postman believes that television does more to the news than disrupt its coherence. Revisiting his general thesis about how television influences its content, Postman also claims that televised news is irrational, irrelevant, and trivial. As he explains, television presents us “not only with fragmented news but news without context, without consequences, without value, and therefore without essential seriousness; that is to say, news as pure entertainment.”11 So, even weighty news subjects are driven to become entertaining under the influence of television, as the typical American newscast showcases a company of attractive reporters skipping from spectacular (if insignificant) local stories to spectacular (if insignificant) international stories, to celebrity gossip, to weather forecasts, to sports scores, to a closing story about babies or puppies or kittens. Commercials are scattered throughout. Music, graphics, and captivating video footage add touches of theater to the program. Quick transitions from one segment to the next ensure that audience members don’t become bored—or troubled—for long.12 Instead of useful and important information, then, viewers are treated to the impotent but entertaining trivia that Postman calls “disinformation,” which isn’t necessarily false
but *misleading*, creating the *illusion of knowing* and undermining one’s motivation to learn more.\textsuperscript{13} Consequently, Postman writes, “Americans are the best entertained and quite likely the least well-informed people in the Western world.”\textsuperscript{14}

**The Daily Show and Television News**

Now, as far as we can tell, the writing staff of *The Daily Show* doesn’t publicly acknowledge Postman’s intellectual influence.\textsuperscript{15} Nonetheless, it’s clear that these general ideas about television news, whatever their sources, can help us to see the significance of some of the program’s wittiest and most inspired jokes. *The Daily Show* is often described as a “fake news” program, but in fact, it’s more than that. Much of its humor rests on Postman-like insights that highlight the peculiar ways in which the medium of television inevitably influences the news that it conveys.

For example, many episodes of *The Daily Show* begin with Stewart’s selected rundown of the day’s headlines as reported by the major television news networks. A comedy show that only does “fake news” could simply build jokes around the content of such headlines, or perhaps report fictional news stories in a humorous manner. On *The Daily Show*, though, the way in which television seems destined to render its news as entertainment frequently serves as the basis for these opening segments. Stewart and company often joke about the major networks’ coverage of natural disasters, for instance. In many of these cases they simply replay absurd clips of television reporters standing outside during hurricanes and snowstorms, sitting in cars with giant thermometers during heat waves, or paddling canoes through inch-deep “flooded” city streets. Other pieces mock the way hordes of television reporters cover celebrity weddings, arrests, and criminal trials. Segments like “The Less You Know” and “International Pamphlet” poke fun at the shallowness of typical television news coverage. Exchanges between Stewart and his Senior Correspondents—“The Best F#@king News Team Ever”—parody their good-looking but sometimes ill-informed journalistic counterparts.\textsuperscript{16} Clever graphics packages (“Indecision 2012,” “Clusterf#@k to the Poor House,” “Baracknophobia,” “Mess O’ Potamia,” “Crises in Israfghyianonanaq,” and so on) offer mocking imitations of the logos, diagrams, and pictorial illustrations so essential to today’s television
newscasts. With these segments and graphics, *The Daily Show* is clearly doing more than just “fake news.” It is offering deep satire that relies on its audience’s appreciation of the substance of Postman’s thesis, that television has a significant and sometimes adverse influence on the news content it reports.

At this point, one might be tempted to suggest that *The Daily Show* simply furthers the unfortunate transformation of reporting into entertainment, as if *The Daily Show* were itself a source of news to its audience members. For instance, Bill O’Reilly (host of the Fox News program *The O’Reilly Factor*) once famously dubbed viewers of *The Daily Show* “stoned slackers” who “get their news from Jon Stewart.” However, at least one prominent study from the Annenberg Public Policy Center found that viewers of *The Daily Show* were better informed about the positions and backgrounds of candidates in the 2004 US Presidential Campaign than most others. More recent surveys by the Pew Research Center and Farleigh Dickinson University’s PublicMind project have also found relatively high levels of current affairs knowledge in *The Daily Show*’s audience. Indeed, it’s difficult to see how the deepest *Daily Show* jokes could be appreciated by an audience unaware of the relevant social, political, and other newsworthy issues. As Annenberg analyst Dannagal Goldthwaite Young put it in a press release announcing the Center’s Election Survey results, “*The Daily Show* assumes a fairly high level of political knowledge on the part of its audience.”

**Conversation and Crossfire**

Postman’s ideas about television also illuminate Stewart’s legendary October 2004 appearance on CNN’s *Crossfire*. First aired in 1982, *Crossfire* was a long-running staple of CNN’s lineup that featured curt discussion by hosts and guests supposedly representing both left- and right-wing positions on controversial political issues. Co-hosting for Stewart’s visit were the unsuspecting Paul Begala and Tucker Carlson, neither of whom seemed prepared for what would become an extraordinary exchange. Instead of simply participating in a typical *Crossfire*-style debate (described by more than one observer as a “shoutfest”), Stewart quickly launched into a Postman-like criticism of the shallow and partisan punditry that passes for serious discussion on such programs.
In fact, this theme is one that Stewart had explored before his Crossfire appearance. An earlier Daily Show segment called “Great Moments in Punditry as Read by Children” drew laughs simply by having children read from transcripts of shows like Crossfire. Moreover, during a 2003 interview with Bill Moyers, Stewart claimed that both Crossfire and its MSNBC counterpart Hardball were “equally dispiriting” in the way their formats degrade political discourse. And in a 2002 interview with CNN’s Howard Kurtz, Stewart foreshadowed his Crossfire appearance by chiding the news network for offering entertainers instead of “real journalists” and pleaded, “You’re the news .... People need you. Help us. Help us.”

On the Crossfire set, Stewart offered a sustained attack against the superficial conversational style of television. Before either Begala or Carlson could catch his balance, Stewart was already begging them to “stop, stop, stop, stop hurting America” with their “partisan hackery,” which he claimed serves only politicians and corporations and does nothing to help ordinary citizens make informed decisions. “We need help from the media,” Stewart said, “and they’re hurting us.” Carlson tried to counter Stewart’s charges with the allegation that Stewart himself had been too lenient during the Daily Show appearance of 2004 presidential candidate John Kerry. Stewart replied that there was a fundamental difference between journalism and comedy, snapping back, “I didn’t realize that … the news organizations look to [The Daily Show’s home network] Comedy Central for their cues on integrity.” And when Begala tried to defend the Crossfire format by claiming that it was a “debate show,” Stewart pointed to Carlson’s trademark bow tie and charged, “you’re doing theater, when you should be doing debate.” Finally, Stewart charged, “You have a responsibility to the public discourse, and you fail miserably.” Because of such remarks, Stewart’s Crossfire appearance produced a rare opportunity for reflecting about the effects of television on public discourse. Indeed, the incident sparked a great deal of follow-up conversation in The New York Times, Newsweek, and countless other outlets.

We can see, once again, that these are the sorts of criticisms developed by Postman in Amusing Ourselves to Death. His deepest discussion of such issues concerns ABC’s controversial 1983 broadcast of the film The Day After, which depicted the bleak effects of a nuclear strike on the American Midwest. Given the film’s grave subject matter, ABC decided to follow it with a roundtable session moderated by Ted
Koppel and featuring such notable figures as Henry Kissinger, Elie Wiesel, Carl Sagan, and William F. Buckley. With a serious theme and a guest list of unquestionable distinction, Koppel proceeded to march his cast through a fragmented 80 minutes of “conversation” in which the participants rarely engaged one another on points of substance. Instead, they used their camera time to push whatever points they had decided to make beforehand, without regard to the contributions of their fellow participants. Postman writes:

Each of the six men was given approximately five minutes to say something about the subject. There was, however, no agreement on exactly what the subject was, and no one felt obliged to respond to anything anyone else had said. In fact, it would have been difficult to do so, since the participants were called upon seriatim, as if they were finalists in a beauty contest.

To put it another way, this wasn’t a genuine discussion, but a pseudo-discussion warped by television’s drive to entertain. “There were no arguments or counterarguments, no scrutiny of assumptions, no explanations, no elaborations, no definitions,” and yet each of these elements is essential to genuine and thoughtful dialogue.

So, how did ABC go wrong? According to Postman, the root problem remains that thoughtful conversation just isn’t entertaining, and thus plays poorly on television. As a result, televised discussions about even the most serious of subjects tend to be rendered in forms that are more amusing or dramatic than reflective. On this, both Postman and the writing staff of The Daily Show seem to agree. Moreover, CNN President Jonathan Klein cited Stewart’s critique when he announced the cancellation of Crossfire in January 2005. In an interview with The Washington Post, Klein said, “I think [Stewart] made a good point about the noise level of these types of shows, which does nothing to illuminate the issues of the day.”

**Business News, CNBC, and Jim Cramer**

Stewart’s Crossfire appearance is noteworthy because it offers an unusually direct expression of his deeper media critique. Here we can find a relatively clear and sharp indictment of television news, rather than a more ambiguous presentation filtered through assorted bits of
comic material. And as if to make his critique even more forceful, Stewart followed up the Crossfire exchange with several additional instances of straightforward media criticism.

For example, Jim Cramer’s March 2009 appearance on The Daily Show, tagged “Brawl Street,” followed an extended buildup in which Stewart made repeated jokes at the expense of Cramer’s employer, the business news network CNBC.28 According to Stewart, CNBC and other such outlets had failed to adequately foresee (and perhaps forestall) the global financial crisis of 2008.29 Of course, this line of attack is a specific version of Stewart’s now familiar, Postman-like critique of television news; by focusing on popular entertainment-driven shows like Fast Money, Squawk Box, and Cramer’s own Mad Money, CNBC was (in Stewart’s view) neglecting its journalistic duties. Thus, CNBC and the other business news networks were in part responsible for a financial disaster that ultimately produced trillions of dollars worth of losses.

As he settled in for his Daily Show interview, Cramer offered a tepid defense of CNBC’s work. “We’ve made some mistakes,” he admitted. But when he claimed that “the regulators” needed to do a better job of policing short sales and other such “shenanigans,” Stewart pounced:

When you talk about the regulators, why not the financial news network? That’s the whole point of this. CNBC could be an incredibly powerful tool of illumination.

Once again, then, we see Stewart’s call for a more robust and vigilant form of television journalism. With the network’s significant talent and resources, CNBC might help to educate its viewers, thereby protecting them from nefarious CEOs, traders, hedge fund managers, and financial advisors. But as Stewart sees it (perhaps following Postman’s line), shows like Mad Money do little to further this sort of “illumination.” And to the suggestion that business news networks might provide the kind of serious journalistic inquiry that could have helped to lessen the destructive effects of the 2008 collapse, Cramer offered this sobering reply:

In the end, under the heat of Stewart’s repeated calls for journalistic reform in financial news reporting, Cramer relented: “How about if I try it?” The two men ended the interview with a handshake, and Stewart has offered few criticisms of Cramer in the years since. Nonetheless, the exchange became a sensation, with many commentators applauding Stewart’s performance.

**Fox News Sunday and TV’s Entertainment Bias**

Stewart’s roving critique of 24-hour cable TV news has included a June 2011 exchange on Fox News Sunday, an hour-long public affairs show that typically features extended newsmaker interviews followed by roundtable discussions with a rotating team of pundits. Stewart’s appearance on Fox News Sunday was particularly noteworthy given his steady criticism, over many years, of the entire Fox News network. Indeed, after a bit of banter, host Chris Wallace opened the conversation with a selection of quotes in which Stewart charged that Fox’s ideological conservatism undermined its journalistic integrity. To Stewart, Fox News was “a biased organization, relentlessly promoting an ideological agenda under the rubric of being a news organization.” Instead of a genuine news source, he maintained, Fox was “a relentless agenda-driven 24-hour news opinion propaganda delivery system.”

To counter such sweeping claims, Wallace suggested that mainstream news outlets promoted liberal causes and viewpoints; Fox News, then, could serve as an ideological counterweight to the left-leaning news divisions of networks like ABC, CBS, and NBC. Stewart’s response to Wallace largely bypassed the question of political bias to focus on the more fundamental issue of how the medium of television itself subtly shapes the content of television journalism. As he explained, the principal biases of television news are not political at all. Rather, “The bias of the mainstream media is toward sensationalism, conflict, and laziness.” To attract and maintain audiences, television news needs to follow the familiar formulas that make TV amusing, dramatic, or otherwise compelling. For example, zealous pundits who are quick to disagree and who are outrageous in their attacks on the opposition are especially welcome on the news networks. Meanwhile, careful and thoughtful discussion is marginalized, or edited out entirely. The resulting content