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Television

Is Jon Stewart the Most Trusted Man in America?

By [MICHIKO KAKUTANI](#)

IT'S been more than eight years since "The Daily Show With [Jon Stewart](#)" made its first foray into presidential politics with the presciently named Indecision 2000, and the difference in the show's approach to its coverage then and now provides a tongue-in-cheek measure of the show's striking evolution.

In 1999, the "Daily Show" correspondent [Steve Carell](#) struggled to talk his way off Senator [John McCain](#)'s overflow press bus — "a repository for outcasts, misfits and journalistic bottom-feeders" — and onto the actual Straight Talk Express, while at the 2000 Republican Convention Mr. Stewart self-deprecatingly promised exclusive coverage of "all the day's events — at least the ones we're allowed into." In this year's promotional spot for "The Daily Show's" convention coverage, the news newbies have been transformed into a swaggering A Team — "the best campaign team in the universe ever," working out of " 'The Daily Show' news-scraper: 117 stories, 73 situation rooms, 26 news tickers," and promising to bring "you all the news stories — first ... before it's even true."

Though this spot is the program's mocking sendup of itself and the news media's mania for self-promotion, it inadvertently gets at one very real truth: the emergence of "The Daily Show" as a genuine cultural and political force. When Americans were asked in a 2007 poll by the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press to name the journalist they most admired, Mr. Stewart, the fake news anchor, came in at No. 4, tied with the real news anchors [Brian Williams](#) and [Tom Brokaw](#) of [NBC](#), [Dan Rather](#) of CBS and Anderson Cooper of CNN. And a study this year from the center's Project for Excellence in Journalism concluded that " 'The Daily Show' is clearly impacting American dialogue" and "getting people to think critically about the public square."

While the show scrambled in its early years to book high-profile politicians, it has since become what Newsweek calls "the coolest pit stop on television," with presidential candidates, former presidents, world leaders and administration officials signing on as guests. One of the program's signature techniques — using video montages to show politicians contradicting themselves —

has been widely imitated by “real” news shows, while Mr. Stewart’s interviews with serious authors like Thomas Ricks, [George Packer](#), Seymour Hersh, Michael Beschloss and Reza Aslan have helped them and their books win a far wider audience than they otherwise might have had.

Most important, at a time when Fox, MSNBC and CNN routinely mix news and entertainment, larding their 24-hour schedules with bloviation fests and marathon coverage of sexual predators and dead celebrities, it’s been “The Daily Show” that has tenaciously tracked big, “super depressing” issues like the cherry-picking of prewar intelligence, the politicization of the Department of Justice and the efforts of the Bush White House to augment its executive power.

For that matter, the Comedy Central program — which is not above using silly sight gags and sophomoric sex jokes to get a laugh — has earned a devoted following that regards the broadcast as both the smartest, funniest show on television and a provocative and substantive source of news. “The Daily Show” resonates not only because it is wickedly funny but also because its keen sense of the absurd is perfectly attuned to an era in which cognitive dissonance has become a national epidemic. Indeed, Mr. Stewart’s frequent exclamation “Are you insane?!” seems a fitting refrain for a post-M*A*S*H, post-“Catch-22” reality, where the surreal and outrageous have become commonplace — an era kicked off by the wacko 2000 election standoff in Florida, rocked by the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11 and haunted by the fallout of a costly war waged on the premise of weapons of mass destruction that did not exist.

MR. STEWART describes his job as “throwing spitballs” from the back of the room and points out that “The Daily Show” mandate is to entertain, not inform. Still, he and his writers have energetically tackled the big issues of the day — “the stuff we find most interesting,” as he said in an interview at the show’s Midtown Manhattan offices, the stuff that gives them the most “agita,” the sometimes somber stories he refers to as his “morning cup of sadness.” And they’ve done so in ways that straight news programs cannot: speaking truth to power in blunt, sometimes profane language, while using satire and playful looniness to ensure that their political analysis never becomes solemn or pretentious.

“Hopefully the process is to spot things that would be grist for the funny mill,” Mr. Stewart, 45, said. “In some respects, the heavier subjects are the ones that are most loaded with opportunity because they have the most — you know, the difference between potential and kinetic energy? — they have the most potential energy, so to delve into that gives you the largest combustion, the most interest. I don’t mean for the audience. I mean for us. Everyone here is working too hard to do stuff we don’t care about.”

Offices for “The Daily Show” occupy a sprawling loftlike space that combines the energy of a newsroom with the laid-back vibe of an Internet start-up: many staff members wear jeans and flip-flops, and two amiable dogs wander the hallways. The day begins with a morning meeting where material harvested from 15 TiVos and even more newspapers, magazines and Web sites is reviewed. That meeting, Mr. Stewart said, “would be very unpleasant for most people to watch: it’s really a gathering of curmudgeons expressing frustration and upset, and the rest of the day is spent trying to mask or repress that through whatever creative devices we can find.”

The writers work throughout the morning on deadline pieces spawned by breaking news, as well as longer-term projects, trying to find, as Josh Lieb, a co-executive producer of the show, put it, stories that “make us angry in a whole new way.” By lunchtime, Mr. Stewart (who functions as the show’s managing editor and says he thinks of hosting as almost an afterthought) has begun reviewing headline jokes. By 3 p.m. a script is in; at 4:15, Mr. Stewart and the crew rehearse that script, along with assembled graphics, sound bites and montages. There is an hour or so for rewrites — which can be intense, newspaper-deadlinelike affairs — before a 6 o’clock taping with a live studio audience.

What the staff is always looking for, Mr. Stewart said, are “those types of stories that can, almost like the guy in ‘The Green Mile’ ” — the [Stephen King](#) story and film in which a character has the apparent ability to heal others by drawing out their ailments and pain — “suck in all the toxins and allow you to do something with it that is palatable.”

To make the more alarming subject matter digestible, the writers search for ways to frame the story, using an arsenal of techniques ranging from wordplay (“Mess O’Potamia,” “BADvertising”) to exercises in pure logic (deconstructing the administration’s talking points on the surge) to demented fantasy sequences (imagining Vice President [Dick Cheney](#) sending an army of orcs to attack Iran when he assumed the presidency briefly last year during President Bush’s colonoscopy).

Gitmo, the Elmo puppet from Guantánamo Bay, became a vehicle for expressing the writers’ “most agitated feelings about torture in a way that is — not to be too cute — that is not torture to listen to, and that is not purely strident,” Mr. Stewart said. And the cartoon strip “The Decider,” featuring Mr. Bush as a superhero who makes decisions “without fear of repercussion, consequence or correctness,” became a way to satirize the president’s penchant for making gut calls that sidestep the traditional policy-making process.

As the co-executive producer Rory Albanese noted, juxtapositions of video clips and sound bites are one of the show’s favorite strategies. It might be the juxtaposition of Senator [Barack Obama](#) speaking to a crowd of 200,000 in Berlin while Mr. McCain campaigns in a Pennsylvania grocery store. Or it could be a juxtaposition of a politician taking two sides of the same argument. One famous segment featured Mr. Stewart as the moderator of a debate between then-Governor Bush of Texas in 2000, who warned that the United States would end up “being viewed as the ugly American” if it went around the world “saying we do it this way — so should you,” and President Bush of 2003, who extolled the importance of exporting democracy to Iraq.

Often a video clip or news event is so absurd that Mr. Stewart says nothing, simply rubs his eyes, does a Caronesque double take or crinkles his face into an expression of dismay. “When in doubt, I can stare blankly,” he said. “The rubber face. There’s only so many ways you can stare incredulously at the camera and tilt an eyebrow, but that’s your old standby: What would [Buster Keaton](#) do?”

Given a daily reality in which “over-the-top parodies come to fruition,” Mr. Stewart said, satire like “Dr. Strangelove” becomes “very difficult to make.” “The absurdity of what you imagine to be the dark heart of conspiracy theorists’ wet dreams far too frequently turns out to be true,” he

observed. “You go: I know what I’ll do, I’ll create a character who, when hiring people to rebuild the nation we invaded, says the only question I’ll ask is, ‘What do you think of ‘Roe v. Wade?’ It’ll be hilarious. Then you read that book about the Green Zone in Iraq” — “Imperial Life in the Emerald City” by Rajiv Chandrasekaran — “and you go, ‘Oh, they did that.’ I mean, how do you take things to the next level?”

Mr. Stewart has said he is looking forward to the end of the Bush administration “as a comedian, as a person, as a citizen, as a mammal.” Though he has mocked both Mr. McCain and Mr. Obama for lapses from their high-minded promises of postpartisanship, he said he didn’t think their current skirmishes were “being conducted on the scale that Bush conducted things, or even the Clintons; I don’t think it has the same true viciousness and contempt.”

SOON after Mr. Stewart joined “The Daily Show” in 1999, in the waning years of the Clinton administration, he and his staff began to move the program away from the show-business-heavy agenda it had under his predecessor, [Craig Kilborn](#). New technology providing access to more video material gave them growing control over the show’s content; the staff, the co-executive producer Kahane Corn said, also worked to choose targets “who deserved to be targets” instead of random, easy-to-mock subjects.

Following 9/11 and the invasion of Iraq, the show focused more closely not just on politics, but also on the machinery of policy making and the White House’s efforts to manage the news media. Mr. Stewart’s comedic gifts — his high-frequency radar for hypocrisy, his talent for excavating ur-narratives from mountains of information, his ability, in Ms. Corn’s words, “to name things that don’t seem to have a name” — proved to be perfect tools for explicating and parsing the foibles of an administration known for its secrecy, ideological certainty and impatience with dissenting viewpoints.

Over time, the show’s deconstructions grew increasingly sophisticated. Its fascination with language, for instance, evolved from chuckles over the president’s verbal gaffes (“Is our children learning?” “Subliminal”) to ferocious exposés of the administration’s Orwellian manipulations: from its efforts to redefine the meaning of the word “torture” to its talk about troop withdrawals from Iraq based on “time horizons” (a strategy, Mr. Stewart noted, “named after something that no matter how long you head towards it, you never quite reach it”).

For all its eviscerations of the administration, “The Daily Show” is animated not by partisanship but by a deep mistrust of all ideology. A sane voice in a noisy red-blue echo chamber, Mr. Stewart displays an impatience with the platitudes of both the right and the left and a disdain for commentators who, as he made clear in a famous 2004 appearance on CNN’s “Crossfire,” parrot party-line talking points and engage in knee-jerk shouting matches. He has characterized Democrats as “at best Ewoks,” mocked Mr. Obama for acting as though he were posing for “a coin” and hailed [MoveOn.org](#) sardonically for “10 years of making even people who agree with you cringe.”

TO the former NBC anchor Tom Brokaw, Mr. Stewart serves as “the citizens’ surrogate,” penetrating “the insiders’ cult of American presidential politics.” He’s the Jersey Boy and ardent Mets fan as Mr. Common Sense, pointing to the disconnect between reality and what politicians

and the news media describe as reality, channeling the audience's id and articulating its bewilderment and indignation. He's the guy willing to say the emperor has no clothes, to wonder why in Senator [Hillary Rodham Clinton](#)'s "It's 3 a.m." ad no one picks up the phone in the White House before six rings, to ask why a preinvasion meeting in March 2003 between President Bush and his allies took all of an hour — the "time it takes LensCrafters to make you a pair of bifocals" to discuss "a war that could destroy the global order."

"The Daily Show" boasts a deep bench when it comes to its writing, research and production and has provided a showcase for a host of gifted comedians who have gone on to other careers — most notably, [Stephen Colbert](#) of "The Colbert Report," as well as Mr. Carell, [Rob Corddry](#) and Ed Helms. But while the show is a collaborative effort, as one producer noted, it is "ultimately Jon's vision and voice."

Mr. Stewart described his anchorman character as "a sort of more adolescent version" of himself, and Ms. Corn noted that while things "may be exaggerated on the show, it's grounded in the way Jon really feels."

"He really does care," she added. "He's a guy who says what he means."

Unlike many comics today, Mr. Stewart does not trade in trendy hipsterism or high-decibel narcissism. While he possesses [Johnny Carson](#)'s talent for listening and [George Carlin](#)'s gift for observation, his comedy remains rooted in his informed reactions to what [Tom Wolfe](#) once called "the irresistibly lurid carnival of American life," the weird happenings in "this wild, bizarre, unpredictable, hog-stomping Baroque" country.

"Jon's ability to consume and process information is invaluable," said Mr. Colbert. He added that Mr. Stewart is "such a clear thinker" that he's able to take "all these data points of spin and transparent falsehoods dished out in the form of political discourse" and "fish from that what is the true meaning, what are red herrings, false leads," even as he performs the ambidextrous feat of "making jokes about it" at the same time.

"We often discuss satire — the sort of thing he does and to a certain extent I do — as distillery," Mr. Colbert continued. "You have an enormous amount of material, and you have to distill it to a syrup by the end of the day. So much of it is a hewing process, chipping away at things that aren't the point or aren't the story or aren't the intention. Really it's that last couple of drops you're distilling that makes all the difference. It isn't that hard to get a ton of corn into a gallon of sour mash, but to get that gallon of sour mash down to that one shot of pure whiskey takes patience" as well as "discipline and focus."

Mr. Stewart can be scathing in his dismantling of politicians' spin — he took apart former Under Secretary of Defense [Douglas Feith](#)'s rationalizations about the Iraq war with Aesopian logic and fury — but there is nothing sensation-seeking or mean-spirited about his exchanges. Nor does he shy away from heartfelt expressions of sadness and pain. The day after the [Virginia Tech](#) massacre in 2007, he spoke somberly of the tragic situation there and asked his guest, Ali Allawi, a former Iraqi minister of defense, how his country handled "that sort of carnage on a daily basis" and if there were "a way to grieve."

Most memorably, on Sept. 20, 2001, the day the show returned after the 9/11 attacks, Mr. Stewart began the program with a raw, emotional address. Choking up, he apologized for subjecting viewers to “an overwrought speech of a shaken host” but said that he and the show’s staff needed it “for ourselves, so that we can drain whatever abscess there is in our hearts so we can move on to the business of making you laugh.”

He talked about hearing, as a boy of 5, of the assassination of [Martin Luther King Jr.](#) He talked about feeling privileged to live where you can “sit in the back of the country and make wisecracks.” And he talked about “why I grieve but why I don’t despair.”

Mr. Stewart now says he does not want to listen to that show again: “The process of the show is to bury those feelings as subtext, and that was a real moment of text. It’s laying bare the type of thing that is there hopefully to inform the show, but the show is usually an exercise in hiding that.”

In fact, Mr. Stewart regards comedy as a kind of catharsis machine, a therapeutic filter for grappling with upsetting issues. “What’s nice to us about the relentlessness of the show,” he said, “is you know you’re going to get that release no matter what, every night, Monday through Thursday. Like pizza, it may not be the best pizza you’ve ever had, but it’s still pizza, man, and you get to have it every night. It’s a wonderful feeling to have this toxin in your body in the morning, that little cup of sadness, and feel by 7 or 7:30 that night, you’ve released it in sweat equity and can move on to the next day.”