

# Using *The Daily Show* to Promote Media Literacy

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Social studies teachers are tasked with aiding their students' abilities to engage in public debate and make politically sound decisions. One way we have found to help facilitate this is to draw connections between content knowledge and current political conversations through the use of clips from *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*. Social studies teachers who regularly incorporate attention to current political events in their classrooms are aware of students' propensity to introduce Jon Stewart into those conversations. *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* has consistently been reported as a primary media outlet

from which young people learn political information. Since becoming the host of the show in 1999, Stewart's coverage of elections and political events, and his appearances on shows such as CNN's *Crossfire* and *The O'Reilly Factor*, have placed him well within the boundaries of mainstream political conversations. He and his writers have also written two books, modeled after school textbooks, which are national bestsellers. Their work is equal parts satire, political commentary, and silly humor. In this article, we describe how examining the form and content of *The Daily Show* can be used for academic and civic purposes with social studies learners.

While acknowledging that *The Daily Show* may be perceived as reflecting a particular ideological orientation, Stewart has insisted that any politician or issue is fair game for comedic/critical treatment on his program; indeed, within *The Daily Show* online archive, there are numerous clips of monologues with pointed critiques of both left and right. In the activities in this article, we describe how *The Daily Show* can be used to both highlight the relevance of content knowledge and to model a media critique that transcends a specific political orientation, providing students with a set of practices they can bring to the viewing of any news media presentation.

We contextualize our work with *The Daily Show* within the content of Social Studies Themes **5 INDIVIDUALS, GROUPS, AND INSTITUTIONS**; **6 POWER, AUTHORITY, AND GOVERNANCE**; and **10 CIVIC IDEALS AND PRACTICES**, as well as the NCSS position statement on media literacy, which argues that "If we hope to make learning relevant and meaningful for students in the 21st century, social studies classrooms need to reflect this digital world so as to better enable young people to interact with ideas, information, and other people for academic and civic purposes."<sup>1</sup> Promoting media literacy, as the NCSS statement indicates, means helping students develop a framework to understand that all media messages, including those on a comedy show, are created for specific purposes and that

these messages carry ideological and political implications. Students need to understand how different audiences might understand the same media text differently, and should develop the capacity to evaluate the credibility as well as the partiality of any media message. Put differently, the goal of media literacy in social studies is to “detransparentize” media in order to look beneath what might otherwise be self-evident aspects of messages to see how and why they “work.”<sup>2</sup> Critical media literacy skills are required for active, thoughtful citizens in the digital age who need to understand local and global events and also need sophisticated tools to understand *how* those events are presented through various media. The activities described in this article are aimed for high school students but could be adapted for middle school students as well.

### **Comedy in the Classroom**

*The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* is most assuredly a comedy program. It airs, after all, on a comedy network. What students may not recognize is that comedy often borrows from and draws upon social studies content knowledge and has served an important civic role for much of U.S. history. Although the use of comedy news shows is not prevalent in most social studies classrooms, the work of political cartoonists is. But writers in both of these genres draw on the same practices and sensibilities, commenting on symbols and already existing stories in order to present an argument about a social or political topic. We argue that teachers who have recognized the value of using political cartoons as examples of social critique can find similar qualities in *The Daily Show*. Engaging students’ interest in the funny and compelling writing of the show is an opportunity for teachers to tap into another example of the way that comedy provides social commentary. Comedians from Mark Twain to Richard Pryor to Tina Fey have used political material both for performance value and to offer valuable

### **Figure 1. Critical inquiry questions embedded in the NCSS Position Statement on Media Literacy**

Media education built on critical inquiry encourages students to ask probing questions such as:

1. What social, cultural, historical, and political contexts are shaping the message and the meaning I am making of it?
2. How and why was the message constructed?
3. How could different people understand this information differently?
4. Whose perspective, values and ideology are represented and whose are missing?
5. Who or what group benefits and/or is hurt by this message?

social critique. The important point is that all political comedians rely on what people already know and then point out the tensions, contradictions, obscurities and absurdities within that knowledge. Understanding their critique requires a sophisticated grasp of social and political processes and institutions. In the same way that using historical political cartoons helps students understand and recognize dissent and disagreement around events of the past, *The Daily Show* can help students look “under the hood” of the complex social and political commentary of current events.

### **How *The Daily Show* Works**

While it is an example of a media text in and of itself, *The Daily Show* is also an example of how to conduct a study of a media text. Instead of presenting the news, *The Daily Show* covers and critiques it. What this means is that the program, and in particular the monologue that typically comprises the first 10 minutes of the show, is less a presentation of news stories than a commentary on the manner in which particular stories are being told.<sup>3</sup> Through Stewart’s parody of the presentation of the news, as seen in the artful “mash-up” of news clips or his mocking of both news makers and

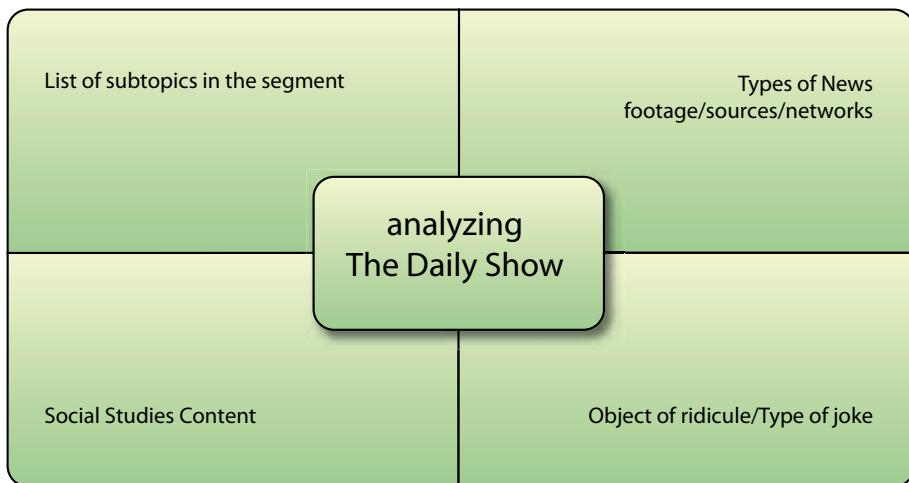
reporters, he deconstructs media messages, pulling back the curtain on the way that the news is contorted to serve certain purposes. In this way, Jon Stewart’s work models a sophisticated set of strategies that students can use in their own efforts to interpret media messages critically. These strategies include the ability to contextualize comments into ideological categories, juxtapose contradictory statements from the same speaker, examine the substance of an argument, and determine whose interests are being served by the particular story or account on offer. Through an analysis of the way the opening segment reports, comments upon, and pokes fun at news presentations, students can identify a template of an approach to “reading” media critically that can be applied to other contexts.

Using the critical inquiry questions outlined in the NCSS media literacy statement (Figure 1), we designed a classroom activity, based upon the viewing of a monologue from *The Daily Show*, that asks students to analyze how Jon Stewart’s critique of media works. In particular, we ask students to identify three aspects of the monologue—the content knowledge required to understand the monologue, as well as its “easy” and “hard” laughs—so they can better

**Figure 2. The Daily Show Graphic Organizer**

**Current Events & Video Analysis: The Daily Show**

Guiding Questions: How does this segment of the Daily Show "work"? What does one have to know in order to "get it"? Fill in the compartments of the graphic organizer to prepare for discussion.



understand how *The Daily Show* works by being simultaneously entertaining, politically incisive, and civically relevant. In addition to describing this activity, we also discuss some issues teachers need to consider in their use of *The Daily Show* and propose ways for students to apply what they have learned to their own critique of media.

**Using The Daily Show in the Classroom**

The typical format of *The Daily Show* consists of a nine- to ten-minute opening monologue, followed after the first set of commercials with either further commentary on current events or interviews, or sometimes a combination of both. Because the opening monologue is typically the section of the program in which the most current and compelling social and political events are discussed—and because the length of these clips are well-suited for both student attention spans and for replaying—the instructions below outline activities appropriate for analyzing one of the opening monologues. Teachers can search for clips from the show, by topic or date, at [www.dailystow.com](http://www.dailystow.com). The activities we describe can be used for the analysis of clips on any topic.

**Appropriateness**

Clips from *The Daily Show* need to be reviewed for appropriateness. While profanity is always censored out, sexual innuendo and other possibly offensive humor is not. Depending on the policies of the school, the presence of such innuendo or crudity in some clips may not be appropriate. However, there are many monologue clips from the show in which these concerns would not be a factor. We encourage teachers to take the time to choose a clip appropriate for the context.

**Structuring Student Engagement**

Prior to using *The Daily Show* in our classes, we poll students about whether or not, and how often, they watch the show and then ask the regular viewers to describe why they like the show and what they think the show's purpose is. We have found consistently that the vast majority of our students have seen the show but that many of them are surprised to learn that it's relevant to social studies. We discuss what we have addressed above regarding ideology and appropriateness by explaining that our specific purpose is to investigate the layers of this particular program because of its continued political and cultural relevance as it relates to the

political climate and media landscape of the United States. We then distribute the graphic organizer (Figure 2) and introduce its purpose as a template or a guide for students to organize their thoughts during viewing of the clip. Because we are asking students to attend to multiple layers of meaning in the clip, it is often necessary for the students to watch the clip at least twice. After students have filled out the organizer, we use it as a resource for a discussion for the next part of our activity: a consideration of the content knowledge, easy laughs, and hard laughs in the clip.

**Content Knowledge**

The first thing we do in asking students to engage with *The Daily Show* is to identify what information, knowledge and understandings one must have in order to "get" what Jon Stewart is offering. In making a show about other news shows, *The Daily Show* relies upon a tremendous amount of "content knowledge" from history, political science, economics and geography. For example, in a segment we used with students in our classroom, coverage of the Iraq War was labeled "The Mess-O-Potamia," an allusion to the precarious military/social/political situation present in the run up to, and carrying out of, the invasion of Iraq in 2003. Understanding the very title of this segment requires more than a little current and historical knowledge. The show is, in essence, a "social studies" text in that it addresses and relies upon content knowledge to carry out its satirical look at the world of news media.

Being able to understand the satire presented in the program requires a firm grasp on the geographical, political, historical and economic concepts deployed by Stewart and his staff. For example, in a 2011 clip called "Parks and Demonstration" about the Occupy Wall Street Movement, Stewart used clips and vocabulary to sharpen the focus on both the movement itself and the media coverage of it.<sup>4</sup> In this nine-minute clip, there are allusions to bank regulation

policies, multinational corporations, fascism, totalitarianism, the Tea Party, The Boston Tea Party, the 1999 WTO riots in Seattle, Harry Potter, and Marie Antoinette. One would have to be well versed in specific social studies content and popular culture to be “in” on the funny. Engaging students in analysis of the content knowledge embedded within the show’s monologue provides an important opportunity for students to understand how social studies content knowledge increases their ability to fully understand a media product they watch and enjoy.

### Easy Laughs

In delivering their observations, some comedians and satirists will use sarcasm, sexual innuendo, profanity and scatological humor, and draw on racial, ethnic, and gendered stereotypes all in order to “poke fun” at the object of inquiry, a strategy we have labeled an “easy laugh.” Pointing to the “object of ridicule/type of joke” observations the students have recorded in the organizer, this is the second area of inquiry we ask students to consider and discuss. We find these kinds of jokes a compelling location for inquiry into what makes something funny. For example, a recurring device deployed by Jon Stewart is a voice impersonation of a stereotyped Italian American, à la *Goodfellas* or *The Sopranos*. When Stewart uses this voice, he does so to ridicule a particular line of thinking or argument presented in a clip from a news program. The in-studio audience laughs at this performance, and students are likely to follow suit. The question we pose for students is: why is this funny? Drawing students’ attention to what we have termed “easy laughs” provides the opportunity for students to consider and analyze what is available for ridicule and what is not. So, for example, why is it funny that Stewart invokes a particular ethnicity to make a satirical point? From what stereotypes is he drawing? These are questions that not only allow students to uncover the

processes by which the show amuses viewers, but to engage students in the consideration of how various audiences may interpret and be impacted by these easy laughs differently. In doing so, we ask students to consider whether these easy laughs should perhaps be a little more difficult to laugh at.

### Hard Laughs

Stewart’s demonstration of the ways in which politicians or news pundits will change positions and contradict themselves is another comedic aspect of the program that can be mined for use in the classroom. This set of practices is perhaps what is most compelling to the show’s viewers. In large part, this type of demonstration is what makes the program seem like a source of news itself, rather than a comedic take upon it. Many argue that *The Daily Show* is indeed a news show, for it holds politicians and pundits responsible for their public statements. Stewart has said that he does “what the news networks *do not do*.<sup>5</sup> The process of exposing weak arguments, hypocritical comments, or falsehoods—what we would hope would be the earnest task of media and journalism—is made funny on *The Daily Show*. We call these hard laughs.

An example of these hard laughs was found in one recent segment, titled “Madison Men,” in which Stewart shows clips from the media coverage of the 2012 gubernatorial recall election in Wisconsin to demonstrate that both “left” and “right” present oversimplified and overly dramatic accounts of news events. He presents a montage of clips of popular news commentators on the right claiming the election signals the final corrective to union overreach and a set of clips showing pundits on the left decrying the death of democracy. Stewart contends that “as has now become customary, the news networks functioned less last night like repositories of news and analysis and more as extensions of the winning and losing campaigns.”<sup>6</sup> The juxtapositions of clips from the left and right produce

huge laughs, and it is at points like this that in our use of *The Daily Show*, we again ask students to consider *why* this is funny. On one level, the laugh is an amused response to a carefully constructed exposition of news media’s tendency to dramatize a news story. But on another level, the laugh is attributable to Stewart’s tightly woven critique of the way the news media “spins” any given story to fit their preferred narratives. These laughs are “hard,” we think, due to the degree to which a sophisticated set of media literacy strategies is required of the viewer in order to “get” the joke.

Despite the fact that many students watch the program regularly, our conversations with students lead us to suspect that they are drawn to the show for the easy laughs as opposed to the more sophisticated, hard laughs. As such, students may not be taking full advantage of the media critique offered. The purpose of having students record the types of news in the graphic organizer and drawing their attention to the hard laughs is two-fold. First, we seek to make the hard laughs easier to understand. Asking students to analyze the hard laughs is a strategy for helping them develop a more sophisticated appreciation of what is happening on the show. The reason for the comedy is perhaps not immediately apparent if the viewer’s understanding of the joke stops at the recognition of sarcasm. Naming the laugh “hard” requires a nuanced understanding of satire, and perhaps more than a bit of knowledge, in order to understand it.

Secondly, analyzing the hard laughs provides the template for critical media literacy. Asking questions about the hard laughs opens conversations about why particular news networks differ in their telling of the same news stories, for what purposes, and to whose advantage. Students may have already been introduced to the idea that multiple accounts of a story circulate within the mass media, but on *The Daily Show*, this multiplicity is laid out for examination. We ask students to consider this not to

promote any particular account, but to encourage them to recognize that facts never speak for themselves in the context of network and cable news. News stories are always spoken through affiliations with particular stances.

## Conducting your own Media Critique

To extend students' understanding of critical media literacy, we encourage teachers to have students conduct their own analysis of popular news media. This is an important step in encouraging students to grasp the degree to which media of all ideological positions shape public perceptions about a social or political event. This extension activity invites students to think critically about how Americans get their news. Teachers can begin by identifying a provocative, news-generating current event for which there is a primary source available either in video or as a text, like a short speech or an interview. Students should first view or read the primary source and in small teams, discuss its meaning and relevance. The teams should then track down between three to five examples of the media attention paid to the primary document. In order to not overwhelm students with the number of sources available online, and to mimic *The Daily Show's* focus on televised media, student searches could be limited to clips from the major television news outlets and talk shows.

Building upon students' understanding of the structure of *The Daily Show*, students will work together to analyze their sources, identify and categorize the ideological commentary they find in the media coverage, locate contradictory statements from the same speaker, examine the substance of the arguments, and determine the interests being served. Regardless of their own stance on the current event under investigation, students should be encouraged to recognize the spin that different commentators have given on the issue, and reflect critically on

the similarities or gaps between the primary document and the media's presentation of it.

## Conclusion

It is of the utmost importance that the media students are using to become informed participants in our political processes are being viewed critically. Textbooks and authoritative films can be terrific resources. But just as other social studies educators have suggested the strategic use of YouTube and Wikipedia,<sup>7</sup> we offer the use of *The Daily Show* as a way to bring the students' lives into the classroom. All of us know better than to pretend that our classrooms are the only places that our students receive their political training. Therefore, using program clips strategically with our students helps them understand the very thing that they are already consuming. By drawing attention to the content knowledge needed to understand the show, and combining this with an analysis of the easy and hard laughs, we have found the careful examination of *The Daily Show* to be a valuable use of classroom time.

It is unlikely that news media will be any less ideologically positioned in the near future. It is crucial for our democracy, therefore, that students learn to become critically literate consumers of news media. Our hope is that by harnessing the popularity of this show and bringing it into social studies classrooms, teachers can play a role in helping students adopt the kinds of media literacy strategies that they can bring to their viewing of any media source, now and in the future. 

### Notes

1. National Council for the Social Studies, "Media Literacy" (Washington, D.C.: NCSS, 2009), [www.socialstudies.org/positions/medialiteracy](http://www.socialstudies.org/positions/medialiteracy).
2. Avner Segall, "De-transparentizing Media Texts in the Social Studies Classroom: Media Education as Historical/Social Inquiry," in *Trends and Issues in Canadian Social Studies*, Alan Sears and Ian Wright, eds., (Vancouver, BC: Pacific Educational Press, 1999), 28-49.
3. Gerald J. Erion, "Amusing Ourselves to Death with Television News: Jon Stewart, Neil Postman, and the Huxleyan Warning," in *The Daily Show and Philosophy: Moments of Zen in the Art of Fake News*, Jason Holt, ed. (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell Publishing, 2007), 5-15.

4. *The Daily Show with John Stewart*, "Parks and Demonstration" (New York, N.Y.: The Daily Show with John Stewart, 2011), [www.thedailyshow.com/watch/wed-october-5-2011/parks-and-demonstration](http://www.thedailyshow.com/watch/wed-october-5-2011/parks-and-demonstration).

5. *FreshAir*, "Daily Show Host Jon Stewart" (Washington, D.C.: National Public Radio, 2004), [www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=4054791](http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=4054791).

6. *The Daily Show with John Stewart*, "Madison Men – Scott Walker Prevails in Wisconsin Recall" (New York, N.Y.: *The Daily Show with John Stewart*, 2012), [www.thedailyshow.com/watch/wed-june-6-2012/madison-men-scott-walker-prevails-in-wisconsin-recall](http://www.thedailyshow.com/watch/wed-june-6-2012/madison-men-scott-walker-prevails-in-wisconsin-recall).

7. For example, see Wayne Journell, "Using YouTube to Teach Presidential Election Propaganda: Twelve Representative Videos," *Social Education* 73, no. 7 (November/December, 2009): 325-329; and Mark Kissling, "A Call for Wikipedia in the Classroom," *Social Education* 75, no. 2 (March, 2011): 60-64.

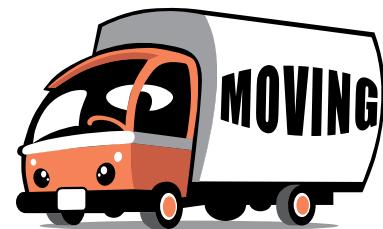
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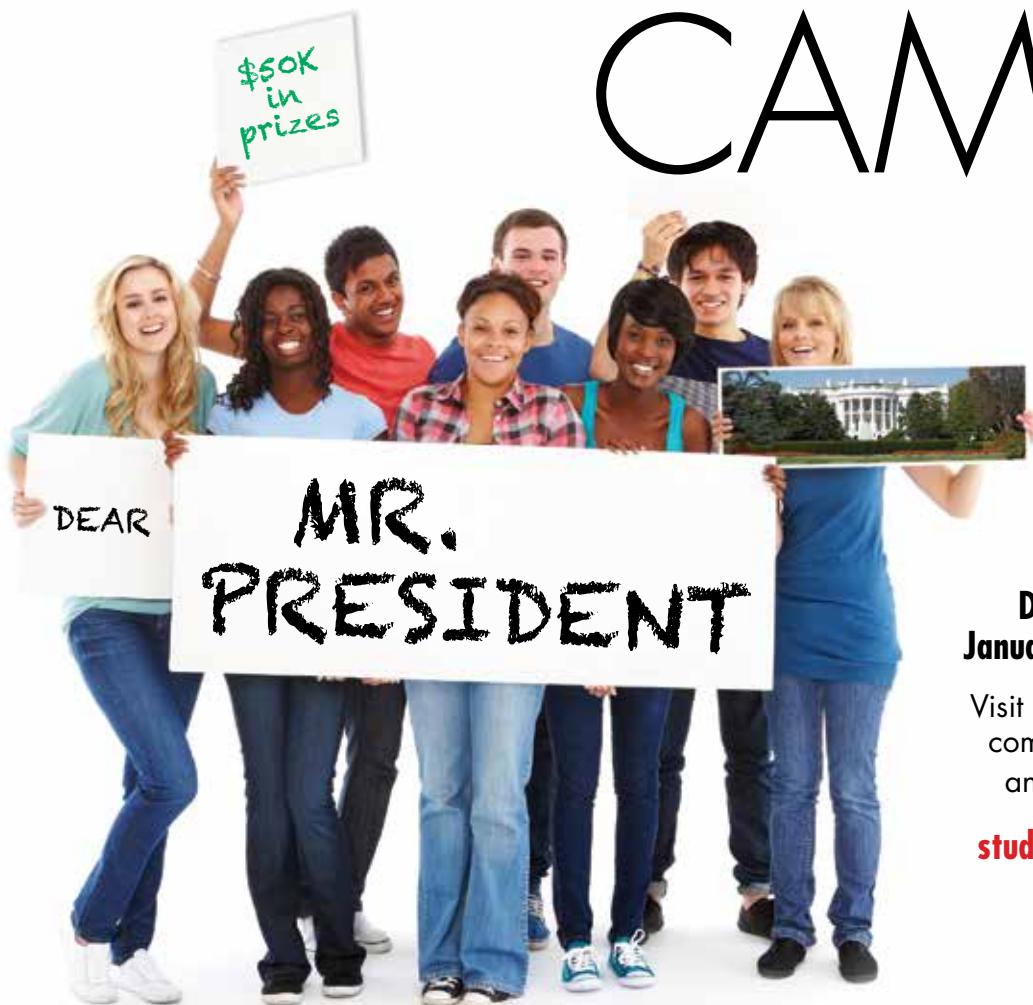
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