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Media Activism in Search of 'Truth'? Questioning the Mission to Restore Sanity

Abstract

For a young, media savvy, radically globalized generation, television as a platform for news has lost momentum. Ironically however, in a media landscape with a variety of news providers competing for audiences and trust, television news parodies like *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* and *The Colbert Report* attract new audiences as they seem to fill a gap. They succeed not only in entertaining and informing (even educating) a previously "deactivated," relatively young target audience but also in initiating activism by using old and new (social) media. How can it be that a comedy show succeeds in promoting reason and gets young people to stand up for more sanity in politics and culture?

In the sense that, in this case, critical (subversive) practice comes from within the mainstream, is television – as the platform that has been criticized for "dumbing down" audiences (cf. Postman) - actually becoming the solution for commitment? In this constellation, what is the role of self-determined (intrinsic) and acquired (extrinsic) practices in relation to mobilized practices and practices determined by other factors? And how do they work differently in comparison to the subversive practices of tactical media and media activism that question the methods of biopower?

This paper examines several responses to the (more and less serious) calls for action of the two shows and discusses their delicate role as entertainers, watchdogs, and activists for reason, sanity, and what is left of 'truth' in the media. Furthermore, implications for critical media studies are considered by questioning the claims of "education towards truth" (cf. Mitterer 1983).

_introduction, basis

On October 30, 2010, around 215,000 people gathered at the National Mall in Washington, D.C. for the "Rally to Restore Sanity and/or Fear," a joint venture by Jon Stewart, the host of Comedy Central's news parody *The Daily Show*, and Stephen Colbert, the host of its spin-off *The Colbert Report*. The official rally website opens with the famous call for action from the 1976 satire *Network*: "I'm mad as hell, and I'm not going to take it anymore!" In the announcement of the rally on the show Stewart starts by asking, "How did we get here?" and points to the loud voices of 15 per cent of Americans that dominate the agenda and are covered by the 24/7 newsreel. In the rally he wants to "send a message to our national leaders and our media that says 'We [the rational 80 per cent of Americans] are here!'" (The Daily Show September 16, 2010).

The rally was a great success. It was much bigger than the organizers had anticipated; yet its impact remains to be questioned. It was covered on all major (real) news channels, however many did not quite know what exactly to make of it (cf. Easley 2010). This might be due to two things: First, the rally combined two very different rallies: the rally to restore sanity (team Stewart) and the march to keep fear alive (team Colbert). Second, the media themselves were one of the main targets of criticism, which put them in an awkward position and hit their blind spot.

Nevertheless, as a piece of media activism, the rally was proof for the fact that a television show could activate people, "who've been too busy to go to rallies, who actually have lives and families and jobs (or are looking for jobs)."[1] The rally is also proof that people are disappointed with politics and with the media and that they are able to differentiate between truth and, in Harry Frankfurt's terms, "bullshit."

This paper seeks to outline the search for truth in the media, establishes news satire as a highly reflected genre that criticizes politics and the media on a meta-level and speaks truth beyond facts. The point will be raised whether we can talk about news parodies as a form of media activism and what it takes to tell the truth in a world where nothing seems real anymore.

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[1] http://www.rallytorestoresanity.com/

_in search of trust

The acceptance of the news media as an authority in terms of truth-telling has been a challenge for some time now, especially with the advent of new technologies and new channels of information processing in Web 2.0. Interestingly enough, a general mistrust of the people can be seen in almost all parts of civil society, ranging all the way from politics to economy. Lipset and Schneider were actually able to show that there is a correlation between the decline of confidence in the media and the decline of confidence in politics (cf. Lipset and Schneider 1983; cf. Hetherington 2005).[2] Even though they do not provide an explanation, it is hardly difficult to come by: Firstly, information about any aspect of civil society is communicated through the media. If people do not trust the media they can hardly trust the content they are reporting on. Secondly, and in my view more significantly, the mechanism and style of communication (and deception) are shared by them all: It is form rather than content, scripted rather than authentic, 'hyped' rather than rationalized. The style of communication we find in all matters today is based on what comedian Stephen Colbert famously coined with the term "truthiness" and philosopher Henry Frankfurt (2005) more harshly calls "bullshit."

truthiness:

1. "truth that comes from the gut, not books" (The Colbert Report, 17 Oct. 2005)
2. "the quality of preferring concepts or facts one wishes to be true, rather than concepts or facts known to be true" (American Dialect Society, January 2006)

bullshit:

"The essence of is not that it is *false* but that it is *phony*" (Frankfurt 2005: 47)

The danger of bullshit/truthiness is, as Frankfurt argues, that people are not concerned with the difference between truth and lie anymore because they are busy chattering things that might be true – or not.[3] This resonates with what Neil Postman writes that "Americans are the best entertained and quite likely the least well-informed people in the Western world" (Postman 1985: 106). The lack of respect for the truth leads to a general mistrust, which is

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[2] According to their reasoning, the criticism of the news media in news parodies has a negative effect on people's trust in politics. Looking at the collected data, watching *The Daily Show* leads to distrust in the media (cf. Morris and Baumgartner). Watching *The Daily Show* significantly decreased ratings of news media coverage of politics (cf. Morris and Baumgartner 2008: 324). Cynicism results in an "unhealthy distrust for all aspects of politics" (Morris and Baumgartner 2008: 328).

[3] There are many possible reasons for this development to speculate about, like the 24/7 news cycle that demands for news/chatter continuously; the emergence of new jobs and fields of work like PR, consulting, and lobbying; Web 2.0 technology where people are invited to share their thoughts, etc.

only legitimate – even sane – and requires careful deconstruction. On a broad scale, ironically, this deconstruction might be provided by news parodies.

In a news media system like that of the United States, where the firm belief in a "truth" that is there to be found (hence the slogan in the Code of Ethics by the Society of Professional Journalists: "Seek Truth and Report it") the question of who is able tell the truth, almost seems legitimate.

So, after CBS anchor Walter Cronkite, the uncontested "most trusted man in America" had died in 2009, speculations about the new most reliable newsperson arose. What was surprising was that in a *Time* online poll and in an article published in the *New York Times*, the anchor of a fake news show, John Stewart, was mentioned and even won the race for the most admired journalists against "real" news people like Dan Rather, Brian Williams, and Anderson Cooper (http://www.timepolls.com/hppolls/archive/poll_results_417.html). Already in the run-up for the 2008 elections, *Newsweek* featured Stewart as one of the most powerful media figures in the elections. In 2010, they called him the "Media Watchdog" and put him on #2 of a list of the New Thought Leaders of the decade: "For the past several years, however, there's been another step added to the end of the process: being held to account for our faults by a comedy show with a sharp eye and a sharp tongue." (http://2010.newsweek.com). Also the *New York Times* describe him as "Mr. Common Sense, pointing to the disconnect between reality and what politicians and the news media describe as reality" (Kakutani 2008).

_fake news shows on the mission to restore sanity (and/or fear?)

In *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, Neil Postman describes a subversive TV program that is highly reminiscent of *The Daily Show*. However, he thought it would not attract an audience large enough to actually have an impact. Quite obviously, times have changed.

The Daily Show with John Stewart and its spin-off *The Colbert Report* are fake news shows aired on weekdays on Comedy Central. Apart from their most obvious mission, to entertain people and make fun of things, and the slogans mentioned on their websites, like "unburdened by objectivity, integrity or even accuracy," "zero credibility," "truth that comes from the gut, not books," and "time for a truth injection," they obviously fill a gap created by their "real" counterparts (cf. The Daily Show; cf. The Colbert Report). With a nightly audience of approximately 1.5 million for *The Daily Show* and about 1 million for *The Colbert*

Report, the shows have gained real momentum, especially among young audiences, aged 18 to 35.

By making fun of firstly current occurrences but secondly – and I would like to argue more importantly – traditional news media, they reveal 'truths' beyond the mere fact-checking or fact/opinion-reporting. They have proven their role as watchdogs of media watchdogs and by making fun of things add on a different layer and upgrade (fake) news to the level of reflected news reporting (cf. Schwarz 2008: 245-277).

The importance of both shows can probably best be measured by the media attention they get, and the fact that they have had studio guests including the sitting president, which was a first even in the U.S (and yes, Jon Stewart called him "dude" on the show) as well as the fact that especially young audiences name them as one of their prime *news sources* and – in research studies – turn out to be among the best-informed group of people (cf. Erion 2007: 10, referring to an Annenberg Public Policy Center poll; cf. Pew Research Center 2007).

From two different angles, the two shows take on their mission: While Jon Stewart is the authentic, reflected but funny stand-up comedian/anchorman, Steven Colbert impersonates a conservative, republican pundit. Stewart wants to get people to think, Colbert wants his audience to become active, gets people to change Wikipedia articles, and makes them actively support his (fake) idea(l)s.[4] Given both shows' incredible success and impact, together, they are the perfect team for real change.

In a reaction to the Tea Party movement in the U.S. and the immediate danger of politicians and their media bullhorns that they believe was systematically stupefying and hence disempowering citizens, the mismatched team set out on a mission to restore sanity and/or fear.

In the "A Moment of Sincerity" speech by Jon Stewart, he pointed to the real challenges of our time and criticized the media for hyping unreal fears and polarizing citizens, what he calls the "24-hour politico-pundit perpetual panic conflict-inator." On the bottom line, however, his message was a call for social cohesion.

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[4] In this sense, media activism is not new to Colbert. He calls his "nation," as he refers to his audience, to actively support him in all sorts of things. As he himself claims, he plays improvising games with his audience: "I do my jokes in juxtaposition to reality" (Colbert qtd. in Strauss 2009).

_moving masses with old and new media

The Rally has shown that traditional media – television – generally believed to de-activate people, have the power to activate people, to get them go to places, do things, make them think and reflect. Ironically, however, it is not the "real" or sincere programs. New media were the supplement in this action. Of course, there were iphone apps, tweets, and facebooks that additionally connected people in this rally, but the initial starting point was a reflective, thinking, fake anchorman/comedian, who – by breaking his very own routine of sticking to his anchor desk – got people not only to think but to show others that they care and are willing to actually do something – in this case participating in a rally – to show their concern for a society and politics that they believed should be more sincere and solution-oriented: "On this one day regular people wanted to show that media may be broken, but America isn't" (Easley 2010).

_between couch potato, political lethargy, and the search for meaning and identity

All across so-called 'Western' countries, one of the main concerns in politics has been that particularly younger generations seem to be disinterested, disenchanted, and disillusioned with politics and society at large. The main question is how to get young people to care about politics and what is going on in the world at large, outside their Facebooks and virtual realms they have been retreating to. The success of a show like *The Daily Show* proves that – if presented adequately – young people do care. One of the reasons why big shots are happy to be interviewed on those shows, even at the danger of being ridiculed and being made fun of, is the fact that they reach out to a young audience, which is almost impossible to get access to through other, yet alone traditional media. Those two fake news shows are the format that gets young people involved, that presents what is important in a way that also helps people differentiate between what is important, honest, sincere, and trustworthy and what is not.

_ "with great power comes great responsibility" (Spiderman / Voltaire)

Finally, the flip side of the coin is that the impact the two shows have on a young population, and this especially true for *The Daily Show*, are systematically denied or played down by the anchors. Jon Stewart must be aware of the power he has to inform/entertain/educate

people, yet he constantly underlines that he is "only" a comedian. Maybe this is part of his success, but it is also a question of responsibility.

Even as arguably the "most trusted man in America" he sticks to his image which is good in the way that he does not misuse his power but it is also the part where he denies responsibility. In this sense, the "Rally to Restore Sanity and/or Fear" was a one-time event whose impact quickly declined. However, it was a rather radical step outside of their (or at least Stewart's) comfort zone. So, are Stewart and Colbert moving from comedy into political activism?

_daily show as forms of media activism?

In his chapter on 'media activism' Matthew Lasar (2007) starts out with a historic example which predates the establishment of the United States (ibd.: 925). He refers to the case of the newspaper printer John Peter Zenger (NY, 1732) who accused the British colony's governor of corruption, and who was put to jail for libel. But the jury ruled that no libel has been committed since Zenger has printed the truth.

As Lasar writes, the "Zenger case both advocated and paved the way for independent media" (ibd.) - an idea which is still at work, for example in the context of Indymedia.

> "Media activism can be defined as two related kinds of activity. One creates media that challenge the dominant culture, structure, or ruling class of a society. The other advocates changes within that society intended to preserve or open up space for such media. Often media activism encompasses both these activities in the same historical moment; or it quickly moves between the two modes of action." (Lasar 2007: 925)

Clearly, the two shows challenge the dominant media and they encourage action and discursive activities (for example, in the context of (re-)mediation in social media). They encompass these activities and they attract a wide and increasing audience, but there is no intention to open up open spaces in terms of platforms.

As similar ambivalence is noticable if we look at other characterizations of 'media activism':

- For example, Graham Meikle (2002), who starts out from the basic distinction of open and closed systems (ibd.: 13) in his essay on *Future Active: Media Activism and the Internet*. He relates openness with incompleteness (cf. open source or open content developments). Here, 'media activism' is used as an umbrella term for various intervening

forms of media appropriation (characteristics: open, incomplete, spontaneous and temporary forms). More recently (2010), he distinguishes four dimensions of Net activism: intercreative[5] texts, tactics, strategies and networks. – As to the shows, the can be regarded as intervening forms, but they are part of a closed system.

- Robert Huesca refers to 'activist media' as key term and defines as follows:
"Activist media are radio, television, and other media practices that aim to effect social change and that generally engage in some sort of structural analysis concerned with power and the reconstitution of society into more egalitarian arrangements. Many activist media practices are also committed to principles of communication democracy, which place at their core notions of popular access, participation, and self-management in the communication process." (Huesca 2008: 31)
Looking the shows, they also aim to effect social change to some extent, and they focus on high quality products (not on processes and grassroots developments). But there is no core notion of participation in a political sense.

- Wolfgang Sützl's (2011) characterization focuses on carnivalesque cultures as media of resistance or disobedience. In view of the explicit self-portrayal in the case of Jon Stewart as an authentic, reflected but funny stand-up comedian the show can be clearly located in this tradition, but at the same time it is part of mainstream media offers.

- With reference to the concept of variations (cf. Goodman and Elgin 1988) the theme of media activism can be described in terms of perspectives which appear in different ways:
– unconventional use of media in the context of creative re-framings or social orientations
– strengthening (fortification) of minorities, questioning and criticizing mainstream developments, structural constraints, regimes and dominant cultures (cultures of dictatorial rights)
– cognitive autonomy in (partial) cultures of resistance.
However, the shows appear as ambivalent forms when applying these perspectives.

As to the case of the Rally to Restore Sanity, the way of questioning mainstream media hyping unreal fears and polarizing citizens and thus promoting biopolitical regimes suggests a form of media of resistance in the sense of biopolitical activism. Although the case is not aiming at cutting edge developments like the activities of artists such as the Critical Art

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[5] For the concept of intercreativity see Tim Berners-Lee (1999).

Ensemble[6] or Stelarc and scientists such as Beatriz da Costa who began developing projects that intervened in a new, engineered (technizised) form of exercising power on the body itself, the case is a good example for effectively challenging the workings of biopower by introducing discontinuities in a new hegemony of knowledge.

Show masters as truth tellers?

In the case of our examples, the activists emphasize that they have no agenda of influence. They rather question issues which are at stake in the care of oneself today, and - for all intents and purposes-- this kind of questioning is not explicitly, but implicitly challenging processes of governementalization, the "art of government" in a Foucauldian[7] sense. On the other hand, if we understand these creative acts in terms of an 'ethics of de-governemen-talization', we should be aware that the analytical potentials under the auspices of Foucault are somehow pruned and finally turned into moral stances here. In other words: the concept of de-governementalization emerges as concept of re-governementalization on other levels (cf. Hug 2008).

However, truth-oriented activism may be related to claims of clarification and enlighten-ment. But whatever the "truthometer"[8] or other authorities will tell us, we are depending on reliance on and trust in the respective agencies. Even though we might successfully refer to differentiated philosophical concepts of truth based on correspondence[9], consensus, evidence, coherence or pragmatism, we should be aware that "education towards truth is always education towards the truth of the educator" (cf. Mitterer 2001: 67).

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[6] http://www.critical-art.net/
[7] With the concept of 'governmentality' Foucault aims at a new understanding of power beyond the problematics of consensus, will or conquest. He writes: "The relationship proper to power would not therefore be sought on the side of violence or of struggle, nor on that of voluntary linking (all of which can, at best, only be the instruments of power), but rather in the area of the singular mode of action, neither warlike nor juridical, which is government" (Foucault 1982: 221). Foucault advocates a concept of power which focuses on various forms of social control in disciplinary institutions (for example, schools or hospitals) as well as on different forms of knowledge in contrast to widespread conceptualizations of power in the sense of hierarchical, top-down power of the state. Accordingly, the concept of 'government' is not limited to state politics alone. It includes a wide range of control techniques which apply to a variety of phenomena, from one's control of the self to the "biopolitical control" of populations. So, Foucault defines governmentality as the "art of government" in a wide sense which includes organized practices (mentalities, rationalities, and techniques) through which subjects are governed, and which is linked to related concepts such as biopolitics and power-knowledge (cf. Foucault 2006a, b).
[8] http://www.politifact.com/truth-o-meter/statements/
[9] Cf. veritas est adaequatio intellectus ad rem (truth is the adequation of intellect to thing).

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http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6JzGOiBXeD4

Media React to Rally to Restore Sanity/Fear

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D1dCGvw99sA&feature=related