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From comedians to spokespersons: Stewart and Colbert’s journey to political activism
When the morning paper fills with news of a sluggish economy, mudslinging politicians, and volatile conditions in the Middle East, the urge to find something, anything, to laugh at becomes more a survival tactic than a search for entertainment. For many, Comedy Central’s the Daily Show with Jon Stewart and the Colbert Report provide this diversion. The hosts, Jon Stewart and Stephen Colbert, use distinctive brands of satire to poke fun at politics, society, and the media, during their half-hour “fake” news programs... Read more below
“And now, your moment of Zen:” Rally brings thousands to the National Mall

Handwritten signs sprouted from the mass of people gathered on the National Mall in Washington D.C.: “Only the jesters dare speak the truth.” “Politely requesting an incremental improvement in our general societal environment.” “More sanity. Less Hannity.” “All bad spellers UNTIE!”

The Rally to Restore Sanity and/or Fear, sponsored by Comedy Central’s Jon Stewart of the Daily Show and Stephen Colbert of the Colbert Report, drew an array of people to the nation’s capitol. According to crowd estimates by CBS News, around 215,000 people turned the lawn of the Mall into a sea of poster board and sunburned faces. By some standards, this outpouring of support was rather unfortunate because there were only 508 port-a-potties — enough for 150,000 people — and the crowded lawn meant many people were locked out of the fenced-in Mall and left to fill the streets.

Many participants who managed to snag a spot inside the gated lawn had camped out all morning, spreading out blankets and camp chairs, propping signs up against their coolers. At 8 a.m., the D.C. metros were cramped with people. It was an effort to squeeze in close enough to get the doors to close, and there were a few unintentional paper-cut wounds as people and signs jockeyed for space on the moving trains.

On the lawn, the white Capitol building faded into the morning sky behind the giant, banner-decked stage announcing: “Restore Sanity and/or Fear.” Even at 9 a.m., most participants were already facing forward, eyes glued to the empty stage. Waiting. Others wandered around, snapping pictures of amusing signs or making the slow journey toward the toilet lines.

The official performance kicked off at noon. The Daily Show theme song filled the air as Stewart jogged onto the stage. Colbert arrived in a more flamboyant manner, emerging from the stage in a replica of the Phoenix, the capsule that raised the 33 Chilean miners out of the earth a few weeks before. The central shtick of the performance was the battle between Colbert’s exuberant fear-mongering and Stewart’s appeal to rationality.

The rally included a musical battle between Yusuf Islam (formerly Cat Stevens) and his song “Peace Train,” and Ozzy Osborne and his “Crazy Train.” Stewart and Colbert performed a musical number of their own entitled “There’s No One More American Than Me,” in which each host presented different images of the American population.

“I love America from USA to USZ,” Colbert sang with his usual bravado.

“I’d marry Uncle Sam if I could do it legally,” Stewart warbled along.

“My hybrid electric scooter gets 100 mpg,” Stewart sang.

The crowd joined in on the chorus line, following a little ball as it bounced along the JumboTrons over lyrics about the “greatest, strongest country in the world.”

During the rally, a larger-than-life papier-mâché puppet made an appearance, as well as stars such as John Legend, The O’Jays, Kid Rock, Sheryl Crow, and the Myth Busters. But the most memorable moment was Stewart’s closing speech, which retained elements of the comedian’s familiar humor, but indubitably moved into the realm of political activism.

“I know there are boundaries for a comedian, pundit guy,” Stewart began, recognizing the increasingly fuzzy line between comedian and activist. “And I’m sure I’ll find out about them tomorrow.”

The news media received the brunt of the criticisms during the speech and the rest of the rally. Stewart compared the media to a magnifying glass, which could either show us the problems in society, or be used to burn ants. The 24-hour newscasts and focus on extreme viewpoints, leaves the vast majority of Americans unrepresented, he argued.

“We work together every damn day,” Stewart said. “The only place we don’t is here,” he motioned toward the Capitol behind the stage, “or on cable TV.”

The view from the other side: Delving into the huddled masses

The origins of attendees were as diverse as their signs, ranging from Alaska, to Texas, to New York City, and Iowa City. According to Nielsen figures, the roughly 1.7 million people who tune into Stewart every night and Colbert’s loyal 1.3 million audience members are largely under 30. But the rally drew individuals from all age groups, including many who had never attended rallies before, or who hadn’t been inspired to come out in years.

“I had been waiting for someone to plan an event where we could come out, the rational ones, not the fearmongers,” said Carmen Anthony, 65, of California. “The last time I was here was for the Martin Luther King Jr. rally. Back then we were full of hope. We wanted our voices to be heard. The mission was very different, but the environment was very much the same.”

Unlike the tense atmosphere prominent at other political rallies during the past year, the sun warmed the faces of a calm, diverse audience, all prepared to laugh, not fight.

“We went to the end of a Tea Party rally,” said Emily Krueger, 22, from D.C., gesturing toward her friend with a half-eaten PB&J sandwich. “People here are willing to talk. There, everyone was so angry.”
To many rally attendees, the Rally to Restore Sanity was a response to Glenn Beck’s August Rally to Restore Honor and the multiple Tea Party events of the past few months.

“I’ve seen a lot of a rallies pass through, all dominated by the extreme views,” said Josh Edwards, 23, of Silver Spring, Maryland, about 30 minutes from the capitol. “This is a rally about the middle. This is a rally for moderates. That’s something I can agree with.” Edwards held a whiteboard sign announcing: “I can change my sign/mind.”

The ambivalence of the rally’s title was reflected in the contradictory signage and quirky outfits sported by participants. Some took advantage of the October 30 date, celebrating Halloween a little early by donning Where’s Waldo sweaters, “Black Jesus” costumes and neon-green body leotards. Others wore more politically-inspired costumes, like red suits with beehive updos or Uncle Sam ensembles and stilts.

The light-hearted costumes were a good reflection of Stewart and Colbert’s target audience. According to a 2008 PEW study, people tune into the shows for much the same reason that they attended the rally: to laugh. Forty-three percent of the Stewart audience and 53 percent of Colbert’s audience tune in for entertainment.

“Sanity is serious,” said Ginny Woolley, 66, a DC resident who wore a star-spangled visor festooned with two mini American flags. “The economy is not funny. The war in Afghanistan is not funny. ‘Don’t ask, don’t tell’ is not funny. But we can’t forget our whimsy.”

But some claim that the satire of the shows has begun to seep into the political sphere, influencing behavior. And, the trajectory of the shows, culminating in the Oct. 30 rally, provide a strong argument for this movement from light-hearted jesting to political and social criticism.

“[Colbert] performs an important service, pointing out contradictions and making people laugh,” said Khrista Rypl, 23, who flew in from Florida for the rally.

According to some rally-goers, this ability to unbury an issue from a pile of conflicting statements, gives Stewart and Colbert an important role in the media.

“So many newscasters try to give newscasts without putting in their opinion,” said Kris Warner, 27, who came from Maplewood, Minnesota for the rally. “But, those newscasters do give an opinion. [Stewart and Colbert] are honest. They speak for a lot of people who would go unspoken for if they weren’t on air.”

Warner wore a Charlie Chaplin costume and a sign that read: “Fear my mustache.” The odd attire was unrelated to Halloween, rather it referenced Stewart’s comment on the rally website that the rally was for people “who believe that the only time it’s appropriate to draw a Hitler mustache on someone is when that person is actually Hitler. Or Charlie Chaplin in certain roles.”

“A lot of people are being pretty ridiculous,” Warner said, referring to the popular signs at Tea Party rallies that depict President Obama in Nazi uniform with a Hitler ‘stache. “If we have to act a little crazy to point that out to them, that’s what we should do.”

The ambivalence of the rally — which simultaneously promoted fear and sanity, raised a call for voter participation, endorsed the hunting of Grizzly Bears, and called for a reformed media — permitted many attendees to bring their own issues to light. Jennifer Peery, 51, of Keizer, Oregon, arrived at the rally decked out in a bear costume, complete with a rainbow flag emblem and a sombrero from which dangled little marijuana patches.

Peery said she came to the rally because she feared Americans were “going to elect crazy people,” and hoped the rally would draw attention to the flawed logic and extremism of the candidates. The costume, she added, was intended to satirize fear. “I’m a gay, Mexican, pot-smoking bear,” she explained. “Because so many people are afraid of irrational things.”

Ameina Andrus-Debian, 51, drove with her niece from Toledo, Ohio to raise awareness of anti-Muslim sentiments. Andrus-Debian wore a U.S. flag bandana over her hijab. Numerous American flag pins decorated her sweater and she held a blue “Team Sanity” sign in her hand. Coming just one day after the discovery of two explosives sent by al-Qaeda and destined for Chicago synagogues, her message was particularly relevant.

“Moderate Muslims need to come out to say we are not like extremists who destroyed the Twin Towers,” Andrus-Debian said. “I may wear a hijab, but I’m just like everyone else. Each person here is an immigrant whether they know it or not. That’s what makes the melting pot so special and America so blest. I’m hoping everyone will, one day, learn to accept differences.”

“Peace in Arabic is salaam,” she added. “Salaam to everyone.”

During the rally, Stewart also addressed discrimination against Muslims, and tried to convince Colbert to let go of his fear and adopt a more rational outlook. Colbert defended his position, arguing that some things Americans feared were actually real, like Muslims. “They attacked us,” he exclaimed.

“Some people who happen to be of Muslim faith attacked us,” Stewart countered. “But there are 1.5 billion Muslims in the world.”

The line brought cheers and applause from the crowd, and represented one of the many occasions in which the performance veered from its parade of one-liners and slapstick and gave way to a serious tone.
When the morning paper fills with news of a sluggish economy, mudslinging politicians, and volatile conditions in the Middle East, the urge to find something, anything, to laugh at becomes more a survival tactic than a search for entertainment.

For many, Comedy Central’s the Daily Show with Jon Stewart and the Colbert Report provide this diversion. The hosts, Jon Stewart and Stephen Colbert, use distinctive brands of satire to poke fun at politics, society, and the media, during their half-hour “fake” news programs.

Some scholars argue that this satire affects the political behavior of viewers. They are split between believing this effect is positive, inspiring critical thinking and raising interest in politics, or negative, generating cynicism and giving rise to apathy.

According to James Alan McPherson, an Iowa Writer’s Workshop professor and Pulitzer-prize winning author, comedy plays a constructive role in society.

“When behavior becomes mechanized, when it becomes too rigid, humor becomes a mechanism to nudge it,” McPherson said. “Humor is a key to democracy. Democracy has to flow, has to move.”

Other scholars disagree, arguing political satire is detrimental to democracy. According to a 2006 study by Jody Baumgartner and Jonathan Morris, published in American Politics Research, viewers of the Daily Show were found to have higher levels of political knowledge, but were less supportive of both 2004 presidential candidates, indicating an increased level of cynicism. They also found reduced levels of trust in the media and the political process.

A different study conducted during the same election by Xiaoxia Cao and Paul Brewer and published in the International Journal of Public Opinion Research suggested that the shows increased participation in attendance of campaign events and political organizations. The authors contend that the shows’ “informed satire” questions the way viewers perceive issues, challenging their viewpoints, and can be viewed as “some of the most bracing and engaging commentary on the television.”

The debate regarding the use of satire is a long one. Most high school students will remember reading Jonathan Swift’s 1792 essay, A Modest Proposal. They might also remember the confusion the satirical content caused.

Many students read Modest Proposal and think it argues: “let’s be cannibals,” said Russell Peterson, author of Strange Bedfellows: How late night comedy turns democracy into a joke, in a phone interview.

The same danger of misinterpretation exists in the “fake” news shows. Like readers of Modest Proposal, some viewers fail to catch the disparaging parody Colbert presents of right-wing pundits, such as Bill O’Reilly. Many conservative politicians agreed to appear on Colbert’s show during the first season, Peterson said. They were surprised by the unfavorable treatment they received.

According to a 2009 report by Lisa Colletta in the Journal of Popular Culture, part of the difficulty with Colbert’s show is its deliberate resemblance of the conservative talk show, The O’Reilly Factor. Colbert’s carefully developed persona mocks O’Reilly’s conservative positions by taking them to absurd extremes. But the rhetorical strategies of the two shows are nearly identical. Both reference anecdotes, not facts, appeal to emotions, not reason, and use “everyman language,” Colletta wrote.

“Satire and irony are intellectual perspectives,” McPherson said, explaining that the same element that makes comedy appealing also creates the hazard of misapprehension. Satire and irony “don’t flow from here;” he said, motioning to his gut. “They flow from an understanding of complex situations.”

This ability to explain complex situations and represent a myriad of viewpoints is one of the greatest advantages of comedy, Peterson said, but he was careful to distinguish between the beneficial use of satire and what he called “pseudo satire.” Both the Stewart and Colbert shows represent true satire, he said, but other late-night shows, such as Letterman’s The Late Show or Leno’s The Tonight Show, constitute pseudo satire.

“The points-of-view on the [Stewart and Colbert shows] are often expressed in pretty complex ways,” Peterson said. “It’s not just quip, quip, quip. They explain the issue. They challenge preconceptions about an issue by taking apart the logic and poking holes in the reasoning. They aren’t just talking about personal peccadilloes and habits, like Bill Clinton is promiscuous and Sarah Palin is dumb.”

This latter version of humor, poking fun at personality traits, is pseudo-satire, Peterson said. While it may appear similar to the Colbert/Stewart-style satire, it fails to actually engage in the discussion of politics and “just makes fun of someone opportunistically.”

Pseudo-satire is little more than entertainment, but genuine satire can serve an important role in a democratic society, helping to create a more informed and critical population.

“The way to teach people to be critical listeners is to show them the process,” Peterson said. “What Stewart and Colbert do is show the process of critical engagement of information. They are modeling interpretation for them rather than just repeating over and over: ‘believe this, believe this, believe this.’”

The debate regarding the effect of the “fake news” shows, becomes even more important in light of the growing popularity of both the shows and hosts. According to Nielsen ratings, audience numbers for the Daily Show, hosted by Jon Stewart, and the Colbert Report, hosted by Stephen Colbert, have grown over the past few years, reaching around 1.7 million and 1.3 million, respectively. This is in addition to the 9 million individuals who view their sites online each month.

According to a Pew Research Center study, most viewers tune in for entertainment — 43 percent of the Daily Show and 53 percent of the Colbert Report audience reported primarily seeking diversion. However, with the hosts’ increasing participation in the political sphere, the line between entertainment and politics blurs.
A recent example of this blurring was Colbert’s Sept. 24 testimony before the House Judiciary Committee’s Subcommittee on Immigration, Citizenship, and Border Security. Colbert spoke in-character about his day picking vegetables and advocating better labor conditions for migrant workers.

“Maybe this Ag Jobs bill would help, I don’t know. Like most members of Congress, I haven’t read it,” Colbert quipped during his testimony. “But maybe we could offer more visas to the immigrants who, let’s face it, will probably be doing these jobs anyway…Or maybe that’s crazy. Maybe the easier answer is just to have scientists develop vegetables that pick themselves.”

While Peterson admitted the appearance could be portrayed as a celebrity using fame to promote a good cause, he said many “people saw it as a comedian wasting the time of the congressional committee.”

However, Peterson supported Colbert’s 2006 appearance on the Washington scene, when he spoke at the Correspondents’ Dinner.

“He questioned the legitimacy of the cozy relationship between politicians and the people who are going to cover them,” Peterson said.

Holding the rallies was also justified as a necessary rejoinder to the recent onslaught of news coverage of far-right rallies, Peterson argued.

“Although they have denied it, I think the rallies are a response to Glen Beck’s rally,” he said. “Beck has a small, devoted following, just like Jon Stewart. It shows that just because a lot of attention is being paid to Glen Beck rally and tea party, doesn’t mean they are representative of the majority of people…Polarization is something from the fringe.”

Because the rally’s message differed from the familiar partisan discussion, some rally attendees said they did not expect the event to make much of a wave.

“America tends to be very black and white, either for or against, and they don’t see very much grey,” Anita Storm, a psychologist from Los Angeles, said in a phone interview. “This rally was very much in the grey. Maybe if the message is continued it will have an effect.”

While it may be impossible to measure the influence of the shows or rally, it is clear the demonstration influenced at least one person. The Monday following the rally, Keith Olbermann of MSNBC announced the suspension of his daily staple, “Worst Persons in the World.” A move inspired, he said, by the rally’s call for a change in tone.

“Satire and whimsy have gradually gotten lost in some anger,” Olbermann announced. “So in the spirit of the thing…I am unilaterally suspending that segment.”
Timeline: Stu Fe

November 1, 2010 — Keith Olber
MNNBC suspended the segment of
program "Worst Person in the W"
the rally influenced his decision a
the need for a time change in the

October 30, 2010 — Olber
second appearance on the Do
First time as resident.

October 17, 2010 — anniversary of the Colbert Report

September 29, 2010 — Obama at
the Rally to Restore Sanity is a re
table discussion.

September 21, 2010 — Oprah in
favor of Stewart's rally, saying:
I think Jon Stewart's on to
something. Rally to Restore liant
you consider going? Oct 30, 2010

September 16, 2010 — Stewart
Colbert announce the rallies or
shows.

June 8, 2009 — Colbert received
from General Raymond Odierno
the week of June 8-11, the comed
broadcast his show from Iraq and
performed for U.S. troops.

October 28, 2008 — Obama mail
appearance on Daily Show as a ca
in 2008 election.

October 2005 — Colbert broadc
word, "truthiness," defined as the
seems, according to one's gut, to b
or that which one wants to be tru
because Merriam-Webster's word
in 2006

"The truthiness is anyone ca
news to you. I promise to feel the
you."

September 15, 2003 — John Ed
announces candidacy on Daily On

1999 — Jon Stewart takes over a
the Daily Show.

— Steve Carell joined the Do
"correspondent" staff. He left the
2004. He began his series, The Of
n't.

1996 — Daily Show created by Li
and Mardelene Smithberg. Origin
by Craig Kilbors.