Thinking with Foucault about Truth-Telling and *The Daily Show*

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**Abstract:** This essay brings together two practitioners of critical irony, Michel Foucault and Jon Stewart, to examine problems in the standard critiques of the impact of irony on cultural discourse. For years, critics have bemoaned the increased use of irony in culture, arguing that too much irony in public discourse leads to the formation of distant and disengaged subjects. Using Foucault’s work on *parrhesia* or truth-telling to think about *The Daily Show*, I argue that the latter neither erodes a foundation through which truth claims can be made nor leads to a pervasive and dangerous cynicism amongst its viewers. Rather, the communicative activity performed by both *The Daily Show* and Foucault provide ethical models for an ongoing and sustained engagement with *untruth* and artifice in the mass media that is directly related to the care of the self and society. Accordingly, critics need to rethink the salutary importance of such truthful irony in a media world that is dominated by earnest sounding rhetoric and artificially serious speech.

“I always feel like, when you see the atmosphere of our show, it’s very serious people doing a very unserious thing. Whereas a lot of times when we are watching the government in action or a lot of the media representatives in action, those are very unserious people doing very serious things.” -- Jon
Ironically, as the trope of irony has become the dominant modality in all forms of contemporary media discourse, culture critics have become very attached to a certain way of describing its cultural effects. It has become a reflex to bemoan, with varying degrees of anxiety, the inevitability of a certain eye-rolling withdrawal amongst the subjects constructed by such discourse. The critical riff goes something like this: since ironists can only expose the discursive constraints that get in the way of ever really communicating the truth in and through the forms of media we use and experience, the cynical post-modern public, too distant by the pervasive irony, seems unable to maintain commitment to any form of communicative action or normative discourse. As such, the phenomenon of irony has been blamed for the rise of a cynical bad faith in culture [1] and for the decline of political engagement. If one commits to this kind of anironic [2] analysis, irony is held up as an effective trope for deligitimating certain forms of communication, but nonetheless is avoided due to the problems with it for rational public debate. [3] No doubt there are ethical implications to using any trope of discourse, but are irony and satire – in a post-modern age characterized by the dominance of irony and cynical reason -- really all that divisive, distancing and dangerous to public discourse and participatory democracy?

This essay brings together two practitioners of irony, Michel Foucault and Jon Stewart of The Daily Show, both of whom in their respective fields of cultural production have been accused of being too ironic. More importantly, both exemplify a level of engagement in their work that makes such criticism ring hollow. I will argue that Foucault's writing on parrhesia provides an ethical model for telling the truth that is more forgiving of the trope of irony than other theories of communication and can help us come to terms with the way that irony functions in media discourse on a program like The Daily Show. Moreover, it argues that critical irony that aims at truth, a practice characteristic of both ironists, is more helpful than hurtful in today's mass media democracy. As such, communications theorists and culture critics need to revisit received ideas about irony and reconsider its effect on public discourse.

Few theorists have been criticized more for the implications of their work in the trope of irony than Michel Foucault. Indeed, though his attacks on idols of enlightenment liberalism have cleared ground for all kinds of new inquiries into the ways that earnest enlightenment ideals have led to normative restrictions on freedom of all kinds, his ironic anti-foundationalism has drawn much of the standard commentary about how too much irony can lead to critical pessimism. [4] Foucault was troubled by such criticism, yet remained committed to his position as a romantic ironist in the Nietzschean sense. He avoided “proposing” any normative mode of discourse, for fear that it could be appropriated and used by power to dominate. “As soon as one ‘proposes’ – one proposes a vocabulary, an ideology, which can only have the effect of domination.” [5] Being trapped in the ironist’s cage, however, did not make him a prophet of indifference or get in the way of his ongoing critique of the present and its regimes of discursive domination. Though it may have caused him to spend lots of time in the archives, it did not lead to his withdrawal from public life. The influence of his thinking on public discourse – ironically enough – has been more stimulating than stultifying, more of a conversation starter than a conversation stopper.

It may seem like a strange leap here to move from such a virtuoso of high theory to Jon Stewart and The Daily Show, but both exemplify an ongoing critique of the present based on a commitment to telling the truth. Like Foucault, The Daily Show (TDS) has inspired waves of criticism pertaining to the effect of its irony on audiences. [6] Many are anxious about the impact of long term exposure to irony on viewers; others point to the growing phenomenon of discursive integration [7] in shows like TDS, where formerly distinct fields of communicative action or codes of rhetoric, like earnest “objective” news and satiric comedy, have become interpenetrated and blurred. If one’s normative benchmark for communicative action in the public sphere is drawn from someone like Jurgen Habermas, where distinct fields of communicative activity need to stay true to their own particular internal logics, then this is a problem.
However, if we think about TDS using Foucault’s notion of parrhesia, here defined as an ethical attitude committed to an ongoing critical ontology of the present and to a care of the self, then one can see that TDS seems to live up to this kind of communicative praxis almost every day. As such, thinking about both together allows for a re-appraisal of the effect of irony on mass media culture. It will be argued that irony, long valued for its subversive potential and as an essential part of the modern critical spirit, is meta-tropic and does not necessarily lead to a waning of commitment to politics or telling the truth; rather the kind of parrhesiastic irony that one sees dramatized on TDS can provide a salutary model for communicative action that exemplifies, as Linda Hutcheon has argued, a political ethical force.

To be sure, even communications theorists who are less ironic and more normative, like Jurgen Habermas, give Foucault credit for always seeking to unveil the negation of truth in his work. Indeed, the tension between the two writers in regards to the normative ethics of public speech activity in relation to truth-telling is directly linked to the trope which each utilized for communicative action. This difference was most famously laid out in their responses to Kant’s seminal essay “What is Enlightenment?” Foucault, though shedding Kant’s normative procedure, stressed that his work was linked to Kant by way of a shared modern attitude toward public speech activity that offered a critique of the “ontology of contemporary reality.” Of the many critics of modernity, Foucault saw the best example of this critical attitude – and one that is closely aligned with his thinking on parrhesia – in Baudelaire’s life and work. Baudelaire, Foucault offered, was able to pick out those things in the present that he thought were false or fake and shake things up a bit by employing critical irony. Yet Habermas, for his part, found Foucault’s recommendation of his kind of ironic critical “dandyism” in public discourse at odds with the enlightenment project, partially because he thought that Foucault’s work was always eroding the foundations from which one could speak on all kinds of issues. Just being provocative or ironic, Habermas offered, did not ensure healthy public discourse. Without a normative ethic or commitment to some foundational language – without being part of the discourse of enlightenment that Foucault so often hammered away at – there could be no way to foster better truth claims in the public.

Yet Foucault’s later work on parrhesia was full of the thing that Habermas thought that it lacked: namely an ethic for speech activity with an aim to the truth. For Foucault, truth telling – parrhesia – was part of the care of the self and one’s relationship to truth was crucial for a healthy life. His work on parrhesia focused on examples of those who lived this relationship of truth, connecting what they believed (enuncidium) and what they said (enunciation) -- and he memorialized those figures in the past who problematized the meaning of parrhesia by speaking against rhetoric and artifice in language, and battling the flattering speech that so often dominated in democratic public discourse. Foucault’s exemplary truth-tellers spoke out against the constraining influence of power over truth and showed how parrhesia, as a kind of critical speech activity, could form the basis for a healthy bios or life that was important for the self and others.

For the Greeks, where Foucault drew inspiration for his work on the care and regulation of the self, parrhesia was “a guideline for democracy as well as an ethical and personal attitude characteristic of the good citizen.” [9] Nowhere was the normative injunction to tell the truth and to fight untruth more important than in democracy, where “parrhesia is given even to the worst citizens, [and where] the overwhelming influence of bad, immoral, or ignorant speakers may lead the citizenry into tyranny.” [10] An ideal parrhesia, Foucault insisted, could not exist in the same way in modern democracy, but nonetheless a speech activity aimed at being true was crucial for regulating the self and, by extension, society. Indeed, if Foucault always wrote his histories aimed at the heart of the present, it would seem fitting to think with him about truth-telling in democratic discourse today. Wh at would parrhesiastic communicative action look like in mass media? Indeed, so much of the phatic speech or media chatter that passes as public discourse today seems points to the ascension of what Foucault called the “depraved orators” or “flatterers” in the Greco-Roman, those who always said what the people wanted to hear. Everywhere in convergent mass media discourse, we see Machiavellian talking points, focus-group-tested sound bites
and commodified speech. Moreover, in our news programming, we see a media that pretends not to notice the pervasive artificiality and “untruth” that gets in the way of informed democracy. In short, we see the dominance of irony and cynical reason in media discourse that might lead one to be nostalgic, like Mark Crispin Miller, for a lost golden era of public interest news programs lead by earnest father figures. Like Habermas’s public sphere, which critics have long contended never really existed except as a normative ideal, one wonders if the idea of a T.V. dutifully informing democracy is a realistic or helpful contrast as we try to come to terms with today’s cynical media world. Yet we need not despair or fall into nostalgia.

Though imperfect, there are examples of speech activity in today’s mass media world that do, as Foucault likes to put it, effectively “problematize” parrhesia, and that exemplify a specific relation to truth through a frank use of irony. The Daily Show is one such example. At least since the Pew Research Center started charting the statistics around the year 2000, media scholars have wondered aloud about the significance of the huge audiences enjoyed by comedy news hybrids like TDS. It is often argued that if audiences are drawn to such shows, then it must have something to say about the seriousness with which they view politics or current events. Indeed it does, but not for the reason that many critics of such discursive integration cite. The Daily Show exemplifies a parrhesiastic attitude and mode of communicative activity in important ways and thinking about TDS with Foucault can help us to re-imagine the impact of its brand of irony on today’s mass media public.

The Daily Show is now something of a cultural juggernaut with widespread impact in both old and new media. Its viewers, as the recent Pew Report indicated, are not detached and jaded, but rather informed and critical. Politicians, “primary definers” and performers who want to reach its crucial audience demographic now realize that they must go beyond the safe environment of mainstream media (MSM) news programming in order to do so. Most of the recent appraisals of TDS have rightly centered on its self-description as “fake news,” a description that aptly sums up TDS’s role as an ongoing critique of the “news” itself as a mode of communicative activity that is overwhelmingly artificial and constructed. If TDS’s news is fake, then it is because TV news as a form is equally artificial. While MSM news tries to conceal its constructedness with its nostalgic rhetoric of earnestness and stylized objectivity, by satirizing the artifice and untruth performed nightly in MSM news, TDS performs what Foucault might call a kind of “epistemic parrhesiastic” activity that aims to teach certain truths about the nature of media, especially its predictable way of exhaustively covering sensational stories while avoiding controversial topics.

Take for instance the critique of the MSM’s coverage of Anna Nicole Smith’s death in a bit called “death of a person.” Academic critics of commercial media have long complained about the sensationalist nature of media coverage in the 24-hour news cycle, but it is verifiable that Smith, a kind of ready-made persona in a hybrid media world that synergizes reality television with corporate journalism, was perfect ersatz news. The Daily Show’s take on the over-coverage of her death and its transformation into a “news event” brings out these same problems to the mass audience in a way that allows the individual viewer to, as Foucault would say, “internalize this parrhesiastic struggle – to fight within himself against his own faults” – to question his own relationship to a sensationalist media event like that which surrounded Smith’s death. This call to self-examination through one’s relationship to truth was what Foucault believed the Cynics of old did when they operated in the public. It meant calling attention to the artificial discourse that offended their sense of truth. In the media public, TDS calls attention to the content that offends their parrhesiastic sense by setting up a shot-countershot dialogue with the MSM figures who present such artificial discourse as news. The irony here works, as it always does for TDS, contextually. After a montage featuring the heads of each major news source repeating the same narrative meme and trying to brand their show’s name for their coverage, Stewart turns to camera two:

Stewart: “Of course, coverage of Anna Nichole Smith didn’t end with her death. There were
still so many unanswered questions like…”

Cut to CNN interviewing “witness:” “Did you get a good look at her?”

Witness: “She was covered up.”

Interviewer: “She was covered up as if she were deceased....”

Cut to Nancy Grace on Headline Prime, with split screen of Grace, Anna Nichole as Marilyn Monroe and Anna with her poodle behind Grace, and a footer posing her framing question, “What Killed Anna Nicole Smith?” Grace asks the expert: “were there needle marks on her body?”

Cut to Stewart responding to the footage saying: “HMMM…probing questions, tell me more.”

Cut to Clip of CNN report on Smith’s “Last Interview:” “Did she ever indicate that she suffered from post-partum depression?”

Quick Cut to Stewart: “Well, that’s something that exists.”

Cut to Clip of Nancy Grace hours later, this time stating: “There have been reports that Anna Nichole Smith actually choked on her own vomit.”

Cut to Stewart looking sick: “You know, I’m not choking on mine right now, but I’m tasting it a little…” (Cheers from the audience) “There were also a slew of onsite investigative reports from locales as diverse as (Cut to screen image) the strip club where she met her millionaire husband to pictures of her possible ’Death Fridge’…. (Crowd laughs at stock image of fridge interior) “Methadone and Worcester Sauce… You know you’ve never had General Chow’s chicken until you’ve had it with Methadone… All to find out how a woman who appeared to be in a perpetual downward spiral… somehow spiraled downward… Of course the viewers weren’t the only one befuddled.”

Cut to Clip of Lou Dobbs, teasing his upcoming show during “The Situation Room:” “Over the course of the next hour, there will be no reporting, beginning at the top of the hour, on the passing of Anna Nichole Smith. We hope you’ll join us. Wolf back to you....”

Cut on CNN back to a stunned Wolf Blitzer in the “Situation Room” in front of a giant four paneled screen showing Anna Nichole posing for the camera in various states of undress.

Wolf Blitzer: “OK. Lou Dobbs thank you for that. Coming up next in a few moments, Jackie Scheckner has been watching this unfold on the internet…”

Cut to Stewart, pausing as the audience laughs at the irony: “Oh Wolf, is it to the point where even Lou Dobbs can show his contempt for you, Wolf.”

This segment reveals the dominance and artificiality of many formal elements of MSM news coverage: celebrity news as a cultural dominant, celebrity newscasters who shamelessly choose prurient content for the sake of ratings, the “circular circularity” [15] of the news whereby everyone reports on the “situation” as it happens only because it is new and other people are reporting on it, the egregious use of stock footage and photos in cable news broadcasting to flesh out the inane speculative nature of the “reporting.” Moreover, Stewart identifies Wolf Blitzer, whose overly serious on-screen persona as the man at the heart of the “Situation Room” made him a star during the first Gulf War, as one of the chief perpetrators of this
cable news tendency to pander to what audiences “want” for better ratings. Blitzer acts as if the sensational material he is reading as news is as important as any other and, therefore, becomes the object of The Daily Show’s ironic détournement and parrhesiastic activity. Here Linda Hutcheon’s thinking about irony as a discursive strategy that depends upon context is perfectly dramatized in a strategy that is as much visual as it is prosodic. As they often do, TDS employs the logic of shot (earnest news as construct) and countershot (subversion of the former) to accomplish their strategic inversion. TDS’s brand of irony depends on the multiplicity and availability of serious-sounding news content in our hyper-mediated culture and, for the audience to get it, a deep insider knowledge of and engagement with MSM news. Indeed, TDS’s use of images and available footage is not that different from CNN’s, but this is also part of the media critique at work here, showing how little real journalism or truth-telling actually goes on in TV news.

Stewart and his writers have used these techniques to take on other media figures who feign seriousness and objectivity in their presentation of untruth. Indeed, his ongoing feud with MSM news, most famously rendered in the on-air confrontation with the hosts of Crossfire about how the show was “hurting” democracy, hardly shows the signs of a detached withdrawal. When asked what he thought about the “liberal” bias of the media recently, Stewart rejected the clichéd framing language and responded that the liberal vs. conservative categorization was part of the media’s game of deception. “The bias of the media is not liberal, it’s lazy and sensationalist.” [16] It is precisely this lazy and sensationalist tendency in MSM news coverage that The Daily Show goes after nightly. “The press has bravely and nobly eroded the public trust,” Stewart recently quipped ironically, “I celebrate that.” [17] In other words, a show like TDS, which is truly engaged with the 24-hour news cycle, has plenty of fodder for contextualized satire. Given the constant stream of representations that “flow into the mind” via mass media – to paraphrase Foucault’s Epictetus, The Daily Show remains in a constant state of critique, cutting away at serious-sounding public media activity that is designed to flatter and manipulate viewers. Media stories that are reported by the MSM without any self-reflexivity are held up by The Daily Show as false. The procedure for ironically revealing untruth is accomplished not just by making fun of the overly earnest news, but by showing or indexing what the research staff and Stewart believe to be the truth. They do this by fact checking and using their media archives to reveal what public figures actually said. They do not, as is often the case with commercial news in the era of 24-hour cable, allow the utterances of people whom they interview to stand as if they were true or rather “pretend to play along” as Stewart has often accused.

This relationship to truth, this commitment to indexing something that is true as a feature of their comedy, is crucial for understanding The Daily Show’s brand of parrhesiastic irony. It may also explain why the audience of TDS is driven to keep up to date with the underhanded machinations of mass media politics on the blogs where clips from the show are featured prominently. Indeed, the writers of the show depend on it. “If they came to our show without knowledge, our show wouldn’t make any sense to them. We assume so much knowledge on our show, we do not instruct. They are not coming to us for the news, they are coming to us to find out what the funny is on the news.” [18] If one can assume that TDS and its audience resembles this characterization, then this seems to indicate that Claire Colebrook was right to say that ironists seem to display a commitment to a truth that lies beyond the particular communicative act. While the ironist rarely takes things at their word, the ironic reading also entails “looking beyond standard use and exchange to what this or that might really mean.” [19]

Stewart has shown such a concern about the existence of a meaning beyond the artifice often constructed by the MSM in his description of what a truthful network would look like, “that is not liberal, but is credible…. You could create a paradigm of media organization that is geared toward no bullshit and do it actively, and stop pretending that we don’t know what is going on.” [20] Broadcasting that peddles predictable product becomes the context and content for his irony. In most cases, the humor depends on the referent enunciation – the absurd event, the bold-face lie or rhetorical artifice – being acutely present.
in the public, and on the humorist and the audience knowing that there is a truth beyond the absurd construct being utilized. So when overly earnest primary definers or corporate spokespersons use the artifice of mass media to brand ideas through repetition or to push talking points like product s, _The Daily Show_ uses such speech acts – immediately available for re-framing – as fodder for its ironic comedy. This engaged attitude toward untruth is something that Stewart shares with Foucault's Cynics, whose practice of parrhesia as a public activity is most akin to the critical ontology of the present that Foucault saw in Kant and Baudelaire; this praxis, Foucault suggested, was the basis for a healthy modern bios. “The manner in which a person lived,” Foucault wrote of the Cynics, “was a touchstone of his or her relation to truth.” [21] Or, as Stewart has described his commitment to this practice in his work: “I am hard-wired this way.” [22]

Along with epistemic function of parrhesia, Foucault discussed how the Cynics’ parrhesia also served politics by taking a stand toward the laws and political institutions that were being corrupted by untruth. This fidelity toward the true application of laws or toward institutions or function of government – a mode of cynicism that we are unfamiliar with today – is something that _The Daily Show_ returns to regularly. Again, understanding the “funny” on political institutions also assumes – and provides – a level of engagement with constitutional procedure and legal proceedings. Take, for instance, this news dialogue from March 21, 2007, between Stewart as "Anchor" and "Senior Political Correspondent" John Oliver. It exposed the disingenuous nature of the Bush Administration's rhetoric of executive privilege through which they hid people who knew the truth about "attorney-gate" and avoided the oversight of constitutional checks and balances:

Stewart: “John, the President right now is suggesting that the only reason he is doing this is preserve his ability through executive privilege to get good council from his advisors… and it strikes me as, and I don’t mean to be rude here, it strikes me as Bullshit.”

Oliver: “Bull shit or bull fact… Look if Karl Rove knew that he one day he’d be forced to testify under oath about advice he gave the president, he’d have to limit that advice to things that weren’t shameful, illegal or spectacularly bone-headed. And John, I don’t think that is what Thomas Jefferson had in mind when he wrote that the princes who have done great things are the ones who are known to have turned men’s brains with guile….”

Stewart: “I think that was actually Machiavelli.”

Oliver: “If I might quote Stalin, does it really matter whose idea it was?”

Stewart: “That’s a quote actually from Tony Snow yesterday….”

Oliver: "Great minds….”

Stewart: "Look, to my mind I don’t know why Karl Rove can’t just walk up to congress, put his hand on a Bible and tell the ffffkin truth…” (crowd goes wild)

Oliver: “Well, that is all very well John, but I think we all know what happened the last time he did that (cut to image of burned hand print on Bible) the room smelled like burned bacon for three weeks….”

Not only does this carefully constructed dialogue deconstruct the claim about executive privilege, denounce the rhetoric used to justify avoidance of accountability as bullshit, and liken the administration’s speech activity to Machiavelli and Stalin, but its frankness makes all other news reporting of such rhetoric – the stenographic and uncritical kind often practiced by MSM – seem complicit in the dissemination of
untruth. Whereas the MSM tends to passively allow the rhetoric of “executive privilege” to stand without ascertaining its relationship to truth, *The Daily Show* constantly decodes such claims by citing constitutional law and telling the viewer how such rhetoric functions as media spin. In another bit on “executive privilege” by John Hodgman, “Resident Expert,” this rhetorical device is described as something invoked “by presidents when they do not want you to hear about something bad that they did.” This is *The Daily Show* frankly stating the truth behind such speech activity.

Here and elsewhere the show employs the Q & A dialogue format between field correspondent or expert and the anchor that is the structural mainstay of MSM news. Jamie Warner recently wrote that such dialogues on *The Daily Show* can be seen as examples of Socratic irony, but Foucault stresses that Socratic irony depends on a relationship of friendship between the interlocutor and the bearer of belief. It can be said that *The Daily Show’s* active confrontation of powerful people and their rhetoric shows something more like contempt toward the way of life that their disingenuous speech acts represent, a kind of questioning of principles which is much more akin to the “provocative dialogue” witnessed between Diogenes and Alexander than between Socrates and his pupils. Whereas Socratic irony is designed to show someone that he is ignorant of his own ignorance, the Cynics’ parrhesia targeted the pride and hubris of the powerful. This may seem like a picky mis-en-point, but it is crucial for understanding the relationship between *The Daily Show* and the talking points used by the powerful to manipulate the masses. By revealing them as untruth, the enunciations produced by the powerful are barred from belief.

Crucial to understanding *The Daily Show’s* form of ironic deconstruction is the constant use of clips whereby sound-bites are interrupted and placed in dialogue. In so doing, the powerfuls’ control of the media discourse is disturbed. For instance, whereas the media often uses George Bush’s sound bites at face value, *TDS* often re-contextualizes them in shot- countershot montage with past performances of the president himself. Doing so creates a détournement of the rhetoric revealing Bush’s speech activity for what it is: pure political theater by someone who uses words only to get people to believe the opposite of what he is actually doing.

The difference here between the cynicism characteristic of the Bush Administration’s brand of mass media politics and that of *The Daily Show’s* writers and performers is illustrative of a certain split that cuts to the heart of the question over the use and abuse of irony in today’s media public. On the one hand, this is an administration whose manipulation of the truth through mass media miscommunication seems to be its normal mode of communication; on the other, *TDS* tries to subvert such lies through satiric irony. What is this if not the difference between what Slavoj Zizek calls “cynical reason” and “kynicism.” “Kynicism,” which Zizek borrows from Sloterdijk, indicates the popular rejection of official rhetoric by means of irony and sarcasm. It indicates a kind of pragmatic procedure that tries to expose the egotistical self-interest behind ideological phrases used by the ruling elite. “Cynical reason,” on the other hand, takes into account the interest behind ideological universality of its words revealed by such criticism, what one might call the distance between the ideological mask and reality, but it still finds reason to retain the mask.

In other words, *TDS*’s “kynicism” unveils the abuse of empty signifiers like “freedom,” “executive privilege,” and “patriotism;” the Bush administration’s “cynical reason” takes the meaninglessness of these words into account but uses them anyway because they seem to be so effective since the rest of the media often acts as if these words meant what they were used to say. In short, *The Daily Show*’s ironic subversion is used against a communicative artifice that, though its rhetorical style is straightforward and earnest, is already ironically detached. While the MSM covers the cynical communications of the Bush Administration as if its enunciations deserved to be to be taken seriously -- thereby allowing the lie to be experienced as truth -- *TDS*’s “coverage” of the artifice of official rhetoric exposes its cynical reason by refusing to pretend to take their lies seriously.

One sees all three kinds of parrhesiastic activity described by Foucault on *The Daily Show*: epistemic
parrhesia, political parrhesia and parrhesia which elaborates on the relationship between truth and one’s style of life. More often than not, all three are used against the administration’s most cunning liar, Dick Cheney, for whom The Daily Show does little to conceal its contempt. When the Vice President recently claimed to be part of the legislative branch to avoid complying with an executive order mandating transparency, Stewart deconstructed the absurd claim which stood largely unexamined in MSM coverage by using Cheney’s own past lies against this latest one:

Stewart: "I’m not angry as a tax payer, I’m angry as an attention payer. I’m a little peeved as a country liver, an air breather…. So, an executive order requires disclosure for members of the executive branch. The vice president says he is not in the executive branch because he has legislative duties…. I wonder what he would say if someone in the legislative branch required disclosure of, let’s say, the names of people he met with for the energy task force."

Cut to Cheney: “This request in fact for me to provide them with this information….as a member of the executive branch for the vice-president strikes me as inappropriate.

Stewart: “Oh, so basically the government has three branches and he’s saying he is the fourth…” (Starts counting down on his figures…) He’s clearly not in the judicial, he’s clearly not in the legislative, … (pausing between middle and index finger as crowd goes wild)… Which one… And he’s not in the executive (chooses index finger)…. I know you thought that was where I was going with this, but Cheney is actually much smarter. He is using the pointer finger to come up to us personally and tell us to ‘go fuck ourselves’…"

Political parrhesia is employed here, daring to say what the MSM would not, and denouncing Cheney’s lack of respect for the constitution and the country. The Daily Show’s modern parrhesiastic attitude is at work as this bit continually indexes a reality or truth that is lost in the usual memory hole of mass media. Again, the effect of the irony here is not to distance, but rather to engage the viewer with the truth of what Cheney actually said by showing him speaking against himself.

Holding Cheney to account is a practice that Stewart would like to see in network news coverage, but rarely does. The following bit shows the pattern of narrative repetition that the mainstream media has adopted in relation to Cheney’s constant equivocation. Again, the shot- countershot montage technique is used to establish the context of the irony.

Stewart: “As it happens the media is atwitter when it comes to Cheney. Has the Libby verdict undermined his influence?”

Cut to Anderson Cooper: “Vice President Cheney, the question is now, has he lost much of his clout”

Cut to Scarborough Country, with footer, “Cheney: The Enemy Within?”: He is the most powerful VP in History, but is he beginning to lose his clout?”

Cut to the Today Show: “Is Vice President Dick Cheney losing his clout?”

Cut to Tucker Carlson: “So what should the president do about his number two?”

Cut to Stewart as the audience gets the joke: “I don’t think that last question is any of our business. But you get the point. Surely the Libby conviction must have reduced the Vice President Cheney’s clout. His chief of staff was found guilty of lying. Is there any other instance involving Cheney that should have had a similar clout-loosening effect?”
Cut to Cheney on *Meet the Press*, Tim Russert asking Cheney: “Your support for the NSA surveillance eavesdropping policy has weakened your influence within the White House.”

Cut to Stewart: “That’s something. Is there anything else?”

Cut to Wolf Blitzer, reading while stock footage of Cheney rolls: “Vice President Dick Cheney’s clout isn’t what it used to be after his hunting accident.”

Cut to Stewart: “Oh right, he shot an old man in the face… and also there’s this.”

Cut to Cheney: “Simply stated, there is no doubt that Saddam Hussein now has weapons of mass destruction.”

Cut to Cheney: “If you will, they will greet us as liberators.”

Cut to Cheney: “They are, if you will, in the last throws of the insurgency.”

Cut to Stewart: “So I think we are beginning to see a pattern. Cheney causes some high level embarrassment or makes some completely erroneous statement about American policy, his clout is questioned, and yet, his clout goes on. All of this begs the question…. What the f**k? Why does this man have any clout at all? Cheney has been wrong about everything. I’ve been fired from jobs for being late. This man is very very ungood…."

First, one sees the epistemic critique of the media talking points, the repetitious use of rhetoric that hides a lack of substantial criticism and obfuscates the truth by layering on pointless questions for public consumption. Rather than engage his speech activity and check the truth of his statements, the media figures cynically pose rhetorical questions about whether the public still believes Cheney has clout. Anyone who knows how to use the internet could easily do this and Stewart thinks it would be easy and even commercially viable to do so in broadcast news: “Why can’t you create [a network] of people who care about the truth, you know them, they’re good. You’ve got people on blogs who are fact checking as things happen… Have someone who can be an arbiter of what is real and what is not… make the network reactive to the devastating game of strategy that is being played in Washington.” [27] This quote from Stewart sounds more like Habermas than Foucault, with its nod toward rational deliberation, and Stewart does seem to hold the News as a form of democratic mass media to such an extent. “There is,” he offered, “a responsibility in the media to help.” [28] However, this is not the ideal guiding what *The Daily Show* does on most nights. Time and time again, Stewart has stressed that he is not a media critic, that he is not following some crusade against the powerful and that he is not being political. Rather, he always states that he is merely reacting to the devastatingly cynical game of strategy being played in the media by trying to put on a show that uses the strategic rhetoric, artifice and bold-faced lies as the context for comedy. Focusing on the most egregious lies and the most artificial rhetoric of mass media through a pragmatic procedure that is very close to Foucault’s description of *pa rrhesisastic* irony, he and his writers try to write the best jokes and frame the outrageous clips in the most clever ways. In so doing they model a relationship to mass media discourse that is engaged and that reacts to the disingenuous speech activity that dominates so much of it. *TDS* manages, as Foucault’s Cynics did, to persuade people to change their lives by acting more truthfully. It is this final point – the link between one’s relationship to the truth and the care of the self – that best explains the disdain toward Cheney. If *parrhesiastic* activity is designed to show how to live truthfully as part of caring for the self, then Cheney serves as the counter-example, or rather an example of the “ungood” life. His utter lack of health, his seeming lack of human emotion and ethics, is contrary to the healthy bios or way of life that is tied to telling the truth.

Importantly, it should also be noted that *TDS* does not subvert any and all attempts to make meaning in
the public sphere. Though much of what the media does seems worthy of ironic détournement – and one can often feel Stewart’s frustration that the MSM is so complicit in the dissemination of artifice and spin, like Diogenes barking in the public square in search of an honest man – when Barack Obama recently delivered his speech on race, TDS did not make the speech itself the context for its comedy, but rather exposed the clichés and narrative memes that MSM outlets used to frame it. It was as if the speech was too truthful for them to re-package in their fine tissue of clichés, and TDS focused its irony on their incapacity to deal with it as such. In the end, though taking some jabs at Obama’s attempt to represent his family as a multi-ethnic smorgasbord, Stewart noted that the problem that the MSM had with Obama’s speech was not its content, but the fact that “at 11 o’clock on Tuesday, a prominent politician spoke to Americans about race as if we were adults.” Offering this parodied commentary took many commentators by surprise. Rachel Sklar of the Huffington Post even accused Stewart of “getting all earnest,” [29] a comment that shows the power of the either/or division in journalism that seems to miss the extent to which TDS’s discursive integration is also meta-tropic.

The performers and writers on The Daily Show, though steeped in satiric irony, are committed to offering a critique of public discourse, to taking aim at the heart of the present. “I am advocating that the media come to work for us again,” Stewart recently said. “That they remove themselves from the symbiotic relationship that they have developed with the power structures, the corporations and the politicians.” [30] By putting on a show that they think is true, frank and funny, TDS acts as a kind of guide for others in the same way that, as Foucault described it, the Greek parrhesiastes acted as a “spiritual guide” for others in the polis. As a guide to truth-telling in the media through the model of revealing untruth, The Daily Show’s irony does not distance his viewers from politics, but rather exemplifies and promotes a kind of engaged commitment to truth-telling that is crucial for the well-regulated self and society. “I think of myself as a comedian who has the pleasure of writing jokes about things that I actually care about.” [31] This parrhesiastic care is manifest in the show night after night and could, if taken seriously, provide a model for communicative action for those who care enough to be ironic about the state of media in society today.

Notes


[2] On this concept, which is used to characterize art that opposed ironic, degraded reality, see Alan Wilde, Horizons of Assent: Modernism, Postmodernism, and the Ironic Imagination, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1981.


Linda Hutcheon is exemplary of critics who highlight the capacity of postmodern irony to be subversive and to offer multiple and even inconsistent meaning that depend largely on the audience interpretants for meaning. See Linda Hutcheon, Irony’s Edge: The Theory and Practice of Irony, London: Routledge, 1995.

Michel Foucault, Discourse and Truth, chpt. 4, p.51.


Ibid.


Discourse on Truth, chpt 4, p.11.

Interview with Bill Moyers, July 11, 2003.


On this technique of interrupting sound bites as a kind of Bakhtinian dialogic confrontation that “forces the original statement into revealing contexts,” Geoffrey Baym, “The Daily Show: Discursive Integration


[26] See Slavoj Zizek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, New York: Verso, p.29. He takes the phrase “kynicism” from Peter Sloterdijk’s *Critique of Cynical Reason*, which posits the thesis that ideology’s dominant mode of functioning is cynical, rendering vain the classic critical-ideological procedure for revealing the truth, and calling into question the validity of the “anironic” anxiety about the deleterious effect of irony on public discourse.


[31] Ibid.