

# The Daily Show and Meta-Coverage: How Mock News Covers the Political Communications System

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## Abstract

*This study examines the relationship between mock news coverage and Presidential approval. Specifically, it focuses on whether approval affects the volume and framing of mock news meta-coverage, or coverage of the political communications system. In contrast to other studies, which address either entertainment news programs or meta-coverage, this study combines the comedy of mock news and the democratic importance of meta-communications. Using a content analysis of The Daily Show episodes during the first term of former President George W. Bush and the current term of President Barack Obama, the research does not support a significant relationship between approval ratings and mock news meta-coverage. The research does identify key trends in meta-coverage themes and framing strategies.*

## I. Introduction

When the Pew Research Center released information on America's most admired news figures in 2007, it probably surprised few to see Katie Couric, Dan Rather, and Tom Brokaw toward the top of the list. However, many were shocked to see one person's name. Americans ranked comedian Jon Stewart among the top five most admired journalists. Stewart's mock news program, *The Daily Show*, has become very popular since it premiered in 1996. The show is regarded as a fake news program, but it is structured much like a traditional news broadcast with an anchor, Stewart, giving news updates and interviewing guests. There are also news packages produced by fake correspondents on real or fake locations. Stewart satirizes political and pop culture issues as well as the media in a fashion that has garnered much attention from both viewers and critics. The show averages about 1.2 million viewers, who some believe are paying too much attention to the program (Pew, 2008). Critics say it is not appropriate for people to rely on *The Daily Show* for accurate information on current events (Pew, 2008). Others see the program as the true watchdog in society that exposes a manipulative government and media (Baym, 2005; Brewer, 2003). Regardless of which side of the argument is right, it is important to understand the messages that are being sent to so many people.

This research addresses *The Daily Show's* role in revealing the manipulation of the political communication system among the Presidential Administration. The program does this through the coverage of media coverage, also known as meta-coverage. In traditional news meta-coverage can be defined as "the news media's self-referential reflections on the nature of the interplay between political public relations and political journalism" (Esser, 2001). In mock news programming meta-coverage is not exactly self-referential, but is critical of the relationship. This research analyzes *The Daily Show* episodes during the presidential terms of George W. Bush and Barack Obama to determine if public approval affects the volume and type of

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meta-coverage. The Administration is constantly under public scrutiny and its actions become controversial topics of debate; the type of stories that fuels Stewart's wit. The President's office and the media also have a crucial relationship. Political officials have communications strategies that are extremely sensitive to public acceptance. Meta-coverage threatens this acceptance and helps the democratic process by exposing the manipulation. This study explores the conditions under which presidential approval affects mock news meta-coverage.

## II. Literature Review

The increasing popularity of *The Daily Show* has caught the eye of political communications researchers. The scholarly literature has focused on a number of issues related to political processes and programs like *The Daily Show*. Much of the research on this topic can be divided between two groups: 1) research on entertainment media, including mock news and 2) research on meta-coverage (Baym, 2005; Brewer, 2003; Esser, 2001, 2003; Fengler, 2003; Johnson, 1996). The first of these topics can be further divided into two categories: 1) content (Baum, 2003; Baym, 2005; Brewer, 2007; Niven, 2003), and 2) effects (Baum, 2003; Baumgartner, 2006; Feldman, 2008; Young, 2006). These studies have established a need to take a closer look at the significant implications of mock news programs.

### *Soft News and Entertainment Media*

**The Content:** *The Daily Show* and other satirical entertainment programs focus on a wide range of topics. They are reflective of what is popular in society, but also bring attention to what may not be widely known. This watchdog nature is similar to the role of a traditional journalist, with a twist. Much research has focused on analyzing the content of these programs (Baum, 2003; Baym, 2005; Brewer, 2007; Niven, 2003). Soft news programs are an important source of information on foreign crises and what Baum describes as "water cooler" events (2003, 5). These are events the media can elevate from traditional political discourse to topics discussed across the population, such as the Monica Lewinsky scandal or the war in Afghanistan.

Specifically analyzing Stewart's typical dialogue with sound bites from political events has led Baym (2005) to conclude that Stewart often juxtaposes what is happening in the real world with his idea of common sense, creating an undermining humor that has become very popular. Scholars have discovered the majority of news stories featured on *The Daily Show* are about politics (Brewer, 2007, 259). According to Brewer and Marquardt's content analysis, the top subject for ridicule was the President in 2004, but the press also became a primary target (Brewer, 2007, 259).

Previous research has also found that guest appearances and interviews have a significant role in informing the public on political issues (Brewer, 2007; Niven, 2003). Brewer and Marquardt (2007, 263) found that over half of guest interviews on *The Daily Show* discuss politically relevant issues and claim this increases the show's potential to influence public opinion.

**The Effects:** To further establish whether or not satirical entertainment programs, like *The Daily Show*, can provide the public with political information, researchers have also looked into the effects of the programs on political efficacy (Baum, 2003; Baumgartner, 2006; Feldman, 2008; Young, 2006; Young, 2008). Some researchers have categorized *The Daily Show* within a group of late-night comedy television programs that also include political satire (Young, 2006; Baum, 2003; Feldman, 2008). Other scholars have considered *The Daily Show* as a separate phenomenon, because unlike the other late-night programs, it takes on the personality of a news program and often includes more political information (Young, 2006). The 2004 National Annenberg Election Survey and the 2000 Pew Research Center for the People and the Press report suggested that younger audiences are avoiding traditional news programs and getting all of their information from more entertaining sources. Both Feldman and Young (2008) and Young and Tisinger (2006) used data from the reports to determine the relationship between late-night viewing and traditional news consumption. Both concluded that an effect of late-night content is an increased level of attention to traditional news for political information. Baum (2003) refers to a similar group of programming as soft news. According to Baum, more people consume soft news for its entertainment purposes rather than for political information. He identifies soft news as a gateway to traditional news. Feldman and Young (2008) supported this gateway theory by finding a positive relationship between late-night viewing and higher levels of attention to traditional news sources during the 2004 presidential primaries. Other research may not necessarily deny the legitimacy of entertainment media as a source of political information, but it recognizes news media as the better source (Kim,

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2008). Kim and Vishak (2008) claim that traditional news viewers remember information more accurately than entertainment media audiences. Their research also suggests that entertainment media does not promote information acquisition.

Other research has found more direct effects on political knowledge. Baumgartner and Morris (2006) conducted a study to test young viewer's evaluations of political candidates after seeing clips of *The Daily Show* and *CBS Evening News*. Seeing the negative portrayal of the candidates on *The Daily Show* led to increased cynicism and lowered support (Baumgartner, 2006, 352). They found that it negatively affects external efficacy by lowering trust in both the media and entire electoral process. They claim viewers are less likely to vote if they see flaws in the electoral process or have increased cynicism towards the candidates. However, Baumgartner and Morris found the opposite for internal efficacy. Viewers of *The Daily Show* thought they had a better understanding of the political process because the content appeared to simplify the complexities of the political system (Baumgartner, 2006, 353).

Baum (2003) has researched the effect of soft news programming outside of the election process. He also analyzed attitudes of soft news viewers, but with an emphasis on foreign policy. He found a strong correlation between soft news consumption and opposition to a proactive or interventionist foreign policy (Baum, 2003, 230-258). The research also revealed that soft news viewers are also more likely to view the content as the most pressing issues facing the nation.

### Meta-Coverage

Most scholars would agree that meta-coverage involves both sides of the political communications process (Baym, 2005; Brewer, 2003; Esser, 2001, 2003; Fengler, 2003; Johnson, 1996). Fengler (2003) first looked at media self-criticism through interviews with journalists and critics. She identified several attitudes towards media criticism including a reluctance to attack fellow journalists and recognition of the potential of criticism as a method for self-regulation (Fengler, 2003). Academics have further looked at meta-coverage by studying the content of traditional news programs (Johnson, 1996; Esser, 2001, 2003). Research has identified four prominent themes in meta-coverage: media performance/impact, policy/campaign issues, candidate media strategy/ performance, and general media stories (Johnson, 1996). Johnson and Bourdeau (1996, 662) discovered most meta-coverage stories fell in the general media category, which would include features on media figures or about the technology used to cover political campaigns, and that few stories focus on media performance (Johnson, 1996, 662). Research has revealed differences between American, German and British meta-coverage content (Esser, 2001). In studying the coverage of political public relations, academics found the United States used "spin doctors" more often as legitimate sources than as people using the media for manipulation (Esser, 2001, 32).

Other scholars have similarly focused on the content of meta-coverage, but with an emphasis on content frames. Esser and D'Angelo (2003) analyzed meta-communications content frames of news programs during the 2000 election. They divided meta-coverage into two different groups: press and publicity propositions. They identified frames from three categories, finding that strategy frames were the most common (Esser, 2003, 632). Conduit frames were the second most popular, while accountability frames accounted for very few stories (Esser, 2003, 632). Academics have also examined the tones of meta-coverage in traditional news (Johnson, 1996; Esser, 2001, 2003). An earlier analysis found most meta-coverage stories to have neutral tones (Johnson, 1996, 662). Compared to other countries, American programs more often portray political officials as competent, useful professionals (Esser, 2001, 38).

Other scholars have researched meta-coverage specifically in *The Daily Show* (Baym, 2005; Brewer, 2003). Some academics suggest that Jon Stewart uses humor to confront the entire political communications system (Baym, 2005). The mock news format illuminates government manipulation of the media and the media's compliance. According to Baym, *The Daily Show* has a type of diagnostic function, pointing out what is wrong with the government media strategy. His study claims *The Daily Show* can actually inform the public on politics and policy issues, while also encouraging them to be skeptical of the news media. A content analysis of *The Daily Show* episodes discovered that fifteen percent of the stories cover the media, including clips of news programs or general criticism of media behavior (Brewer, 2007).

It is clear that *The Daily Show* and satirical entertainment programs have a strong influence on public opinion, especially with meta-coverage of the political communications system. However, there has been little research identifying similar content specifically to the President's office that could have the same impact on political discourse. As the leader of the United States, the President is one of the most scrutinized positions in government. Research has yet to address the role of *The Daily Show* and late-night comedy specific to the

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President's office and whether the same principles from previous studies are applicable. The following research will provide further detail on the conditions that influence content on *The Daily Show* during the terms of former President George W. Bush and President Barack Obama.

### III. Methodology

#### *Hypotheses*

This analysis is exploratory because no previous research has systematically looked at meta-coverage of the President's office on mock news programming. Previous research has discovered *The Daily Show* is very cynical, so one could expect the news stories to be more critical of the political communications system than the traditional news broadcast (Baumgartner, 2006). Content analyses have also revealed that most of the stories mock elected officials, with the President being the top subject (Brewer, 2007). Based on this research, while Johnson (1996) identified a neutral tone in traditional news meta-coverage, this is not necessarily true for mock news. *The Daily Show* has anything but neutral undertones. Therefore, rather than meta-coverage focused on general media stories, it is logical to predict there will be more stories about media performance and political media strategy. (Hypothesis 1)

When presidential approval is low, the public is more critical of the government's strategies. Given the critical nature of *The Daily Show* meta-coverage, it is reasonable to believe that as approval decreases, meta-coverage will increase (Hypothesis 2).

Scholars have suggested that accountability frames are the most desirable for democratic theory because they hold both politicians and the media to a set of democratic standards. As approval decreases, *The Daily Show* is more likely to hold officials and the media accountable for their responsibilities, resulting in more accountability frames than conduit and strategy (Hypothesis 3).

#### *Measurements*

This research utilizes a content analysis of *The Daily Show* episodes to identify the volume of meta-coverage and to code four meta-coverage categories and three framing categories. For this research, meta-coverage is defined as "the news media's self-referential reflections on the nature of the interplay between political public relations and political journalism" (Esser, 2001). As a mock news program, *The Daily Show* acts in place of the news media to reflect on and criticize this relationship. The definition suggests two types of meta-coverage: press and publicity. Press meta-coverage was coded based on media key words (e.g. journalists, press, news media, broadcast, camera crew) and images (e.g. video cameras, news footage). Publicity meta-coverage was identified using political public relations key words (e.g. press conference, public affairs, press secretary, appearances, aides, statements) and images (e.g. press conference, microphones). Only meta-coverage of the President's administration was coded for the quantitative analysis, but other instances and topics were recorded. The volume of presidential meta-coverage was measured as a percentage of general meta-stories.

The four themes analyzed were adapted from Johnson and Boudreau (1996): 1) media performance/strategy; 2) politician performance/strategy; 3) general media; 4) policy issues. All political meta-coverage stories, regardless of mentioning the Administration, were coded for analysis according to these themes. Those centered on the media's performance in reporting political issues or on an administrator's performance in communicating his or her message, were coded just as such. Stories not performance or strategy related were coded with the general media or general policy themes.

The three coded script frames were adapted from Esser and D'Angelo (2003): 1) strategy frames; 2) accountability frames; and 3) conduit frames. The foundation of their frames remained the same, but the definitions were adjusted to fit the comedic nature of *The Daily Show*. In strategy frames, the media is viewed as a political tool caught in the game of politics. They emphasize a politician's desire to manipulate and control information and the media's inability to stop it. In *The Daily Show*, strategy frames would criticize the rhetoric and tactics used to manipulate the public. A story about the press secretary's use of a certain word would be considered to have a strategy frame.

Accountability frames focus more on the role of the media in democracy. They examine the news media's watchdog role and the government's attempts to fool the media. *The Daily Show* coverage would

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concentrate on exposing flaws or mistakes in a public affairs strategy or the media’s negligence to cover important issues. For example, *The Daily Show* may expose the President’s mistake in saying he will do one thing at a press conference, then actually doing something else.

Conduit frames show the media as simply the transmitter of information and the government as a basic user of the media. In traditional news these stories are not as critical, but in mock news the stories would frame the media and government’s mutual compliance in a negative way. A story about the media publishing a prepackaged news report from the government would be coded as a conduit frame. To be coded for framing analysis the story had to mention 1) the President or President’s office and 2) any keywords that constitute meta-coverage. The stories were not coded based on their length and could include more than one frame depending on the content.

This research examined *The Daily Show* episodes during the first term of former President George W. Bush and the current term of President Barack Obama (Appendix A). Gallup Poll data on the percentage of Americans who approve of the way each handled his job as President was used to determine presidential approval levels (Appendix B). Ten episodes were examined from three months corresponding to the months of highest, lowest, and closest to average approval. These months were selected by first identifying the weeks of highest, lowest, and average career approval. The average approval ratings for the proximate months determined which month would be analyzed. This was done so the episodes were more reflective of the high or low approval ratings. Episodes were chosen with a random number generator to total the ten episodes per month. If an episode did not air on the random date generated, the very next episode was chosen for analysis. Sixty total episodes were analyzed. These episodes were found on *The Daily Show* website, which keeps an archive of segments aired on a particular date.

## IV. Findings

With approximately 192 episodes per year, or 768 per four-year term, there are many opportunities for *The Daily Show* to criticize the political communications system. In this same time frame, the public has many opportunities to judge the Administration’s performance. Former President George W. Bush’s approval ratings shifted throughout his first term in office. On the other hand, President Barack Obama’s approval ratings have steadily declined since he took office in 2009. October 2001 marked Bush’s highest month of approval, just after the September 11 attacks and his lowest first-term approval ratings in August 2001. His first term average was 62.2% with just over a majority of Americans agreeing with how he handled the job. As previously mentioned, Obama’s ratings have steadily declined since he took office in late January with his highest approval in February 2009. Currently his average rating is at 56%, slightly lower than his predecessor’s.

The content analysis included 327 story segments, of which 103 constituted meta-coverage (31.5%). Fifty-three of these were coded as meta-coverage of the Administration. A majority of the meta-coverage focused on the publicity side of communications, with only 33 of the 103 total meta-stories about the media. Of the 53 Presidential meta-stories, there were only 15 instances of press meta-coverage. An example of one of the press-centered stories aired in August 2009. The segment discredited cable news polling by exposing biased and inaccurate research methods (*The Daily Show*, August 17, 2009).

**Finding 1:** The data showed the dominant theme in mock news meta-coverage is politician performance/strategy followed by media performance/strategy (Table 1).

**Table 1. Meta-coverage by theme**

Meta-coverage Theme	Number of Meta-Stories	Number of Administration Stories
Media Performance/Strategy	33	15
Political Performance/Strategy	58	39
Policy Issues	2	0
General Media	2	2
Not Coded	8	0

**Finding 2:** The analysis did not support a strong relationship between low Presidential approval and a high volume of meta-coverage (Table 2). In the lowest approval month of analysis, there were 6 meta-stories about the Bush Administration, representing 17% of his meta-coverage. For Obama, only 16 meta-stories or 23% of the meta-coverage occurred in the lowest month of approval. The highest counts for both Presidential Administrations were in the months corresponding to the term's average approval rating. However, when comparing volume between the two Administrations, the data showed a significantly larger volume in Obama's current term. Compared to Bush, President Obama had the lower first-term average (56%) and the lowest approval rating (45%).

**Table 2. Relationship between approval rating and media coverage volume**

Month (Approval %)	Number of Meta-Stories*	Number of Administration Stories**
August 2001 (56%)	6	4
October 2001 (88%)	11	4
June 2003 (62%)	18	11
February 2009 (64%)	20	13
August 2009 (53%)	32	17
April 2010 (45%)	16	4
Totals: 103 Meta-Stories; 53 Administration Stories		
*Calculated as the amount of stories constituting meta-coverage		
**Calculated as the amount of meta-stories coded as Presidential Administration stories		

**Finding 3:** Furthermore, the data did not indicate a relationship between Presidential approval and the way each segment, or story, was framed (Table 3 on the next page). In months of low approval there were more strategy frames than accountability, representing more than 60% of the meta-coverage. Strategy frames also constituted the majority of meta-coverage in the months of high approval ratings. Overall, there were just as many accountability frames as strategy frames, each making up 48% of presidential meta-coverage. During the Bush Administration, there were more strategy frames than accountability. The opposite was true for the Obama Administration. Conduit frames were nearly nonexistent with only two total segments of presidential meta-coverage.

Strategy stories were often critical of the rhetoric and tactics used in a political actor's strategic messaging. In a June 2003 episode, Stewart claimed all Bush Administration functions were "carefully choreographed." As he narrated a press conference accordingly, Stewart said Bush rolled up his sleeves to "give the people the idea [he's] a regular dude" and addressed weapons of mass destruction using "deliberately vague wording" (*The Daily Show*, June 5, 2003). This kind of commentary left audiences under the impression that political talking points are strategically planned to carry out manipulative political agendas.

Most accountability stories focused on criticizing the media's inability to perform their role as the nation's "watchdog." During one August 2009 segment, Stewart said they had to talk about "the disgrace that calls itself the mainstream media...and its incessant desire, nay need, to give one Barack Obama a great big, fat pass." He illustrated the media's avoidance of the pressing issues by showing a press conference clip of a journalist asking about the President's birthday plans. Stewart jokingly said, "you'd think the [mainstream media] would be coming at the White House hard and fast" (*The Daily Show*, August 4, 2009) Meta-stories like these enlighten audience members on their watchdog's shortcomings.

Conduit frames are the most basic and least critical form of meta-coverage. Given the nature of mock news programming, it is expected that only a few instances of conduit frames occur. The two stories

were brief mentions of Obama’s use of the media to get his message to the public. They did not carry overly-critical undertones.

**Table 3. Relationship between approval rating and framing**

Month (Approval)	Accountability	Strategy	Conduit
August 2001 (56%)			
Press	0	0	0
Publicity	1	3	0
October 2001 (88%)			
Press	1	0	0
Publicity	1	2	0
June 2003 (62%)			
Press	2	0	0
Publicity	4	5	0
February 2009 (64%)			
Press	4	0	0
Publicity	2	10	0
August 2009 (53%)			
Press	7	0	0
Publicity	6	3	1
April 2010 (45%)			
Press	1	0	0
Publicity	0	2	1

## V. Discussion

*The Daily Show* format in itself addresses the flaws in the United States’ political communications system. By mocking a traditional news program with an anchor, interviews, news packages, and correspondents, Stewart comically exposes the absurdities of mainstream media. This analysis supports previous research in showing that *The Daily Show* fulfills this role beyond its program format to challenge both the media and political actors’ strategies for communication political messages in its program content. With nearly one-third of *The Daily Show* content being meta-coverage, much of the show directly calls into question the political communications system. While other categories of content were not coded, analyzing the episodes did provide some evidence that no other content category made up such a significant portion of the program. This further suggests that one of *The Daily Show*’s main roles, whether intentional or not, is to confront the flaws in the system.

**Discussion 1:** As supported by this analysis, the most common way *The Daily Show* identifies these flaws is by evaluating a political actor’s media performance and strategy. Every word that comes from the President or his staff is subject to Stewart’s merciless scrutiny. The show’s assessment extends deeper than calling out the President’s last stumble in his speech or laughing at the press secretary’s inability to answer a question. Stewart analyzes the subject matter closely to reveal what the common eye might not see. He sheds light on the public relations tactics and manipulative rhetoric commonly used by political actors to fool the public and the media.

The media does not escape Stewart’s watchful eye either. As the second most popular theme found in this analysis of meta-coverage, mock news evaluation of media performance and strategy is crucial to confronting the political communications system. The media are widely known as America’s watchdog, but who is making sure they are doing their job for the benefit of society? The data show that much of the mock news content does just that. Stewart often points out media compliance in political publicity. Their willingness to accept government-generated information, he suggests in various sound bites, runs counter to their journalistic values. *The Daily Show* also brings the media’s infotainment fascination to the forefront of its criticism.

Stewart attacks traditional news organizations for following politically irrelevant stories when there are more newsworthy events taking place.

**Discussion 2:** It was hypothesized that there would be some correlation between presidential approval ratings and the volume of meta-coverage. The analysis did not reveal such a relationship, suggesting *The Daily Show* content is not dependent on public opinion. In other words, the results suggest Stewart does not focus all of his resources on the topic simply because people do not like the President at the time. Meta-coverage appears to be more reflective of current events and the activities of the President's Administration. In months of low activity, there is less media coverage and correspondingly less meta-coverage. For example, in August 2001 Bush took a month-long vacation in Texas. There were very few meta-stories most likely because there was nothing going on, not because of his approval rating. The traditional media had little to report and the President was not holding press conferences on vacation, giving *The Daily Show* little material to work with. Inactivity may be an indicator of low approval ratings, and thus indirectly related to low meta-coverage. Conversely, controversial activity may lead to low approval ratings, yet yield significant amounts of meta-coverage. There are many factors not studied in this analysis affecting approval ratings that could influence mock news meta-coverage volume. For example, significant differences between the Bush and Obama administrations suggest yet another factor that could affect the volume of meta-coverage.

**Discussion 3:** The analysis also did not provide strong evidence for the hypothesized relationship between approval ratings and meta-coverage framing strategies. Accountability frames were most common in the months representing average approval ratings. Again, *The Daily Show* content appears to be more reflective of current events than public opinion. For publicity meta-coverage, accountability frames are dependent on inconsistencies in messaging strategies. Because *The Daily Show* is not a team of experienced investigative journalists, the mistake must be obvious or it must have already been exposed. In a February 2009 episode, Stewart discussed President Obama's press conference in which he was asked about his economic stimulus plan. Obama avoided answering by saying his Secretary of the Treasury will provide details the next day. Stewart then played footage from Secretary Geithner's press conference in which no details were mentioned (*The Daily Show*, February 11, 2009). In doing so, Stewart reported an inconsistency in the White House's message. However, he did not discover this falsity on his own; the press conference provided the evidence. Had the conference not happened, *The Daily Show* probably would not have covered the mistake. This dependency would limit opportunities for accountability-framed publicity meta-coverage more than approval ratings.

Furthermore, all press meta-coverage had an accountability frame. While the data does not indicate that approval ratings affect the volume, the analysis shows that *The Daily Show* holds media organizations accountable for their responsibilities as journalists. Rather than portraying the media as incapable of preventing government manipulation or basic users of government information, as is the case for strategy and conduit frames, *The Daily Show* insists the media can and should fulfill their obligations to the public.

Similar to accountability, strategy frames were popular regardless of approval ratings. However, the strategy-framed meta-stories were not as critical of the political communications process. Instead, Stewart's mockery often appraised the political actor's rhetorical strategy. This type of criticism is not as dependent on inconsistencies as accountability frames. For example, identifying the President's use of a particular word to appease the public is easier than investigating the truth in his statement. Just as timeliness is key to traditional news, it is also important for *The Daily Show*. This could explain why strategy frames are popular despite high or low approval ratings. In an effort to both inform and entertain audiences in the mock news format, *The Daily Show* must report and criticize the most recent events. Strategy frames are simple criticisms, easy to write into Stewart's dialogue.

## VI. Conclusion

While this research does not suggest strong relationships between the variables, it is still important to recognize several findings. This research does identify two prominent themes in mock news meta-coverage: media performance and political strategy. The analysis also revealed the popularity of publicity strategy and press accountability frames in presidential coverage. Approval does not seem to have an impact on the types of framing strategies used in *The Daily Show* scripts. This suggests that there may not be any overarching strategy that goes into writing Stewart's sound bites. Researchers may be looking too hard to explain a

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media based solely on events that are happening no matter what the accompanying frame may be. There may not be any particular reasoning for including some types of stories more than others, besides the need to attract and entertain viewers.

Future research may address some of the weaknesses in these findings, including the limited sample. Three months per term may not be representative enough to support a strong relationship between the variables. This research also measures volume based on quantity. Examining the actual length of each story segment may provide different results if meta-coverage stories took up more time in each program than non-meta stories. Further analysis could also compare the script frames of Presidential coverage to non-Presidential coverage to determine if strategy and accountability frames still make up the majority. Also, this research does not address the direction of the relationship between approval ratings and mock news coverage. Examining the effects of *The Daily Show* meta-coverage could find if mock news has an influence on public opinion. This kind of research is necessary to determine the implications of mock news coverage.

As previous research suggests, the cynicism in *The Daily Show* leads to an increased cynicism towards the subjects of Stewart's ridicule (Baumgartner, 2006). If viewers regard *The Daily Show* as a source of news, then it could have the potential to set the public agenda like traditional news programs. Agenda setting theory suggests the media may not be able to tell people exactly what to think, but they can tell them what to think about (McCombs, 1972). By exposing the press-politician relationship, *The Daily Show* may be able to bring political manipulation and media compliance to the forefront of public discourse. With the increasing dependence on mock news for political information, it is important to understand its impact on public opinion and even its potential for future government manipulation.

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## Appendix A: List of Episode Dates\*

August 2, 2001	February 2, 2009
August 6, 2001	February 3, 2009
August 7, 2001	February 6, 2009
August 9, 2001	February 9, 2009
August 13, 2001	February 11, 2009
August 15, 2001	February 12, 2009
August 20, 2001	February 23, 2009
August 21, 2001	February 24, 2009
August 22, 2001	February 25, 2009
August 23, 2001	February 26, 2009
October 1, 2001	August 3, 2009
October 2, 2001	August 4, 2009
October 10, 2001	August 5, 2009
October 15, 2001	August 6, 2009
October 16, 2001	August 12, 2009
October 17, 2001	August 13, 2009
October 18, 2001	August 17, 2009
October 22, 2001	August 18, 2009
October 23, 2001	August 19, 2009
October 30, 2001	August 20, 2009
June 2, 2003	April 1, 2010
June 3, 2003	April 5, 2010
June 4, 2003	April 6, 2010
June 5, 2003	April 7, 2010
June 9, 2003	April 8, 2010
June 10, 2003	April 12, 2010
June 12, 2003	April 13, 2010
June 16, 2003	April 14, 2010
June 17, 2003	April 15, 2010
June 18, 2003	**March 31, 2010
<p><i>*All episodes retrieved from <a href="http://www.thedailyshow.com">www.thedailyshow.com</a></i></p> <p><i>**March 31 used to make ten episodes of analysis for the month of April 2010</i></p>	

## Appendix B: Gallup Poll Approval Ratings

Month	Average Approval*
Bush:	
August 2001	56%
October 2001	88%
June 2003	62%
Obama:	
February 2009	64%
August 2009	53%
April 2010	45%
<i>* Calculated as the average percentage of respondents who believe the President is handling his job well.</i>	