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It's no joke: IU study finds *The Daily Show* with Jon Stewart to be as substantive as network news

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BLOOMINGTON, Ind. -- Which would you think has more substantive news coverage -- traditional broadcast network newscasts or *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*?

Would you believe the answer is neither?

Julia R. Fox, assistant professor of telecommunications at Indiana University isn't joking when she says the popular "fake news" program, which last week featured Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf as a guest, is just as substantive as network coverage.

While much has been written in the media about *The Daily Show's* impact, Fox's study is the first scholarly effort to systematically examine how the comedy program compares to traditional television news as sources of political information.

The study, "No Joke: A Comparison of Substance in *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* and Broadcast Network Television Coverage of the 2004 Presidential Election Campaign," will be published next summer by the *Journal of Broadcast and Electronic Media*, published by the Broadcast Education Association.

"It is clearly a humor show, first and foremost," Fox said of Stewart's program. "But there is some substance on there, and in some cases, like John Edwards announcing his candidacy, the news is made on the show. You have real newsmakers coming on, and yes, sometimes the banter and questions get a little silly, but there is also substantive dialogue going on ... It's a legitimate source of news."

Most people have little direct contact with politicians and get most of their political information from the media. Given the growing number of young voters who say they look to *The Daily Show* to meet their political information needs, Fox thought it was important to see whether the program did so.

She and two graduate students at IU -- Glory Koloen and Volkan Sahin -- analyzed coverage of the 2004 national political conventions and the first presidential debate by the networks and Stewart's program. They examined broadcast nightly newscasts on July 26-30, Aug. 30-31 and Sept. 1-3 in 2004. Similarly, they studied episodes of *The Daily Show* on July 27-30, Aug. 31 and Sept. 1-3 in 2004.

"Conventions typically offer candidates a chance to present their views on what they consider to be the important issues facing the nation and are critically important for shoring up political bases and reaching out to independent voters," Fox said in explaining her reasoning. "While debates tend to reinforce pre-existing candidate preferences, they are particularly important for activating supporters and can sway undecided voters."

Not surprisingly, a second-by-second analysis of *The Daily Show's* audio and visual content found considerably more humor than substance -- Stewart himself has insisted that he is a comedian and not a journalist. A similar analysis of network coverage found considerably more hype than substance in broadcast newscasts. Examples of such hype included references to polls, political endorsements and photo opportunities.

"Interestingly, the average amounts of video and audio substance in the broadcast network news stories were not significantly different than the average amounts of visual and audio substance in *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* stories about the presidential election," she wrote in the paper.

"It should be noted that the broadcast network news stories about the presidential election were significantly shorter, on average, than were *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* stories," she added. "The argument could be made that while the amount of substance per story was not significantly different, the proportion of each story devoted to substance was greater in the network news stories ... On the other hand, the proportion of stories per half hour program devoted to the election campaign was greater in *The Daily Show*."

The analysis was run again using the half-hour program, rather than the story, as the unit of analysis, and Fox still found no significant differences in substance. The study does not address differences in the ways viewers of both programs process and remember political information or the differences in tone between them.

"We've been wringing our hands for decades that the networks aren't doing enough substance in the political coverage, so is it any real surprise that it's just as substantive?," Fox said of *The Daily Show*. "Our findings should allay at least some of the concerns about the growing reliance on this non-traditional source of political information, as it is just as substantive as the source that Americans have relied upon for decades.

"In an absolute sense, we should probably be concerned about both of those sources, because neither one is particularly substantive. It's a bottom-line industry and ratings-driven. We live in an 'infotainment' society, and there certainly are a number of other sources available."

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