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## **Laughing as participation**

A textual analysis of the studio audience of  
*The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*

## Introduction

This essay aims to deal with studio audience participation in the context of political comedy talk shows. By using some historical, but mainly cultural and political perspectives on participation, the goal is to demonstrate how the program in some ways can be seen as a forum for participation – a civic force – and in some ways not. The focus will lie especially on identification and emotions, as a core function of the studio audience in this type of program.

### Political comedy and *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*

The study focuses on an episode of *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*, aired on Comedy Central on February 14<sup>th</sup>, 2012, as well as on its Swedish counterpart the day after<sup>1</sup>. *The Daily Show* (referred to as *TDS* in this text) is a satirical program, in the genre of “fake news”, making it a hybrid in the real sense of the word; mixing the political and entertainment in both format and content. Jones, analysing *TDS*: “Stewart changes the public conversation crafted by news from one of spectacle and accommodation to indictment and prosecution through creative reductive reporting, all punctuated by satirical yet earnest ribbing” (2010:141).

Comedy Central is owned by MTV Networks, which in turn is owned by the media giant Viacom (Comedy Central official webpage), which situates it within the sphere of media conglomerates, together with most other commercial television available today.

When it comes to ratings, the program averages about two million viewers per episode (Starr 2008). Studies show that a considerable amount of young Americans get their news from political satire programming such as *TDS*, as opposed to traditional news programming (Cao 2010). Jones contextualizes the program and genre by explaining that it is the postmodern audience – the audience that made *TDS* popular – which is demanding a new type of political programming and journalism (2010).

The program airs four days a week (around 11 p.m.), and it contains three parts or segments, altogether making an air time of 30 minutes (including 10 minutes of commercials spread out over two breaks). First, Stewart performs as a news anchor, going through news in a similar manner to classic news programs. The content mostly focuses on current events. Sometimes this segment has two parts: first, Stewart introduces a topic, and then a “fake news correspondent” appears and is interviewed by Stewart, or reports “on location”, or discusses something in a panel setting. They can appear on stage with Stewart at the desk, or via a fake satellite link. This first segment is about seven to ten minutes.

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<sup>1</sup> The episode is also available in full on the program’s website directly after it has aired.

The middle segment contains the same type of content as the previous one, but is shorter (about five minutes). The last part of the program consists of an interview, after a second commercial break, which can vary greatly content wise, depending on the interviewee. The program utilizes actors, comedians, singers, and other performers, as well as politicians, state or city officials, different types of experts and academics, and authors.

### **The characteristics of talk shows**

The program is a combination of political comedy program and classic talk show – although the two are of course not mutually exclusive. Some contextualization regarding talk shows, which researchers have focused on for a number of years, is relevant. Firstly, they have a clear audience presence (Shattuc 2007). Hill mentions the genre and the fact the public “participate in the production itself, as guests interviewed by the host, as a studio audience, and watching, listening, interacting with the show on TV, radio, mobile and web” (2011:151).

Another attribute is that discussions are conversational and contain both debates, critique, confessionals, storytelling and other discursive forms (Dahlgren 1995). All these elements can be found in *TDS*, to a varying degree. Bignell writes: “their significance has crucially to do with the fact that talk shows revolve around the performance of talk. That is to say, the controversy and the popularity of talk shows is fundamentally rooted in the pleasures of watching and listening to people talking in particular ways” (2001:3).

Talk shows often have a: “moral authority and educated knowledge of a host and an expert” (Ibid.) to guide the audiences, which also can be found in the case of this study. Stewart, his correspondents, and guest, act both as this moral and educated authority. Shattuc continues to say that talk shows are periodically aired, once a day, which is true in this case (with the exception of Fridays); and Carpentier writes that they are relatively cheap to produce (2011).

Finally, another structural aspect that Carpentier notes, with the help of Dahlgren (1995), that is shared by talk shows in general, as well as *TDS*, is that they are taped live or in front of a live audience, to give a feeling of “live”. This also means that they aren’t extensively edited, since the production team has limited time to do this. We will come back to the concept of live and its significance later on in the text.

### **Research questions**

To find out what forms of participation the studio audience of *TDS* represent, and be able to discuss its possible consequences for civic life, the study rests on the following research questions: When and how does the studio audience show its presence? How can one classify or categorize these reactions? And how do the host, correspondents and guests of the program

interact with the studio audience? To help reach the aim of the essay and develop arguments further, the concluding part will make use of Dahlgren's civic circuit (2009).

### **Why should we care about political comedy?**

Political comedy is a vital genre because it is connected to many important concepts relating to entertainment and politics, and politics *in* entertainment. With its critical stance, it can be linked with a number of civic issues; democracy and its deficiencies; public opinion; media critique; political ethics; voice and representation etc.

From a historical standpoint, the program is relevant partly because of its fairly long run of 17 years, and the even longer history of the genre as a whole. As relevant is the tradition of talk in media. Jones writes about the contemporary history of political humour talk show formats (which he includes in the term "new political television"):

(...) new political television has matured from a seemingly inconsequential form of humours entertainment programming that dabbles in politics into a more fully developed and legitimate form of political communication and critique. What originally appeared simply as non-experts and Washington outsiders discussing politics in an accessible and pleasurable manner has evolved into a full-throated critique of the political class from a variety of interrogational perspectives. This critique includes the fundamental relationship that news media play in mediating political life for citizens and, in the process, helps constitute political reality, or even truth (2010:91).

From a political standpoint, the study is obviously important because of the program's content, but also in relation to the civic aspects and potentials of the program itself. Also, the cultural perspective is both relevant and vital to the study of political humour and participation; cultural citizenship, for instance, is relevant when it comes to political comedy.

Also, the fact that the program is popular with younger audiences, a key group in any discussion on civic issues, makes it important to study. Dahlgren argues that:

Popularization can mean making the public sphere available to larger numbers of people via more accessible formats and styles of representation, helping people to feel incorporated into society as citizens (...). The big challenge (...) is to develop new popular forms that will both resonate with large audiences and also communicate in meaningful ways about important matters (2009:46f).

He goes on to quote studies that show how countries with quality journalism available, has higher voter turnout (Ibid:47). Jones, on the subject of satire television and political engagement, states that: "for political life to be meaningful, its presence in venues that we ritually attend to, understand, are comfortable and familiar with, and maintain feelings and commitments to should not necessarily be seen in negative light (...), the politically oriented entertainment shows of new political television carry a dual quality of accessible popular culture and meaningful political material (2010:38).

**Methodological matters**

For this study, one episode of *TDS* has been chosen for analysis, as stated previously. To decide on a particular episode, one recently aired week of episodes was screened. This particular episode was chosen because it illustrated a lively and active audience – a more extensive search may have resulted in better (or worse) examples.

To conduct the analysis, an analysis guide was developed, containing various questions that could be relevant to answer for the purpose of this essay, much like the research questions in character. The episode was accessed on the program’s official website, where all episodes are archived for a few months (after which they are divided up and available as individual clips). The analysis method used was a type of simple conversation analysis: focusing on the interactions between studio audience and host or guest; the structure of the program; and the use of direct speech to the audience. The method can be characterized by elements of both audience research – since the studio audience, in this context, is seen as a manifestation or representation of the audience as a whole. At the same time, since no interviews or observations within the studio audience or audience as a whole have been conducted, the study is a study of text too. Combining these two has its limitations, and one has to be careful not to draw conclusions in regards to actual audience reactions.

To simplify references to the audiences’ reactions, laughter, clapping and screaming has been categorized loosely according to a matrix. The reactions have not been measured in decibel, but subjectively assessed and compared to each other. The intensity of the audience is categorised into three groups: low, medium and high, and the share of the audience, that is, how many individuals does the sound give an impression of, is also categorised into three: few, about half and many to all. Further studies with greater resources could fine tune this system for classification of reactions.

Intensity/Share of audience	Few	About half	Many to all
Low	1 A	1 B	1 C
Medium	2 A	2 B	2 C
High	3 A	3 B	3 C

Table 1. Audience reactions’; intensity and share.

## **The studio audience of *The Daily Show***

The following section contains a brief historical perspective on the concept of audiences and crowds. This will not be an all reaching historical overview; instead parts relevant to this study have been chosen to work contextualizing for the reader. The part following that deals more with the findings of the case study, and how we can understand them with the use of theories and concepts within the political and cultural perspectives of participation.

### **A brief history of crowds and audiences**

Burke has a historical perspective on European popular culture. He describes the changes in conditions which lead to the formation of entertainment on stage and other cultural expressions, during the last three centuries, such as population growth which lead to urbanisation and economic changes such as the “commercial revolution”, i.e. the rise of modern capitalism. With this came the communication revolution, too, which changed, among other things, culture and entertainment. He explains how “Popular culture was (...) closely related to its environment, adapted to different occupational groups and regional ways of life” (2009:337), which gives a hint to what Butsch discusses: the classification and judgement made historically in relation to audiences of different types of culture (2008).

The more business that could be made out of cultural experiences, the more large-scale enterprises drove out the smaller ones, and Burke writes: “In short, a gradual shift took place away from the more spontaneous and participatory forms of entertainment and toward a more formally-organised and commercialised spectator sport, a shift which was, of course, to go much further after 1800” (2009:341). Here, we see how commercial forces were linked to civic ones, something that will be discussed again later.

Before mass media was available and widespread, audiences, or gatherings of people, were found in churches, in the street and in different types of entertainment venues. Here there was no fixed seating and a more casual audience situation than today. Butsch writes: “Entertainment venues were unlike churches, where they [audiences] were under the secure control of a reputable leader, and more like the streets where they were less controlled or predictable. Depicted as volatile crowds and a danger to social order, audiences became the targets of government discipline” (2008:1). In today’s studio audiences we find the almost opposite of this: fixed seating and an audience which has total focus on what’s going on in front of the cameras. They are, in a manner, following a “reputable leader”. When the speaker voice announces Stewart at the top of every program, the crowd expresses high levels of enthusiasm, compared to other parts of the program. There is probably a studio manager or a sign compel-

ling the audience to show this enthusiasm, even though this is something that goes undetected and is not clear for the viewer at home. But as the program goes along, and the studio audience seems less controlled (in respect to when to make how much noise), members keep on showing much enthusiasm at any reference to the program's host. One might guess that they wouldn't attend the taping of the program if they didn't enjoy Stewart; herein lies the reputable aspect. The sometimes rowdy impression one gets from the audience, even though it's never visually shown, is of a wild group of people: cheering on profanity and dirty jokes, booing things they don't agree with and in general making themselves heard. Here there are parallels between the examined case and the scenario painted by Butsch and others, concerning earlier audiences. This may of course be the impression producers wish to give, but there is no point in guessing what they may or may not have done, even if one of course has to keep them in mind and be aware of the fact that studio audiences are directed. Instead, the *representation* of the studio audience is the important part, insofar as they work as a representation of and for the home audience. Studio audiences work as a link: for both producers/performers and home audiences, they are manifestations or representations of the home audience.

Butsch also stresses the importance of the live situation for the experiences of the audience. As part of a live situation, audience members see themselves as participants, and, *are* participants. This makes for a certain behaviour and self-reflexive behaviour.

### **A political perspective on *The Daily Show* studio audience**

The concept of voice is something Couldry focuses on, among others (2010). The focus of this essay is also explicitly about voice – the physical voice: as the studio audience is not visible, but only audible. Voice is something that needs to be encouraged and given space; a way to counter neoliberal tendencies. One could argue that spaces such as the studio audience balcony or seats are spaces in which ordinary people can have a voice. The question is how far this gets us: what type of voice is it that gets expressed in this setting? According to Jones, who has studied program *The Colbert Report* (which shares certain similarities with *TDS* and airs on the same channel): “Political meaning, then, occurs through opportunities to speak, to hear others speak, to project oneself into the conversation, and to merge these with one's life, thoughts, feelings, and attachments” (2010:233). He continues by stating that “new political television allows for a range of cognitive and emotional interactions with what is found on the screen, while also providing behavioural invitations to talk and play in ways that encompass many of these opportunities” (Ibid:233f). Included in the concept of giving voice to different types of citizens – especially the young where the problems of the democratic deficit are clear – is providing a language that can be used in the discussion of politics. Jones claims that new



political television “becomes a resource for alternative forms of discourse about politics that is increasingly used and deployed in ever expanding ways across the Internet. (...) a way of talking about politics in a language through which younger generations can express their own civic hopes for a democratic future more inspiring than the one they’ve recently endured but not quite grown accustomed to” (Ibid:251).

The crisis of democracy is largely seen as the result of accelerating neoliberal logics ruling in contemporary society. More specifically, Couldry and others point to, among other things, distance between political elites and citizens; lack of transparency and accountability. There are different concepts and thoughts on how to curb these developments. Couldry points to voice as being in crisis, which is giving way to a crisis of thought. The various ways in which certain groups’ voice matters less and less are connected to the core of the problem, leading to misrepresentation and division among citizens. Couldry wants to see a counter neoliberal rationality, where social change can be fostered. Citizens *are* interested in social change, he maintains, so that is not the problem with democracy. These citizens need to be recognized and empowered; to gain a voice and through that gain credibility and the possibility to act. *TDS* can in some instances be seen as a manifestation of what is demanded by researchers of participation and democracy issues. The program seems to work as a form of alternative media (not following the same media logic in relation to representation, for instance, and containing critique of established media and politics). On the other hand, political comedy television is not something directly produced by “ordinary people”, non-professionals, so it’s not fully alternative in that sense.

Gray is interested in the potentials of political comedy: “Whereas newscasters can speak to the people, satirists labor to speak *of* and *for* the people. Much satire is about talking back to power, and about criticizing the edifices, practices, and decisions of power” (2008:148). Jones argues similarly, and sees popular culture as equally able to shape and support a culture of citizenship as it is at “shaping and supporting a culture of consumption” (2010:39).

Couldry explains how we often look to media for the answer: here is the space for multiple voices to be heard. He focuses at reality-TV, and isolates two parts of the media which he sees as possible givers of voice, but that upon “closer inspection they are not” (2010:73). When exploring civic potentials in popular culture, this is bound to happen: not all potentials lead to realities, per definition. But we cannot give up the search and constant evaluation, since there are positive examples too, and also: what is the alternative? Contemporary democracy cannot function without mass media. Dahlgren writes: “the media are transforming democracy because political life in itself today has become so extensively situated within the domain of the media” (2009:35). So unless we find a way to completely change the logic of

the media; and the neoliberal influences referred to by Couldry, Dahlgren and others, can be stopped, we have to find ways for the media to transform within this logic and provide the voice that is needed. One way for this is to create spaces for producers and audiences to be able to critique the neoliberal manifestations of politics, from “within the system”.

But another vital aspect is that satire cannot exist without something to satirize. Clips used in the program, for instance, are almost always taken from established media: most often from major news networks such as Fox News and CNN. So not only can satire work to critique the system from within; it wouldn't survive without it.

Can we see this social interest Couldry writes about in the studio audience of *TDS*? Even though the content of the program is decided by writers, the studio audience works to reinforce what is said, or not, and give some type of real time indicator of what they might think about the content of the program. There are a few key moments to focus on. Of course, the audience is audible continually, but here we focus on the bigger, most apparent reactions. There are the obvious and most likely directed reactions, found at the start and end of the programs; when guests are introduced and when the program starts again after commercial breaks. Also, when people are introduced; Stewart himself gets a big roar from the crowd, as does Bee<sup>2</sup> and the guest, Ricky Gervais. This can be seen as both a way for the producers' to create a classic studio audience rhetoric or supporting structure, found in most programs utilizing studio audiences; as well as real appreciation and enthusiasm for the characters mentioned. They *are* popular; Bee is one of the correspondents who has been with the program for a long time, and is well known; and Gervais is a celebrity who is presumably well known to *TDS* audience. Of course, Stewart himself is popular too: it's his program and audience members for the most part should be enthusiastic. These reactions are, though, not something that can be associated with a social interest, at least not social in the Couldry meaning of the word<sup>3</sup>. Celebrities in these types of settings, according to Jones, are still important, though, because they are: “representational figures with whom they [audiences] felt some affective attachment, a bond more powerful in connecting them to public life than the logical arguments present by political experts with whom they felt no such connection. The argument here is that what audiences are ultimately seeking is the ability to see *themselves* portrayed on screen, even if in ideal form” (2010:232, italics in original). He quotes Van Zoonen, who writes that “politics has to be connected to the everyday culture of its citizens; otherwise it becomes an alien sphere, occupied by strangers no one cares or bothers about” (2005:3).

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<sup>2</sup> Samantha Bee is a “fake news correspondent” on *TDS*.

<sup>3</sup> One can of course analyse in detail, what these characters stand for and why people enjoy them in the first place, but in this context, I would argue that this is not a manifestation of social interest or awareness

Another type of occasion which spark more-than-usual-reactions, are at the end of longer jokes. The laughter usually builds up during the joke, and in some cases single audience members start laughing out loud before the joke is over, because they're guessing where Stewart is going with it. The majority of the audience reacts after the punch line is reached. So the single early audience members are laughing and thus showing that they understand Stewart; the subject he's speaking on; or some other part of the joke which hasn't yet sunk in with the majority. This is an instance which shows how the audience acts, or sounds, more like a collective in certain instances, and more as individuals in others. Even if the home audience cannot see these individuals, they are distinguishable.

Most common, though, is that the audience as a whole waits to react until the joke is finished. Here the reaction is stronger depending on how many understand it, and more importantly, how many find it funny or true in some way. When Stewart uses profanity or calls people names, there is often a strong reaction too (2 – 3C), but not always. Rather, it seems to be that when profanity or name calling is used at the end of a joke, as the punch line. Other words that create this type of reaction can be emotive or sensitive words, such as “rape”, which also seems to make the audience react more (see quoted parts further on in this text).

The audience also reacts to visual puns, commonly used in the program. When Stewart speaks about the issue of female soldiers now being allowed closer to front lines than before, and the negative reactions this has had, a sign appears to the left of his head saying “V-JAY JAY DAY”, which gets notable reactions even though Stewart is in the middle of talking at that time. As the signs are designed as part of the joke, making them appear in the middle of Stewart speaking must be intentional. When these overlaps occur, Stewart usually waits and repeats what he was just saying. As the sign appears, he pauses *after* the audience reacts, and then continues:

JS: Anyway, the only way this woman could make her statement worse ... (*Graphics with the words “V-JAY JAY DAY” appears, laughter builds, B2*). JS: ... is to somehow suggest that addressing the problem of sexual assault in the military, is actually a feminist boondoggle. Spoiler alert: She's gonna make it worse. *Laughter, 1B*.

When clips from “real” news are shown, the audience is most often quiet – this can be something done in the editing room by lowering the sound, or something done by the audience itself, naturally, because people want to hear what is being said. This is a representation of attentiveness: the audience cares about what is being said: either because they are interested in the content in itself, or because they know that they need to understand what's going on in the clip if they want to be able to understand the following jokes. At times, though, they are audible when clips are showing, indicating that what is said is so outrageous or funny that

they can't stop themselves, even though it might lead to missing something. Remember: these are "serious" clips, without jokes in them (those come after), which indicates that certain audience members see the absurdity of the clip without getting it spelled out for them through jokes. Since the clips deal with mostly political issues, this indicates an interest in politics.

From the same segment comes this longer illustrative part, showing what audiences react to; how Stewart sometimes waits for reactions to die down; and audiences' reactions mid-clip:

*Cut to Fox News. LT*<sup>4</sup>: Just a few weeks ago, the defence secretary Leon Panetta commented on a new Pentagon report on sexual abuse in the military. And the sexual abuse report says that there's been a, since 2006, a 64 % increase in violent sexual assault. Now, what do they expect? These people are in close contact ...

*Cut to studio. Laughter 1A + a few disliking "Oh:s"* JS: You know, the original bailiff from "Night Court" is right. *Snickering laughter, 2B. Single screams are heard.* JS: Simple math! *Waits for laughter and screams to die down.* JS: It's simple math! If you wanna mix the sexes, you can't complain about the 64 % uptick in violent sexual assault that will occur. *Laughter, 1A.* JS: You know the old saying; you can't make a co-ed omelette without raping a few eggs. *Laughter 2C, a few people applaud.*

*Cut to Fox News. LT*: It's strictly been a question of, uh, pressure from the feminists. And the feminists have also directed them [the Pentagon] really, to spend a lot of money. They have sexual counsellors all over the place, victim's advocates, sexual response coordinators ... so you have this whole bureaucracy, upon bureaucracy, being built up, with all kinds of levels of people, to support women in the military, who are now being raped to much! *Laughter 2B (sounding dismayed).*

*Cut to studio and JS, who has his hands out to the sides, nodding slowly. Audience boo's and simulates painful noises rather than pleasurable laughter, 2C.* JS: Are you not horror-tained! *Laughter, C2.* JS: "Raped too much". *Laughter 2C.* JS: Think about all the money that we've got to spend on women who are raped ... too much. *Laughter, 2C. Spread out applause keep on going while JS says: Think about how much cheaper it would be for all of us, if they were raped just the right amount. Laughter, 1C.*

When Stewart uses what Liz Trotta has said about rape, he of course magnifies it as well as reiterates it, to make a point. The audience follows him: they laugh about the same amount, during his short pauses (shown especially in the last paragraph). This indicates less audience independence, but also that they are agreeing with what is being said. This last part may function as a way for Stewart to wring out all he can from the clip, and really make the audiences in the studio and at home understand the absurd things that are being said, as well as letting it sink in. But he can only do this as long as the audience continues to react, so when the laughter starts dying down, going from 2C to 1C, he finishes and leaves the subject. This gives us a clear example of how audiences are interested in social issues; in this case the discussion on female soldiers being allowed closer to front lines. The issue can be associated with larger discourses on gender stereotypes and women in the military, and the assumption that makes the joke possible is that the audiences subscribe to general beliefs of gender equality. If they didn't, they wouldn't find the clips outrageous or the jokes funny, at least not to the extent shown here. Here, counter publics, as used by Coleman & Ross (2010) are provided a voice,

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<sup>4</sup> Liz Trotta, commentator on Fox News channel.

in this case, the counter public of women, even though the person representing this public is from a media professional, and a man. Coleman and Ross also write about the struggle of defining identity, which is something that this sequence can be seen as doing.

The segment reminds us of something else important; that the political views of the producers' and audience are, more or less, pre-set. Producers assume that the audience subscribes to gender equality, and if individual audience members don't, they don't really have a way to express this, at least not in this case. The program then seems to rely on certain basic political stands, which can be problematic when looking after ways of giving voice and providing spaces for participation. It's participation, yes, but only if you subscribe to certain basic political ideas. There is no indication of the studio audience being silenced in any way while voicing countering opinions: rather, audience members themselves probably choose which programs to visit according to their political beliefs<sup>5</sup>.

In the analysed episode the guest is British comedian Ricky Gervais. He is greeted with the type of emotions and sounds described earlier, and after appearing on stage and sitting down, he and Stewart start commenting on this massive reaction from the audience. Stewart says he'll "handle this" and then tells the audience that Gervais isn't a piece of meat, that he has a mind too. The audience keeps on cheering, and Stewart changes his mind and says "... he's a piece of meat", which makes the audience react even more strongly (3B) and especially the screaming becomes louder. When Stewart or others comment on the studio audience in this direct manner, they react more strongly. This can be seen as a blend of enthusiasm for the people on stage, but also for being *seen* by those on stage. The unequal power relationship between host and famous person, versus the common man in the audience, is clear.

Single individuals make themselves heard during more issue-related moments, too. For instance, Stewart, while talking to Bee, takes on the role of the straight man, in relation to her, who is more in character. He becomes the person the audience should identify with; the voice of sanity. He says that he feels it's wrong to portray men as creatures who cannot control their urges; that he can't identify with this, and he gets a single reaction (a type of scream or howl) from a male audience member – as a reaction of agreement more than general appreciation:

JS: For more on this story, we're joined by senior armed forces correspondent, Samantha Bee. Sam, thanks so much for being here. *Big applause and screaming, 3C.* JS: I'm confused. SB: Yes. JS: The whole thing ... *Applause and screaming continues.* JS: The whole thing has me very confused. Rick Santorum says women can't be in combat because they'll trigger men's chivalrous nature. Liz Stratta says female soldiers can't serve, because they'll arouse mens' baser instincts. What's your take? SB: Well, Jon, I know you're expecting an apology, and believe me, you'll get it. JS: From you ... an apology for what, Sam? SB: Jon, for these ... *Signals to her upper body as audience starts screaming and laughing.* SB: All

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<sup>5</sup> Audience members' motive for choosing to sit in a particular studio audience is something that could be problematized further, if one gained access to such individuals.

this ... *Laughing and screaming continues, 3C*. SB: You guys can rape it or you can protect it (*laughter 1A*) but you can't ignore it. *Laughter 1A*. SB: It's who you are. JS: You know, you're, you're talking about this and the sexual assault and things like this, like it's a bad habit that men have, like, "oh, men always leave their socks on the floor" ... *Laughter, 1A*, JS: ... or "men can't put the toilet seat down" *Laughter 1A*. SB (*in a higher pitched girlier voice*): Oh, my god, I know! Don't you hate it when guys do that! *Laughter 1A*. SB: ... and when they rape ... am I right, what's up! Oh, my gosh ... *Laughter 2C*.

This brings to mind situations like political or religious meetings, where someone is dubbed a truth-teller, which others can identify with and celebrate for representing them. The single voice heard represents other men in the studio audience and at home, who feel that they are being misrepresented by Liz Stratta. It becomes a symbol for voice in general, and the issue of women in close combat a symbol for constraining gender stereotypes in general. The same goes for Bee's satirical portrait of women, which also gets reactions by single female voices, distinguishable from the crowd. The issue of identity will be discussed more further on.

Carpentier problematizes participation in the media by commenting on the uneven power relationships that characterize most media outlets with explicit participatory elements (2011). Even if *TDS* is part of corporate media America, representing the powerful end of the unequal power relationship (in relation to the audience); so is Fox News, and even more so, one might argue. *TDS*, as the most popular program on Comedy Central (Comedy Central official webpage), doesn't come close to having the same ratings as many of the top programs on Fox News. In relation to Fox News, Comedy Central is the weaker part of the power relationship, even if *TDS* has grown in importance and during the past few years been able to attract prestigious guest and gain much credibility in terms of prizes and among media scholars. Studies by, among others, the Pew Research Center, show that *TDS* has a largely young audience, while Fox News programs has an older audience, which would indicate a generational break between the two (Pew Research Center for the People & the Press homepage). In general, young people watch news on TV less than previous generations (Hill 2007), and on this topic, Dahlgren comments that it is a compelling aspect of the recent media development: "The young are not replacing the old as steady news consumers, which drives home the premise that there is no going back to earlier socio-cultural conditions for democracy. We can only look ahead – and the picture is very troubling" (2009:45). To sum up, *TDS* has substantially less economic power than other media outlets, but it has other types of characteristics which problematize the mapping of power relations, in relation to audiences.

Coming back to the issue of identity, the analysed episode shows different types of the same thing. As in the cited clips, there is the identifying reaction from the audience in situations where the audience is as dismayed or horrified by what Stewart is saying, as he himself is. Situations that both make people laugh and, perhaps more importantly: situations that make people feel outraged in some way. The sounds that are audible in those instances vary

and are sometimes close to actual laughter, although they clearly convey bad feelings, like a combination of laughter and booing. Sometimes the audience almost sounds gutted.

Stewart also speaks to the audience (both studio and at home) as Americans. Here it concerns *Time Magazine* regional edition covers<sup>6</sup>. Stewart groups himself together with the audience: we as Americans should be outraged by this. Or as in the previous example: as men. Bee does this when speaking as a woman, as mentioned earlier; to the women and men (as separate groups), also grouping herself together with the audience, even if it in this case is done in an ironic manner: the audience isn't expected to agree with Bee, but recognize the gender stereotypes that she is portraying. It becomes an anti-identification, or at least it's intended that way. It is clear that Stewart and Bee want to keep the audience included and identifying with both hosts and issues represented in the program. Also, Stewart, Bee and Gervais all face the studio audience when they speak to each other. This gives a clear signal that this conversation is for them, and audiences at home, rather than just among those on stage.

Identity and identification, as important concepts in contemporary society, are significant in relation to issues of participation and democracy. According to Dahlgren, who cites a number of additional scholars, identity is key: people cannot act as citizens if they do not see themselves as citizens (2009). He writes: "To the extent that citizenship relates to identity, it must resonate in some way with emotionality, with affect; our identities are never merely the product of our rational thought" (Ibid:64). The above cited clips include both examples of the studio audience identifying with Stewart as a man and American; Bee as a woman (albeit with a clearly sarcastic tone); and the showing on audience emotions in relation to that. For instance, the thought of men as not being able to control their urges, or Americans not being interested in Islam, is offending studio audience members to the point when they feel the need to show emotion. The participation of the studio audience could actually be characterized as almost purely emotional, since it is mostly made up of laughter, screams and boo's. Dahlgren wants recognition of the role of emotion and passion in the discussions about participation and democracy. He refers to Livingston and writes that people in other parts of life, like the everyday experiences we have, combine "head and heart", and therefore the same should apply in public life and participation (Ibid:75). In the context of this program, one could conclude that representations of emotions in a political contextualization are important. Carpentier follows a similar argument when it comes to the importance of representations of identity.

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<sup>6</sup> Stewart's point is, by comparing covers from different editions, that the North American covers deal with less serious issues than the others (for example, when all other editions have an image of a man on a camel in a desert with the headline "Travels Through Islam", the American cover has an image of a married couple and the headline "Chore Wars").

By seeing constant examples in the media, of what we are and what we are not, we can easier position ourselves as citizens, which is a prerequisite for participation (2011).

When *doesn't* the audience react? Less reaction from the audience means less recognition or identification, following the points made above. At the end of the *Time Magazine*-segment discussed above, different mock covers are shown. One is of a bikini model who's been copy pasted into an image of war torn Syria, and this gets a quite quiet reaction (1A to 1B). Considering the image, the almost non-reaction could be evidence of audience members not understanding the link between *Time Magazine* and the mock cover; or that they didn't find it funny. The model was wearing a tiny bikini, and the situation in Syria is of course serious at the moment, so audience members may have seen it as bad taste, too. In these situation, Stewart fulfils the joke according to the script (or at least gives this impression) but then moves on.

Most of the segment, though, gets the planned reactions of dismay, as illustrated earlier. When Stewart speaks of *Time Magazine* and its different regional editions, the program can be seen as critiquing established journalism, and bad journalistic standards. Again, the audience is "with" Stewart; voicing their confirmations through laughter and the more gutted sounds described earlier, which occur mainly when the examples of discrepancies between the North American edition and other edition are shown. The issue here, that *Time Magazine* is seen as trying to sell more magazines by choosing less serious issues (or at least, issues that are *seen* as less serious), connects to the bigger issue of market logic destroying journalistic standards. This is in turn seen as something that can work negatively in relation to democracy and participation – and something that should be given voice through representation in content and studio audience reactions (if we broaden the term voice to include issues and not only people). Dahlgren comments on the fact that the media market follows other types of market logic. Concentration, for instance, is one issue that is linked to this, commented briefly on in relation to Comedy Central and Fox News as parts of two big, competing conglomerates. He continues: "The critical watchdog function and the protection of freedom of expression are not part of the cultural traditions of these institutions" (Ibid:37). He refers to Gans who sees the general problem of disempowerment of citizens as a "result of failed journalism" (Ibid:42), and Carpentier who sees the unwillingness of established journalism to encourage participation among audiences as a problem. Our episode does not directly encourage its audience to participate, at least not explicitly. The program has a website where audiences can comment on episodes and clips, but the use of this is not explicitly encouraged during the program. Instead, it's the audible presence and its supporting function that could be seen as a type of participation, within an important issue relating to bad journalism and market logic. It should be added, though, that information on how to be a part of the studio audience is not



provided in the program, either (although it is available on the programs website), which is an aspect of the lacking in encouragement to participate in this program.

The third part of the program (the interview) can vary between different programs, depending on the guest. This gives for different subject matters during this part of the program: Gervais speaks about the problem of pandas procreation (in a comical manner); the audience has a very different type of content to interpret and react to than if, for instance, a congress woman visits and speaks about legislation. Even though joking occurs in both types, the latter is still more focused on the actual issue, while the former is more focused on jokes and having fun.

In this episode, Gervais and Stewart briefly comment on the fact that they haven't spent much time "plugging" Gervais' new television program, which is actually why he is there in the first place. By stating this, they give the impression that the audience has avoided some type of marketing, even though, of course, mentioning this and having Gervais on the program, is marketing in itself. Still, it may create a form of closeness between audience and comedians, when they act as if we're all together ignoring "the system". The context (that most guests come on the program when they have something to market in some way, like a movie, a new piece of legislation, a new album or a book), is something that hard core fans probably haven't avoided to learn, but less frequent viewers may miss. Jones comments on the subject of marketing on the program: "he [Stewart] changes the conversation achieved through interviews by conducting them in a manner in which the discussion and debate about ideas are paramount, while the promotional aspect of guest's media appearance becomes secondary" (2010:141), which shows us that this has happened in previous instances too.

This aspect of host and guest ignoring the plan for the interview (to market Gervais' new series) and being cheered on by audience members, creates a form of bond between them. Dahlgren writes about PR in the media:

We are awash in media, and most of it is obviously not overtly civic-oriented: Even if various forms of journalism have also increased in recent years, the growth in, for example, entertainment and advertising is much larger. Thus a definitive aspect of the contemporary media world is the intensifying competition for attention - between genres (...) as well as between media forms (2009:35).

### **A cultural perspective on *The Daily Show***

It is complicated, if not impossible, to separate the cultural perspective from the political – at least fully separate them. In this essay, with the focus on civic issues and participation, as well as political comedy, it is both impossible and unnecessary. The point of many scholars and the author is that the political exists within the cultural, within popular culture in particular (emphasizing *popular*). In the introduction of *Practising Culture*, Calhoun and Sennett write about the concept of culture and practice, and conclude that:

As practice, culture is an achievement, not simply an environment. But this is an achievement of large-scale collective participation as well as an elite memory and exemplary performance. Better, perhaps, culture is an always incomplete, never entirely systematic weaving of achievements together. It is work. It is play. It is projects by which people try to persuade, entertain, lead, deceive, and arouse the passions of others. Because it exists in projects, it exists also in struggles – to get ahead, to redefine beauty, to promote morality, to resist ideological hegemony (2007:7).

Illustrating this is the concept of cultural citizenship, which is applicable in this case. Viewing, which is an activity that we know the studio audience to be involved in (even if we don't get to see it visually), is a way to practice cultural citizenship. In the context of television, a quote from Butsch is relevant: "The visual media of movies and television were claimed to have a hypnotic effect on viewers that undercut their civic value" (2008:153).

Hartley writes on the subject of cultural citizenship as follows: "So [television's] impact for its unprecedentedly large but politically unfocused audiences has been cultural and personal rather than political in the normal sense. However, one can argue that exactly these cultural and personal usages have themselves contributes to new forms of citizenship, thereby becoming political in unexpected ways" (2004:524f). The last part of the quote, "becoming political in unexpected ways" is interesting but actually not so true in relations to political comedy. The word, political, is included in the genre name, which makes it expected rather than unexpected. The quote refers to a wide variety of television genres, which accounts for the "unexpected". But still, political comedy is not always taken seriously, as a real space for politics, which is something that it shares with television and popular culture in general, too.

Cultural citizenship also refers to, as Hartley writes: "participation in public decision-making is primarily conducted through media (...). Traditional political theory sees citizenship as something prior to, separate from and if anything damaged by media relations" (Ibid:526). So the space for politics, outside of actual governmental institutions, is media. There aren't many viable spaces outside of the media today. And if politics and participation in politics are confined (mostly) to the media, there must be many different types of such media available, to match the various versions of civic activity and participation that people are capable of and interested in. Political comedy, including the case of this essay, is most definitely one of those spaces, although it can be debated how much, and how important it is.

Viewing as a practice of cultural citizenship can of course be problematized. Some would see this as minimalist participation, or less than that (using Carpentier's distinction, 2011). Without going into the entire discussion of the active or passive viewers – which is closely related – it's easy to criticize such an assumption. On the other hand, it's easy to criticize the opposite: how can we know what viewing entails for different individuals? Dahlgren argues that the democratic potentials (including participation) lie in popular culture's ability to join

people together – giving us a sense of belonging (Dahlgren 2009). The sense of collective identity and being part of something is fundamental for democracy and participation.

Dahlgren and many others see contemporary audiences as diffused and perhaps divided into different, overlapping public spheres (Ibid.). This diversity calls for diverse political outlets and spaces within media (as commented on briefly), which political comedy, and *TDS*, can be seen as examples of. Identity-wise the program has important contributions: creating spaces which match feelings and needs of citizens. But the actual participation is of a minimalist, if any, character, within the context of the studio audience. If we were to consider what activities are carried out by audiences worldwide, using online methods for participation for instance, the story might be different. Those are activities that are invisible in the representation of the studio audience. In the context of this single episode and its studio audience, the participation is low to none at all. If we compare with talk shows where the studio audience is treated almost as guests, with the host moving around the room with a microphone, for instance, *TDS* falls entirely short. Even though the program has a vocal audience, it is not vocal in that it speaks and articulates words. It reacts, emotionally, which one could argue that there is a need of too. This need: for both intellectual or rational, and emotional, means to connect to and identify with others, is then the programs strength. Jones comments on the emotion of the host, and concludes that Stewart has the same need of the emotional as his audience: “He has made holding media accountable both fun and satisfying for audiences through the program’s seriousness and laughter. But Stewart also sees what he does as cathartic, a way of therapeutically dealing with disturbing issues. His program, in many ways, is a means for addressing his and his staff’s frustrations with the surreal quality to contemporary politics” (2010:142). The quote and the empirical data suggests that perhaps it is Stewart and his staff – comedians and writers – who are the participating ones, the ones stepping in from outside of established journalism and providing the audience an alternative way of discussing and relating to politics. Again, emotion is the glue that binds it all together. The therapeutic aspect, which may be true for studio audience members too (expressing joy and disgust, for instance, in a collective, live, situation, rather than at home alone), also seems to be important.

Hill goes as far as to say that the audience *is* the show. Referring to audiences of the paranormal, she concludes that: “Another notion of the audience as the show utilized the attentive audience as part of the performance. Etiquette rules on how to be an attentive audience were an example of audience management, where the middle class crowd co-produced an environment for cultural appreciation” (2011:166) – something which can be applied to the case of *TDS*. Again, the importance of the live situation is stressed: “the power of live performances as moments where performers and audiences produce a memorable experience (...)” (Ibid.).

She stresses that this makes the audience “committed to the process of their own experience”, making them “embody the culture they experience” (Ibid.).

Again, we need to point to the importance of passion for the engagements in politics. The term mostly used so far has been emotion, but the analysis shows that in some instances, emotions are strong, and could be classified as passion. Dahlgren writes that to be engaged in something – which can be seen as the precondition and core of participation – one needs “not just attention and some normative stance, but also an affective investment” (2009:83). He refers to Hall, who has concluded that democratic theory “(...) neglects the interconnectedness of reason and passion; in simple terms, passions have reasons” (Ibid:84).

The opposite of passion, Dahlgren argues, is indifference. This is something which the studio audience in no way (with the exception of the joke about the *Time Magazine* mock covers) represents. An indifferent studio audience in the context of a political comedy talk show would be problematic on several fronts. Mainly, if the studio audience doesn’t care, why should those at home? But by showing extreme enthusiasm and passion in some cases, the representation is instead that of an engaged and emotionally invested group, which the home audience can then relate to in some way. Dahlgren sees indifference as one of the problems of contemporary democracy, and one of the reasons for its deficit. He connects the concept to irony, which is especially fitting in this case:

(...) indifference can be understood as the consequence of experiencing either a sense of simple remoteness, or a sense of having some superior insight that thereby renders politics as personally insignificant. This latter mode veers towards the stance of what many see as a key structure of feeling promoted by late modern media culture, namely, irony. This aesthetic stance can encompass playfulness as well as cynicism, but in either case, I would suggest that irony may be the foundation for the indifference circulating within some of today’s more urbane disengaged citizens (Ibid:82f).

One could argue that irony is the tool used by Stewart to get emotions running. By repeating the words “raped too much”, and subsequently getting response from the studio audience, over and over, irony is used to point out the absurdity of the comments aired on Fox News. Related to the issue of cynicism as a possible outcome of irony, Jones concludes that “Shelving journalistic conventions to get at important truths is less cynical than turning a blind eye to the manipulation by either contending that politics will always be this way or assuming that viewers *should* be informed enough or smart enough to connect all the dots themselves” (2010:183, italics in original). These may not be the only alternatives, of course, but Jones has a point: cynicism is a complex term which could be applied in different manners.

## Conclusion

To further the conclusions made throughout the text, this section uses Dahlgren's civil circuit as an analytical tool, with a special focus on three of its six dimensions. The last one, identity, has already been discussed explicitly throughout the essay. Dahlgren writes that "identities can be seen as the centrepiece of civic cultures (...) with the other five dimensions contributing, reciprocally, to shaping the condition of its existence" (2009:119).

*Spaces* concerns the communicative spaces that make participation possible. They can include media spaces, and in the context of the studio audience, the actual space is the balcony or seats in which the audience is positioned. The analysed program doesn't provide clues on how this space can work as such a communicative space – at least if we're trying to assess the interaction between audience members. On the other hand, what is communicated through the program, both in respect to what the scripted parts say and what the audience does, can be seen as a communicative space, as it can spark discussions between audience members afterwards, and those at home. Dahlgren writes: "The dimension of communicative spaces can thus be seen as the accessibility of viable public spheres in the life-worlds of citizens" (Ibid:115), which illustrates this point. He continues to say "in large-scale representative democracies, the representational chain may be very long, and the relevant communicative spaces may feel very remote" (Ibid.) So, to sum up: there are potential outcomes of this program, that audiences bring home with them, and communicate to others watching at home, that can be linked to some form of participation and communicative space, but they are implicit rather than explicit, and there is no space for audience members to communicate on air.

Also relating to spaces is the commercial aspect of this particular space. Commercial aspects of it may act constraining of the audiences' participation: there is an uneven power relationship between host and audience. But there is also such an uneven relationship between *TDS* and mainstream news, and the audiences' enthusiasm could be seen as an expression of a counter public voicing its opinions. This could be translated to the uneven power relationship that younger generations may feel in relation to older generations.

*Practices* concerns the generating of "personal and social meaning to ideals of democracy, and they must have an element of the routine, of the taken-for-granted, about them if they are to be part of a civic culture" (Ibid:116f). One such practice is communicative competencies – the ability to communicate and take part of others' communication. In the case of *TDS* and its studio audience, one might see most parts of the program as a communicative practice: the host speaks to the audiences at home and in the studio, and they answer, albeit in a diffuse way. He also discusses issues with a correspondent and a guest, which the studio audience is

very much reacting to, and Dahlgren writes that: “One of the key practices of civic culture is discussion” (Ibid:146). The fact that Stewart gets affirming responses (or the opposite, in the form of silence) from the audience is at least some type of communication, which is then being communicated on to the home audience. In relation to this circuit, we should keep in mind the live aspect of the program, and the collective situation that the audience finds itself in. Audience members are confirming not only what Stewart and others say on stage, but also each other – in their identities, beliefs, and shared sense of humour.

*Identities*, discussed throughout the essay, of course refer to how people view themselves as citizens (or not). As commented on earlier, this is the most basic aspect of creating participation. Here, the analysed program is stronger than in relation to the two above discussed dimensions. Dahlgren expresses how identities “develop and evolve through experience, and experience is emotionally based” (Ibid:119), and one could certainly argue that the studio audience shows a range of different emotions through their experience as audience. Simply put: the emotional outbursts can be seen as experience, and this in turn helps create reflexive citizens who see themselves as part of society. As commented on earlier: no reactions at all from the studio audience would signal indifference, and the weight of Stewart’s words would be considerably less. Dahlgren also presses on how identity in part is constituted of how one places oneself within different political communities; “It is difficult to feel empowered if one is alone, and civic participation is basically a collective activity, people acting in concert with one another” (Ibid:121). The analysis of the studio audience gives the impression of a, for the most part, collective group with a shared political community. Laughter, as the primary type of outlet coming from the audience, can work to bind together those in the audiences in the studio, with those at home. Laughter, as an outburst of joy and shared emotions – which may in certain instances of the program also become stronger by pure collective force (people reinforcing each other by laughter and therefore laughing even more) – is an effective way to create a sense of community and shared ideals. It may be more effective than other types of talk shows or discussion forums or news programs, when it comes to showing emotion in a collective setting. The audience member laughing at home is in a sense laughing *with* Stewart and the studio audience, even though it’s not happening in the same space or time.

With the risk of overusing Dahlgren there is one quote that sums up the aspects of the participatory elements of *TDS* and its studio audience, which I would like to finish with:

It may be that mainstream television offers largely shrivelled, voting-oriented versions of civic identities. On the other hand, it provides a continuous flood of topics that touch people in various ways. Some of these topics can, especially if processed by discussion, resonate with core values, suggest practices, mobilize identities, and generate engagement in the public sphere. They can evoke contestation, and further develop the terrain of the political, thereby pumping blood into the body of democracy (Ibid:148).

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