

Leading Horses to Water: Confessions of a Daily Show Junkie

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“When I report the news on this broadcast, people say, I’m making it up. When you make it up, they say you’re telling the truth.”

- Bill Moyers to Jon Stewart,
7/11/03

Cohen reminds us of Meiklejohn’s admonition that education should arouse and cultivate “in all members of the body politic, a desire to understand what our national plan of government is.” This seems a reasonable enough argument on its face, but the generally agreeable nature of his statement masks some important assumptions. Moreover, the challenge currently facing journalists and journalism educators is a fundamentally different one, one that may require rethinking the journalist’s role.

At What Price Political Interest and Involvement? In his statement, Meiklejohn raises the specter of cultivating political interest and enthusiasm “in all members of the body public.” Leaving aside the issue of how realistic or practical such a goal might be, I wonder whether it is truly desirable. I say this for two reasons. First, I think citizens are what they are, and probably always have been—largely inattentive except when momentous events drive them to follow political news closely.

For this reason, I think it is fruitless to spill yet more ink arguing for a more dutiful citizenry, one that takes its democratic responsibilities more seriously. I am not convinced that such a citizen has ever existed. Moreover, I must confess that I am not really bothered by the level of voter turnout we currently experience in American elections. I say that somewhat sheepishly because there is probably no more esteemed variable in my field of research. At the same time, the persistent lack of *representativeness* of the electorate bothers me a great deal. The self-selected subset that regularly voices its political views, whether through the ballot box as well as through other means, is consistently skewed toward the better-educated, financially advantaged segment of the population.

Higher education certainly has a responsibility to model and promote democratic values, but it is for this reason that I do not see it as the best venue for promoting democratic engagement. Given that those with college educations are already over-represented among the ranks of the politically involved, voting public, I can only imagine that efforts centered in America’s colleges would make matters worse. To promote even higher levels of participation among the well-educated could only make electoral outcomes less representative.

Of course, advocates of political participation typically describe their goal as one of *full* representation, and thus representative by definition; indeed, 100 percent participation is the hypothetical held up as the standard against which American success or failure is evaluated. But a simple thought experiment may give one pause in this regard. What would the country look like if politics were first and foremost on everyone’s mind? Would we really want a nation of political activists if we could have one?

Personally, I can imagine nothing scarier than living in a country where 100 percent of the population voluntarily and enthusiastically turned out to vote and eagerly pursued political causes on a day-to-day basis. Political engagement is important, to be sure, but political activists are typically motivated by the sense that their position is the correct one. Ideological extremism is the best motivator of political engagement, and homogeneous social settings are ideal for producing the kind of zeal that fuels political engagement. While political activism is important and necessary to our system of government, a nation chock full of activists would not be conducive to a tolerant political culture. Maximal participation would come at a cost, and it is not one I personally would be willing to pay.

The results of my own research also suggest that if politics were at the forefront of every citizen’s mind, then simply getting along on a day-to-day basis would become quite difficult. As political theorist Mark Kingwell suggests, there is some benefit to not saying all there is to say, particularly in the realm of controversial political topics. As American society reaches new heights in its levels of religious, ethnic, and ideological diversity, politics may need to take a back burner to the business of just getting along. People often avoid political engagement as a means of trying to avoid offending others. They worry that social relationships will become difficult if all differences are openly aired.

Some call this a peculiarly American problem—that we simply haven’t learned how to argue with passion about our political views and then go out for beer afterward. But I doubt it. A poster recently put out in Sierra Leone by the National Commission for Democracy depicts one young man with his arm beckoning to another saying, “HEY BRA! We can still be friends although we support different parties.” As simplistic as this sentiment might seem to us, the reason so many of us are able to maintain friendships across lines of political difference is that politics is only one dimension of our multi-faceted lives. If it were to become the most important aspect of Americans’ identities, then maintaining these cross-cutting ties would be increasingly difficult.

Of course, politics does require of us at times a willingness to endure uncomfortable confrontation. Nonetheless, I find people’s desire to put their relationships with others first difficult to fault. To extend our thought experiment, if we really hold political engagement to be the absolute highest value, then we should promote homogeneous living arrangements, and limit intergroup contact so as to surround people strictly with like-minded others. It would also be useful for purposes of motivation to vilify the opposition, and convince advocates on both sides that the opposition is motivated by ill will toward them rather than a difference of political philosophy.

This recipe for improving political engagement is, of course, also a recipe for disaster. But that is my point. As we express our disapproval and dismay over current levels of political engagement, we need to realize that a universally participative political culture would have its drawbacks. Beyond the social costs, I have yet to enumerate the economic costs of a population in which politics is a vocation rather than just an avocation. As *Daily Show* host Jon Stewart notes, “The general dialogue is being swayed by the people who are ideologically driven. The five percent on each side that are ideologically driven dictate the terms of the discussion. The other 90 percent of the country have lawns to mow, and kids to pick up from schools, money to make and things to do.” For most people most of the time, politics done right makes possible the rest of life; it does not consume our lives, passions, and waking hours so much as make it possible to pursue our lives and activities without constraint *or* intimidation.

This brings me to my last observation, about what changes in the political media environment might mean for today’s journalists and journalism educators. The theme that best characterizes today’s media environment, and indeed the social and political environment more generally, is *choice*. Choice is overwhelming and not to be escaped. I can no longer send my husband to the grocery store for tomato soup without also specifying low or high sodium, reduced or full carbohydrate, generic or name brand, and low or high fat. There are typically six or seven versions of what used to be a single product. Likewise, Americans are being asked to choose among not just three network news programs at 6 o’clock or no news at all, but among countless cable news programs, talk shows, Internet news, and so forth.

The challenge facing the next generation of journalists is not one I envy. As audiences for traditional news outlets dwindle, how should journalism schools respond? And what should those of us who do research on political media be studying?

Just a few presidential campaigns ago, no respectable presidential candidate would be caught dead on a daytime talk show. Now it is de rigueur for candidates to appear on celebrity talk shows such as *Oprah* and *Larry King*, and on late-night comedy programs such as *Letterman* and *The Daily Show*. The line between entertainment and news has been blurred, if not completely eradicated. Although the staff of *The Daily Show* ridicules the idea that people use their show as a primary news source, a recent study funded by the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press suggests that this is not at all ridiculous from their viewers’ perspectives. As many people in the under-30 crowd cited *The Daily Show* or *Saturday Night Live* as a place where they got presidential campaign news as cited all three of the network news programs combined. This pattern represents a huge change relative to only four years ago.

How are journalism educators to respond? We could cluck disapprovingly at how so-called “hard” news has lost audiences and blame the American public for not reading their newspapers from cover to cover on a daily basis, and not watching “serious” news on television. But what would be the point? In the Land of Choice, this is unlikely to be an effective tactic. One need not study the Nielsen ratings to understand who is watching the traditional evening news programs. The advertisements alone tell us that the audience is old and getting older. Just as the loud upbeat music that leads into the *Daily Show* tells the viewer that he or she is in for a lively and entertaining program, the network evening news probably tells many of its viewers that it is time to take another pill. One of my undergraduates ever-so-tactfully described the audience for traditional news programs as consisting of “dinosaurs.” Not yet extinct, perhaps, but it won’t be long. Even the brief orchestral overture that heralds the evening network

news broadcast self-consciously conveys the kind of seriousness and self-importance that has long been considered entirely appropriate to the evening news.

I am not a journalist, but my general impression of journalism schools is that they take their missions quite seriously. They try to train the next generation of journalists to understand the importance of their role in the larger political system, and to competently take on the task of monitoring government elites, and of keeping the public informed.

But the attitude conveyed tends to be principled and purist: If they have produced the best possible content for their audiences, they have fulfilled their responsibilities. The packaging of that content is left to those lower forms of life known as the advertising and public relations specialists. Idealistic young journalism students are taught to shun the kinds of tactics regularly embraced by their classmates in these less noble fields.

The rise of the entertainment news genre is widely blamed on the commercial nature of U.S. broadcasting, and the fact that broadcasters will pander to the least common denominator in order to make a buck. And thus the tired old solution to this problem has always been publicly funded news programs. Once freed from commercial demands and market forces, so the argument goes, news programming will be free to rise to new levels, to fulfill its mission to the American citizenry in the most serious and conscientious way possible.

But in the Land of Choice, this is a naive solution indeed. Giving news the look and feel of programs like the *Jim Lehrer News Hour* will not solve our problems. Those who propose this kind of cure-all tend to overlook a very basic fact: In order to inform, educate, persuade, or make any difference at all, people have to actually watch the programs that are produced.

Although the holier-than-thou attitude seemed altogether appropriate to me at one point in time, I no longer think journalism schools or their students can afford this kind of arrogance. If journalists produce fair-minded, high-quality news, and yet citizens do not eagerly consume it, it is most often claimed that it is the citizens who are to be faulted for their lack of civic duty. But if journalists and journalism schools abdicate their responsibility to inform the public by simply blaming them for their poor taste, they will thereby render themselves irrelevant. Moreover, they will lose a potentially important role in arbitrating the many issues raised by this evolution in news genres.

“I don’t know whether you are practicing an old form of parody and satire, or a new form of journalism.”

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