

IS FUNNY NEWS FAKE NEWS?  
ANALYZING THE ROLE OF SATIRICAL NEWS  
AND ITS IMPLICATIONS IN MAINSTREAM MEDIA

by

Angela Marie Gazzillo

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Approved by:

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Janice T. Pope, Ph.D., Thesis Director

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Theresa Redmond, Ed.D., Second Reader

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Jennifer Gray, Ph.D., Departmental Honors Director

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Jefford Vahlbusch, Ph.D., Dean, The Honors College

## Abstract

Despite the dramatic rise in use of the term “fake news,” its definition continues to be convoluted. While similar terms have been evident in journalism of the past, today’s networked and social media environment is making both the term and spread of fake news even hazier. Regardless of confusion, there are several ways of categorizing or defining fake news, including: 1) intentionally deceptive and misleading news (i.e., News created from fake news sites and shared through social media); 2) unintentional deception/false reporting; 3) comedic news versus satirical news (to be categorized separately); and 4) network news (or “real” news) as fake news, often used and encouraged by the current U.S. President. Comedic news is a “fake” news source that uses real news as the punching bag for its jokes. However, fake news may prove as an inaccurate title for this type of news, due to the advantage it has in sharing political discourse and challenging traditional news sources to do better and more substantial reporting. As a result, shows such as *The Daily Show*, *Late Night with Seth Meyers*, *Samantha Bee*, and *The Late Show with Stephen Colbert* (as well as the 2005-2014 program *The Colbert Report*), and their hosts, are influencing current journalistic practices and leading into a new narrative form of journalism.

## Introduction

The concept of “fake news” has become a sensationalized phenomenon with most of its popularity and usage emerging from the 2016 Presidential Election and following events (Allcott, 2017, p. 212). Google searches for “fake news” remained around a steady 0-3<sup>1</sup> for a decade, but peaked in October 2016, rising to 6 and reaching 100, which was maintained for the months of January and February 2017 (statistics taken from January 2008 to current) (Google Trends). However widespread the term “fake news” has become, its use across several distinct contexts creates confusion in what the term actually means, adversely influencing our public and political discourse along the way.

With regards to fake news as a term, it is clear that it lacks a concrete definition and therefore creates discontinuity between its many users. According to a recent publication released from Merriam-Webster, it is unlikely “fake news” will be entered in its dictionary due to the nature of the term as a compound noun. In literal terms, the definition means news that is fake (which, again, is too ambiguous); the only way it might be added in the future is if the term creates a definition common and separate from fake and news (*Merriam-Webster, 2017*). Alternatively, equity research and shareholder engagement director at Arjuna, Natasha Lamb, defined fake news as circulated news with “the intent to mislead” concerning a dispute between Facebook shareholders over the responsibility of Facebook and the spread of fake news (Boland, 2017). Fake news, at this point in time, is heavily left for personal interpretation. Yet, to

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<sup>1</sup> This number represents interest over time. Google Trends describes it as: Numbers represent search interest relative to the highest point on the chart for the given region and time. A value of 100 is the peak popularity for the term. A value of 50 means that the term is half as popular. Likewise a score of 0 means the term was less than 1% as popular as the peak.

counteract this statement, just because something is not intentionally deceiving does not mean that it is not real.

Alternatively, it is important to understand “real” news as it pertains to journalistic intentions and integrity. Media scholars McBeth and Clemons (2011) claim the impact of real news, “should be such that it impacts public opinion and other media coverage, strengthens democracy, matters to key political players, informs the policy debate, and creates a discourse where alternative viewers are engaged” (p. 85). Additionally, real news would include an educational function, teaching not *what* to think, but *how* to think. The practice of journalism and the free press is to offer a credible, trusting environment of news and information gathering, where citizens can then make an educated, informed decision.

To further attempt to decode the term “fake news,” it is essential to first investigate the root of the term: where fake news comes from and how it has emerged. This paper investigates the history of “fake news” as a concept, and examines how it has evolved in the current digital age. Furthermore, it analyzes the numerous types of fake news represented in our media today. Lastly, using the information above, I will examine whether satirical news constitutes “fake news” and its role in reshaping mainstream media.

### **The History of Fake News**

The term “fake news” has become a common household expression over the past several months, due in large part to the 2016 Presidential Election. President Donald Trump was first archived as tweeting the term in January 2017 and has since popularized its usage, increasing its familiarity (Brown, 2017). The infamous phrase gained further visibility through social media,

and the implications for the 2016 election were dire. Although the phenomenon of fake news is still being debated and researched, its presence and spread in the fall of 2016 was evident as both voters and the election may have been influenced by a range of questionable news stories (Allcott and Gentzkow, 2017, p. 212). However, despite the dramatic increase of this phrase in our daily parlance, the concept of fake news has been around for centuries (Standage, 2017).

The origins of the concept of fake news date as far back as the 17<sup>th</sup> Century when pamphlets were printed and distributed (Standage, 2017). Later, in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, the term “yellow journalism” gained popularity (Campbell, 2001, p. 2). Yellow journalism is sensationalized or exaggerated journalism that, according to Campbell, may be defined by six characteristics, including: (1) large and flashy headlines; (2) copious illustrations and accompanying graphics; (3) multiple different topics on the front page; (4) colorful, bold layouts; (5) anonymous sources; and (6) boasting favoritism of their own newspaper (p. 7). Similar to conceptions of fake news today, yellow journalism in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century had a major effect on American History through its influence and support for the start of the Spanish-American War (Spencer, 2007). Journalists William Randolph Hearst, creator of *The New York Journal*, and Joseph Pulitzer, creator of *The World New York*, are seen as a catalyst for the war and are credited as instigating, or at least encouraging, its start through their intentionally fabricated publications that were read throughout the country (Spencer, 2007). Hearst and Pulitzer were ultimate competitors during the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century who, together, shaped yellow journalism through their sensationalized pieces and overuse of gratuitous illustrations and graphics (Spencer, 2007, p. 264). Both men were responsible for publishing largely fabricated accounts of violence from the Spanish, matched with non-verifiable sources of action. The most popularized

example of this was the sinking of the USS *Maine* in Cuba in 1895. Hearst published an article in his newspaper crediting the Spanish with the sinking of the ship, although there was no evidence to support this claim. Additionally, Hearst was famously credited with saying, “You furnish the pictures, I’ll furnish the war” in response to a reporter who was sent to cover the combat, but reported a lack of war to be covered. These actions, along with the paper’s publications, ultimately lead to the pressures President McKinley faced from its readers to go to war despite his own political views and wishes (Spencer, 2007, p. 266-269).

Although yellow journalism is of the most concrete, notable historic comparisons to fake news, the concept can be traced back to before the press and print media were created. In literal terms, fake news means news or stories that are false; meaning one could go so far as to argue Ancient Greek mythology as fake news (Steinhauer, 2017). It is near impossible to distinguish the exact time in history that the concept of fake news was created; but, in knowing the endless possibilities of its origin, it is easier to understand the way it has progressed in modern society. Through the growth of technology and the uprise of social media as a platform for news-sharing, fake news has manifested as its own individual identity. Listed below are the ways in which “fake news” has taken on a new terminology in the digital age of social media.

### **The 5 (And Counting) Types of “Fake News”**

Fake news may be disguised in many different forms. Although the term was almost non-existent before the 2016 Presidential Election (Google Trends, 2017), the ideologies of fake news have been around for centuries. In a recent study, Allcott and Gentzkow (2017) defined fake news as, “news articles that are intentionally and verifiably false, and could mislead

readers” (p. 213). However, the researchers acknowledge the many “close cousins” of fake news, including:

1) unintentional reporting mistakes, such as a recent incorrect report that Donald Trump had removed a bust of Martin Luther King Jr. from the Oval Office in the White House; 2) rumors that do not originate from a particular news article; 3) conspiracy theories (these are, by definition, difficult to verify as true or false, and they are typically originated by people who believe them to be true); 4) satire that is unlikely to be misconstrued as factual; 5) false statements by politicians; and 6) reports that are slanted or misleading but not outright false (in the language of Gentzkow, Shapiro, and Stone 2016, fake news is “distortion,” not “filtering”). (p. 214).

Similarly, David Buckingham, a media literacy scholar and researcher in the UK, defines fake news as, “most simply .... news that is fabricated, and deliberately intended to mislead or deceive,” although he adds, “it’s important to distinguish it from satirical parodies of news” (Buckingham, 2017). For the argument of my thesis, I have chosen to analyze the five types of fake news that were most prominent in the 2016 election and that reflected the idea of fake news as a physical means of distribution, as opposed to an abstract one. This meaning news that is intangible, and perhaps traveled through word of mouth versus traceable, concrete articles. This alternative type of fake news most reflects Allcott and Gentzkow’s (2017) acknowledged alternative definitions of fake news as rumors, conspiracy theories, or false statements by politicians.

It is important to not just distinguish, but to differentiate and discuss the various types of fake news, due to the inconsistent use of the term in our current society. Several other relatives to fake news are categorized as: 1) knowingly false with the intention to mislead; 2) news shared in congruence with humor or comedy; 3) mainstream media identified as fake news by President Trump; and, of course, Allcott and Gentzkow's (2017) definitions of satire unlikely to be misconstrued as factual and reports that are slanted or misleading but not outright false. It is important to look at and understand these various conceptions of fake news in order to form a conclusive definition and, ultimately, determine legitimate information.

### **Intentionally Deceptive Fake News and its Profitable Incentive**

First, Allcott and Gentzkow's (2017) definition of fake news as, "intentionally and verifiable false" is what most consider when they hear fake news, as these types of false articles are the most common form of fake news. News articles such as these manifested on social media, most notably through the platforms of Twitter and Facebook. These social media sites are equipped with interactive components that allow its users to "like" or "favorite" things that their friends and followers post. Additionally, there is the ability to "share" and "retweet" the online content, which leads to the spread of these posts or articles, and, inevitably, to the possibility of a larger audience reading it. Much of this type of fake news that was spread on social media by copious amounts of "shares" was created by and for ad revenue. This is referred to as "clickbait," which was the contributing reason for the creation of these fake news stories, and explained how the authors made such a large profit. Clickbait is a tactic that uses forward-referring language or narrative with headlines such as "You won't believe *this*," and other various, open-ended or

vague statements that allude to and anticipate a story (Blom and Hansen, 2015). A study conducted by Blom and Hansen (2015) concluded that this strategy is successful and effective in luring in its readers, “thus making the news sites more attractive for advertisers.” Advertisers pay the authors fractions of a penny per click, which does not sound like much. However, if the article goes viral and is shared several thousand times, the profit is tremendous. The content is therefore irrelevant, as long as readers simply click on the article, the advertising companies pay the author, and they are rewarded for the quantity of their audience rather than the quality (or credibility) of the article.

An example of this type of fake news is the article headlined, “FBI Agent Suspended in Hillary Email Leaks Found Dead in Apparent Murder-Suicide,” published November 5, 2016, online at DenverGuardian.com. Laura Sydell from National Public Radio found and interviewed the creator of the website, which is a small fragment of one of the largest fake news businesses (yes, it is a business). The author of this site was responsible for producing the hoaxed story of the supposedly dead FBI agent, which was shared on Facebook more than 500,000 times and viewed by 1.6 million people (Coler, 2017). The author of the questionable piece was Justin Coler, a middle-aged male from Los Angeles with a wife and two children who started the fake news site in order to, “highlight the extremism of the white nationalist alt-right” (Coler, 2017). However, Coler admitted that he was making around \$10,000 to \$30,000 off the fake news sites, which gave him an incentive to continue creating these bogus stories (Coler, 2017). Another example of this type of fake news story is an article headlined, “BREAKING: ‘Tens of thousands’ of fraudulent Clinton votes found in Ohio Warehouse,” which went viral in September 2016 (Shane, 2017). The author of this piece was a young college graduate named

Cameron Harris, who was jobless and in need of money to start paying his student loans. Harris made around \$100,000 in just 20 hours from this story, but insisted that “the money, not politics, was the point” (Shane, 2017). What these stories have in common is their authorship by normal citizens who seek to make money from distributing fake, and often sensational, stories. Playing off of the politics and ideologies of American citizens, these “authors” might sit down in their spare time and, with their imagination and thread of current event reality, create any false reality that they think people will believe.

Yet, the profit incentives made possible through internet advertising is, again, not a new concept. Yellow journalism was able to thrive on the sales of outlandish stories because, just like any good story, the fabricated news left reader wanting more. An example of this is the famous “moon hoax” story published by the *New York Sun* in 1835, which claimed astronauts had seen images and objects on the moon, including bison and a “man-bat” (Thorton, 2017, p. 92). Similar to the “shares” and “likes” of fake news stories on Facebook that drive revenue, *The Sun’s* circulation went from 4,000 to 19,000 in daily sales overnight (Thorton, 2017, p. 92). The implications of this story for the company were huge as readership more than tripled.

Another category of fake news similar to Allcott and Gentzkow’s (2017) notable mentions are stories with “unintentional reporting mistakes.” Veering from the intentional and out-right false stories described earlier, this type of reporting is not done maliciously; however, such news stories result in the same consequences and outcomes. An example of this type of fake news story comes in the form of a Tweet (a post made on Twitter) by a man named Eric Tucker from Austin, Texas (Maheshwari, 2017). Tucker saw several coach buses the same day he’d heard there was a protest and assumed the two were related. He took a picture of the buses and

tweeted, “Anti-Trump protesters in Austin today are not as organic as they seem.” Although Tucker did not have any evidence of this statement, he did not think it mattered since he was, “a private citizen with a tiny Twitter following” of around 40 followers (Maheshwari). The tweet was in turn posted on a Conservative blog forum and went viral in a matter of hours; the story ended up being shared on Facebook over 350,000 times (Maheshwari, 2017). Again, while this story’s origin was not intentionally false and did not depend on monetary value/incentives, the outcome was parallel. Further, this example supports Allcott and Gentzkow’s (2017) argument that a second motivation of fake news is ideological (p. 217).

### **Echo Chambers in Relation to Fake News**

Research shows that not only are Americans most likely to view and share content that match their ideologies, but also their news consumption and feeds are tailored to their ideologies (Pariser, 2011). The rise of social media for accessing information has contributed to the emergence of filter bubbles. The term “filter bubble” emerges from marketing strategies and, more recently, the use of algorithms in social media networks that compile anything users do online in order to generate or direct use towards content tailored specifically to them. In other words, information is gathered through things users shared online, their search history, things “liked,” people in their networks, and so on, and used to make decisions about what content users might prefer to see (Pariser, 2011). This process of filtering or curating specific content for individuals creates what is commonly referred to as an echo chamber effect. An echo chamber may be described when filter bubbles contribute to a narrow experience of information that may result in an endless, potentially harmful cycle where users only see news and messages that fit

their ideologies and reconfirm their beliefs. For example, during the 2016 American Presidential election season, fake news was more easily disseminated because readers were accessing what they wanted to see or hear and resharing this information with others in their ideological spheres. Furthermore, filter bubbles and echo chambers are proving as these users' main news source, eliminating the concept of "mass media," which pertains to a wide variety of audiences: research from the Pew Research Center shows that 79% of online adults use Facebook, and 62% of Americans get their news from social media (almost half get their news specifically from Facebook) (Gottfried and Shearer, 2016). The development and continuation of this type of fake news without fact checking or source referencing allows people to share stories that fit their bias. One outcome of this is that users' knowledge stays limited to stories that fit their ideological biases. This leaves the reader unaware of alternative opinions, and does not challenge the reader to think critically.

### **Satire and Comedy in News**

The next two types of fake news are satirical and comedic news, although as described in my introduction, the allocation of this term may be inaccurate. Allcott and Gentzkow (2017) describe satirical or comedic news as "unlikely to be misconstrued as factual." Examples of this type of fake news include content from *The Onion*, an outright satirical online news publication that disseminates often obscene stories strictly created for comic relief. For instance, a recent story classified under the politics tab of *The Onion* website reads, "The Trump White House's Fourth of July Celebration Schedule," with an hour-to-hour list highlighting the Trump Family's plans for the Fourth, including 10:30 a.m.: 'President Trump signs the original Declaration of

Independence,’ and 3:30 p.m.: ‘Reince Priebus to be fired seconds after taking a huge bite of potato salad’ (The Onion, 2017). Clearly, these articles are not meant to be taken literally as fact, yet nor are they misleading. Instead, their purpose is comedy and humor. However, another type of satirical “fake news,” may not be as cut-and-dry as *The Onion*’s silly stories.

A subgenre of satirical or comedic news may comprise segments featured on cable programs such as *The Daily Show*, where comedian newscasters such as Jon Stewart, Trevor Noah, and Jon Oliver serve to conflate news with stand-up style comedy. Although both forms of satirical news use the skeletal structure of “traditional news” as a platform for humor and comedy, it is important to decipher the differences between the two. What differentiates *The Onion* from late-night television shows is that *The Onion* comprises little to no intentions towards political discourse. In contrast, its comedic cousins on Comedy Central and other networks seek to generate discourse surrounding current events and political hot topics. Further, *The Onion* rarely has any factual substantial or information in its stories, whereas *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report* base most of their segments and jokes in the realm of current political news and headlines (Holt, 2013, p. 35).

### **Mainstream Media and Fake News**

The final type of fake news relevant to this discussion is fake news as defined by President Donald Trump. So far, fake news has been discussed as mostly illegitimate websites fabricating articles for either monetary values or as political or ideological gain propaganda. However, another conception of fake news is as a biased piece of news, or one that does not align with a given opinion (Holt, 2013). For example, in the case of President Trump citing “fake

news” at specific media organizations on Twitter. Again, when one uses the term “fake news,” one typically conjures up examples of fabricated articles and fake online news organizations. In contrast, President Trump has used the term “fake news” several times during his term to define and demean mainstream, credible news organizations, including CNN, *The New York Times*, NBC News, ABC, and CBS, categorizing them all as “failing” networks and media sources. (realDonaldTrump, 2017).

In examining President Trump’s Twitter page, one may identify at least 80 tweets with the phrase “fake news” within the first six months since he has taken office. Yet, the term is being applied only to news organizations that are traditionally liberal or Democratic, and when such media institutions run stories that confront his policies, statements or actions (as opposed to conservative news organizations that fit his political views) (Brown, 2017). Furthermore, Trump’s “fake news” definition and agenda places blame on networks that cover stories where he is equally responsible for perpetuating fake news. According to Persily (2017), Trump’s official campaign account as well as his own personal Twitter account, retweeted fake news stories favoring him (p. 68). Additionally, his ability to critique these sources at free will can establish a distrust in sources that citizens are dependent upon for truthful, current, and verifiable information. The uses of Twitter, and similar social media sources, to create a powerful facility for informal type of communication between a political figure, i.e., the President, and common citizens, is unprecedented. It is yet unclear what the impact of this phenomenon may be for the American public’s abilities or motivations to access and discern legitimate news.

Although there are several types of categories for fake news, it is clear that fake news is intricate at best, and potentially indefinable due to its complexity in our networked, digital age.

Nevertheless, Persily (2017) offers fake news as, “a concept [that] includes all false, biased, objectionable online statements, as some (perhaps even President Trump) would have it” (p. 67). While not all false news is intentionally misleading, all intentionally misleading news is false: although it has the potential to be purposefully misleading and deceiving, it is possible for fake news to be equally credible and influential in society.

### **Is Satirical News Fake News? An Analysis of Comedy and the Media**

As established above, it is possible to define fake news in many complex ways. However, it is important to understand the range of possible concepts in order to compare satirical and comedic news to “real” news and understand comedic news’ purpose in our society. Late night comedy talk shows, notably the 2005-2014 program *The Colbert Report* with host Stephen Colbert and *The Daily Show*, with then-host Jon Stewart (currently hosted by Trevor Noah), have worked their way into the hearts of mainstream audiences and become a common source of news for media consumers (Holt, 2013). Both shows air on Comedy Central, a network that specializes in comedy that potentially challenges the credibility of the show. Both shows employ similar formats, which are as follows: first, they start with an opening sequence including the title of the show, followed by a list of “headlines” similar to a traditional news show, sifting through current topics. Next, the shows organize their content using recurring segments that feature various skits or sketches, again with the topic usually mocking current media or news stories in some aspect. They may follow-up segments with an interview of a public figure, typically a politician, celebrity, athlete, etc. The show closes with a final segment that offers either words of advice or

videos, such as *The Daily Show*'s "your moment of Zen" before signing off. This format is successful in its use of mirroring traditional news show formats.

*The Daily Show* first premiered in 1996 with host Craig Kilborn, and Jon Stewart took over from 1999-2015. Currently the program airs Monday-Thursday with a new host, Trevor Noah who began in 2016. Stephen Colbert made a name for himself as a contributing talent on *The Daily Show* during the Jon Stewart era, with his *The Colbert Report* first included as a segment on *The Daily Show* until it secured its own spot on Comedy Central in 2005, lasting for almost a decade until its last episode aired December of 2014.

While these satirical news programs are not exactly "real" news shows, it is hard to argue that they are "fake," despite the fact that both shows, as well as the comedians who have hosted it, have been quick to label themselves as "fake news." Their comedic talent, namely Colbert, Noah, and Oliver, make the clear distinction that they are not journalists, nor are they the real news (Carr, 2017). Yet, despite their insistence on being a comedy show, scholars and researchers say otherwise.

Satirical news programs are arguably successful in covering real news topics equally well, if not more so, than "real" or traditional television news media for several reasons. First, the material covered is typically the same important political content that network news programs select to cover (Amarnath, 2011, p. 10). McBeth and Clemons (2011) argue that in examining Stewart and Colbert's programs, these programs, "represent authentic (real) discourse that breaks through the shell of the real (fake) news revealing layers of social construction, empty symbolism, and simulacra--thus positively affecting the traditional coverage and political discourse" (p. 81). Despite the fact that these comedy shows are, at the end of the day, comedy

shows, they are communicating news better than “real” news networks. In addition to political discourse, research also suggests that these shows offer more educational opportunities pertaining to science and global impact than their “real news” counterparts; topics which are equally important in media coverage today. A content analysis conducted by the Project for Excellence in Journalism found that in 2007, *The Daily Show* spent more time covering science/technology and environmental stories than mainstream news sources--among the analysis showed that global warming was covered twice as much as mainstream press (Amarnath, 2011, p. 27). Not only are these programs covering the same if not more important political events, but also they are challenging viewers to consider their news consumption as a whole (Amarasingam, 2011, p. 16-17).

The disconnect of real and fake news occurs between the one giving the show--or producers--and the ones watching it--or audiences. The hosts of these satire programs see themselves as comedians, yet their audiences watching these shows consider their role that of a reporter, or, at the very least, reporting news and journalism. In June of 2014, The Annenberg Public Policy Center released a study stating that people who watched Stephen Colbert (on *The Colbert Report*) set up and explain a super PAC (Political Action Committee), “during the last presidential election cycle and proved to be better informed about campaign financing and the role of money in politics than viewers of other news channels and shows” (Rozansky, 2014). At the time, super PACs were being heavily discussed in mainstream news, and thus on other news shows such as *The Colbert Report*. In other words, this research is “showing Colbert is doing a better job than other news sources. . . including CNN, Fox News, MSNBC, and broadcast nightly news, as well as talk radio and newspapers as sources of political information” (Rozansky,

2014). To this, Colbert apologized to his audience, stating, “Clearly, I must work hard at informing you less.” This comment lends itself to the comedic style of the show and its humorous approach at critiquing other news sources. An additional study conducted by the Annenberg Public Policy Center a decade earlier shows that viewers of *The Daily Show* were more informed on the presidential candidate's’ stance and positions of the time, in comparison to non-viewers of the show (Holt, 2013, p. 12).

Another important factor in considering satirical news is that most people who view shows, such as *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report*, use it not as an alternative source to network news, but rather an *additional* source. According to Amarasingam (2009), if people who watched *The Daily Show* searched for additional information, results showed that watching the show increased the time they spent searching for additional information and suggests that “some of the most significant learning impacts of *The Daily Show* may be related to searches for more information, post-viewing” (p. 13). Perhaps this finding is not so surprising when one considers that comedy requires an informed audience. Just like any other comedy piece, it is only funny if the audience knows what’s going on. Context matters, and the audience of these comedic shows continues watching because they understand not only the humor, but also the current events and news that informs the comedy; viewers need to know the source material for jokes to get the punchline.

Lastly, the entire framework for these comedy new shows is that they are based on thoughtful mockery and criticism of current media, political communication, and American journalistic practices. Beyond the fact that they are a bunch of funny comedians who enjoy and studied comedy, the anchors are using comedy throughout their show as a platform to identify

news as a form of entertainment and fake news in itself. In fact, in *The Colbert Report*, Stephen Colbert played a character rather than himself when hosting the show; and his main inspiration and portrayal was of news anchor Bill O'Reilly from Fox News' *The O'Reilly Factor*, a program that aired for over 20 years and was easily one of the networks highest-grossing shows on the network. Despite the tone, these comedians have openly discussed and campaigned for their respective shows as a way to appraise and challenge “real” news. Justin Melkman, *The Daily Show*'s production supervisor and producer, explained in an interview with several other members of *The Daily Show* production crew: “With Jon, we went from creating the news—creating funny spoof headlines—to making fun of the news. That was a big change” (Smith, 2016).

The same time *The Daily Show* hired Stewart, viewers of traditional network news were in desperate need of some type of direction as to what to make of the news--the sensational and theatrical elements of television news programs were only getting worse. According to Smith (2016),

“The TV-newsmagazine formula—leaning heavily on sensationalized crime stories, breathless celebrity profiles, and consumer-product scares—was ripe for parody. As were the self-serious anchor-reporter stars of TV newsmagazines.”

*The Daily Show*, and many of the comedic “news” programs to follow, openly discussed their distaste and disapproval of these ‘serious’ news shows, drawing inspiration for their own content based on the attitude and tone of the mainstream media. Stewart credits the shows as the

space between, “what [politicians] are telling you in public, and the meeting that they had where they decided to do it that way” (Smith, 2016). The comedians quickly realized the gap that needed to be filled between parody news and mainstream news, and that was through pointing out and elaborating on the theatricality of it.

One of Stewart's better-known disputes about the theatrics of network news was from his appearance on *Crossfire*. The show, which aired on CNN from 1982 to 2005, was designed to have a left-wing and a right-wing pundit to discuss political topics. Stewart appeared on the show in 2004, but instead of playing along with the interview, he famously used the spot as a platform to bash the show and television news as a collective. He accused the program of “hurting America,” and begged them to stop. “We need help from the media, and they’re hurting us,” Stewart said (“Jon Stewart on Crossfire,” 2006). He continued criticizing the entertainment factor of television news, labeling it: “now this is theater. You’re doing theater when you should be doing debate. . . You have a responsibility to the public discourse and you fail miserably.” One of the hosts that evening, Tucker Carlson, combated Stewart’s attacks by faulting him for not asking “hard-hitting” enough questions of his guests, particularly 2004 presidential candidate John Kerry. Stewart’s defense was that he was a comedy show, and they were the *news*: “You’re on CNN. The show that leads into me is puppets making prank phone calls,” Stewart said. “If you want to compare your show to a comedy show, you’re more than welcome to” (“Jon Stewart on Crossfire,” 2006)). Stewart’s television news philosophies are reflective of media theorist Neil Postman’s ideas related to media and news. Like Stewart, Postman is outwardly critical of television as a news medium, claiming that, “the problem is not that television presents us with entertaining subject matter but that all subject matter is presented as entertaining” (Postman,

1985, p. 87). He argues that television as a medium has become so focused on entertaining instead of delivering news, that the appearance and credibility of the reporters has led to discontinuity between television and reality. Postman further contends that news programs (similar to *Crossfire*) place too much emphasis on the reporters and rely too heavily on the way the content is being presented rather than on the content itself (p. 102-110). He labels this issue as the “now...this” effect of television news and journalism, by which news programs are emphasizing quick cuts to other segments or flashy effects on their shows (including theme songs for news programs), eliminating any type meaningful flow or discussion. This, in turn, downplays the severity of the news or situation and causes the viewer to have no concern for the news and its importance or relevance.

Despite Stewart and Postman’s corresponding ideologies, they do disagree on plausible outcomes of this issue. While Postman’s slant is a scholarly observation and analysis, Stewart’s perspective embodies a cry for help. Postman believes the medium of television is the cause for entertainment and is therefore unavoidable; there basically is no solution available until the medium changes. However, Stewart believes the media and television news can and should do better (Holt, 2013, p. 18). Stewart and his comedic colleagues, who have been critically faulted as additional “fake news” sources, have proven to be more effective at sharing important news than “real” or mainstream news. They use humor as a powerful tool to mimic and challenge traditional news programs, while increasing their audience’s knowledge of political and newsworthy events.

## Conclusion

While “fake news” is a reality, it is fair to say that satirical news is *not* fake news. Rather, the satirical news provided by cable venues offer a valuable and credible opportunity for viewers, especially as research reveals it to be an additional knowledge tool that promotes awareness of broader current events contexts and the habits of newsgathering. The hosts of these late-night satirical news shows have demonstrated that, although they might not necessarily have the title of journalist (nor do they *want* that title) and their shows are offered in the spirit of comedic relief rather than information gathering, their job descriptions and integral duties say otherwise. Their ability to discuss the news rather than argue it, as well as explain and discuss current events, proves their place in intelligent public and political discussion. Referring back to McBeth and Clemons’ (2011) statement on real news, satirical news successfully creates the environment of presentation. The hosts talk to their audience and special guests instead of at them, and more time is spent showing a news piece instead of discussing or arguing it in circles, which is the typical format for mainstream news programs.

Further, these comedians are demanding journalistic reform and pushing for real journalists to do their jobs in gathering and disseminating legitimate, balanced information. To reference Postman (and Stewart) again, not only is mainstream news blending information with entertainment, in turn discrediting the information, it is doing a disservice to American citizens by conflating commercial purpose and ratings with news. It is evident that mainstream news is losing its credibility and satirical news sources, when viewed cautiously and correctly, are just as “real” or credible (if not, more so) than their counterparts.

News is an intricate topic in itself, and the nature of news is that it is constantly changing. Although new research is being conducted daily in the wake of fakes news and its impact (specifically surrounding the 2016 Presidential Election), it remains unclear just how influential fake news was. This latest media environment requires that citizens educate themselves on how to spot fake news and prevent the spread of it. On The Media, a podcast produced by WNYC studios, published an episode shortly after the 2016 Presidential Election highlighting the ways to avoid fake news. The image below was created as a handy guide on how to spot fake news, which can only help prepare audiences for the as-yet unknown phenomena to come in an age of digital media.

✂ CUT OUT AND TAPE NEAR YOUR COMPUTER OR TV

## BREAKING NEWS CONSUMER'S HANDBOOK

### FAKE NEWS EDITION

1. Big red flags for fake news: ALL CAPS, or obviously photoshopped pics.
2. A glut of pop-ups and banner ads? Good sign the story is pure clickbait.
3. Check the domain! Fake sites often add “.co” to trusted brands to steal their luster. (Think: “abcnews.com.co”)
4. If you land on an unknown site, check its “About” page. Then, Google it with the word “fake” and see what comes up.
5. If a story offers links, follow them. (Garbage leads to worse garbage.) No links, quotes, or references? Another telltale sign.
6. Verify an unlikely story by finding a reputable outlet reporting the same thing.
7. Check the date. Social media often resurrects outdated stories.
8. Read past headlines. Often they bear no resemblance to what lies beneath.
9. Photos may be misidentified and dated. Use a reverse image search engine like TinEye to see where an image *really* comes from.
10. Gut check. If a story makes you angry, it's probably designed that way.
11. Finally, if you're not sure it's true, don't share it! *Don't. Share. It.*

ON **[THE MEDIA]**

ONTHEMEDIA.ORG

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