Is The Daily Show Bad for Democracy?
An Analysis of Cynicism and its Significance

The Honors Program

Senior Capstone Project

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ABSTRACT

In recent years, satirical news programs like *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* have emerged as an important development in contemporary American society, culture, and politics. Critics have argued that *The Daily Show* has a negative impact on the political attitudes of American citizens by making them cynical about government and the political process as a whole. As a result of these attitudes, they argue, citizens are less apt to participate in politics and, in turn, this behavior is detrimental to American democracy. The purpose of this research project is to explore the debate over whether or not *The Daily Show* is indeed bad for democracy. Its objectives are not simply to develop my own answer to this question, but more importantly to critically unpack the question itself in order to analyze the complex relationships between *The Daily Show*, cynicism, and democracy. To do so, I review, analyze, and assess various and competing definitions of the concepts "cynicism" and "democracy," and then use close readings of scholarship from political science, communication, and cultural studies to construct a "debate" on the question of the show's significance for contemporary American democracy.

INTRODUCTION

Is *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* bad for democracy? This research project uses the case of this well-known satirical television show as a means to critically explore the concept of cynicism and its significance for America democracy. To do so, my research reviews, analyzes, and assesses an on-going debate in political science, communication, and cultural studies scholarship concerning the relationship between satirical television, political attitudes, and democratic political participation.

This research is driven by three main objectives. First, it seeks to clarify the important relationship between public cynicism and American democracy by providing a detailed review of the varied, and often conflicting, definitions and applications of both these concepts—"cynicism" and "democracy." Second, my project seeks to apply the findings from its first objective to offer a critical analysis of *The Daily Show*. This is accomplished by constructing a "debate" between those who argue that the show is bad for democracy and those who disagree. My final objective is to draw my own conclusions on this question in order to advance the discussion that already exists in the scholarly literature. The focus is not on demonstrating the *impact* of the show on citizens, but rather is focused on critical investigations of the concepts of "cynicism" and "democracy," understood within the context of *The Daily Show*.

The paper will first offer a brief summary of my research methodology. This is followed by an introduction to *The Daily Show*, including a discussion of its defining characteristics, and an

analysis of how it fits into the larger historical and cultural context of political satire generally, and satirical news in particular. Next, I provide a critical analysis of the concept of "cynicism," which also explores contrasting definitions and their significance for understandings of democracy. In other words, this section will offer an in-depth examination of the literature to address the question: How does cynicism impact democracy? This is followed by a critical analysis of the concept of "democracy," in which I use scholarly contributions from the field of democratic theory to highlight the various and conflicting conceptions of this idea and explore their respective defining characteristics. Drawing on these analyses of cynicism and democracy, I then construct a scholarly debate between those who argue that *The Daily Show* is bad for democracy and those who disagree. As will be shown, this debate fundamentally hinges on distinct views of cynicism and whether it is interpreted as a destructive or constructive political attitude. Finally, based on previous analysis and findings, I will offer my own conclusions on the complex relationship between *The Daily* Show, cynicism, and democracy.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The methodology used in my research project can be best understood as discourse analysis and the "close reading" of texts. This qualitative methodology is appropriate because it is used in similar studies found within and across the disciplines of political science, communication, and cultural studies. And more particularly, this method is used by the primary scholars who examine issues of cynicism and democracy in regards to programs like *The Daily Show*. Additionally, it is appropriate because it was determined by my research question and main objectives, rather than the other way around. Therefore, this project represents an example of problem-driven research that is more typically found in qualitative studies, rather than method- or theory-driven research more typically found in quantitative work. The difference is that my goal was to follow the data where it took me, rather than try to bring pre-determined methods to bear on these data. This methodological approach has been well-established in the social sciences and the humanities (see Green and Shapiro 1994; Shapiro 2002, 2007, for strong defenses of this approach in political science).

The primary data for my project is relevant scholarly literature and *The Daily Show*. Because my goal is not simply to make an argument and defend it, but to review and evaluate the various conceptions of "cynicism" and "democracy" used in the scholarly literature and demonstrate their respective significance, my approach involves the use of critical observation, analysis, synthesis, and interpretation. In the literature, this approach is referred to as discourse analysis in the social sciences and "close reading" in the humanities (on the differences, see Bardzell 2009).

Primarily, this method involves analyzing written texts by first identifying the object of study within relevant texts (in this case, the concepts of cynicism and democracy), systematically identifying or "coding" key concepts so that they can be understood both within the context of particular texts and comparatively across texts, and develop these data into a framework that can re-present information in a way that can address the primary research question (for an extensive discussion of discourse analysis, see Bardzell 2009; and Wodak and Krzyżanowski 2008).

WHAT IS *THE DAILY SHOW* AND WHAT IS THE SIGNIFICANCE OF SATIRICAL TELEVISION PROGRAMS?

While the use of satire to critique American politics has a long history in the United States and has had a well-established presence on television for decades, it has become far more visible, popular, and controversial during the past ten years or so. One prime example of this is the satirical news program *The Daily Show*, which has a huge viewership and is regularly the subject of media and academic commentary. Every Monday through Thursday at 11pm on Comedy Central, Jon Stewart puts on a half-hour long news-style program that makes the country laugh at itself. *The Daily Show* addresses everything from politics, to current events, to pop culture, concluding with a guest interview.

The Daily Show premiered in 1996 on the cable channel Comedy Central. The show's host was Craig Kilborn, a comedian who steered the focus of the show towards pop culture until his departure in December 1998. The show was revamped and renamed with a new host in 1999: The Daily Show with Jon Stewart. While Stewart himself was also a comedian, with a history of standup and other comedy and talk shows, he directed the show with emphasis on politics, current events, and the media. This new focus earned the show its title and reputation as a fake news program.

The format and structure of the show follow a consistent pattern. An exaggerated, trumpet-heralded introduction signifies the show's beginning. The set of the show itself parodies one of a

network news program, with sleek design, maps, television monitors and red, white and blue setting off the entire stage. Each show starts with Stewart saying, "Good evening, ladies and gentlemen. My name is Jon Stewart. We've got a great show for you tonight." This catchphrase itself is reflective of the blending of news and comedy in a satirical way. From there, Stewart opens with his own monologue addressing the day's top stories. He also often checks in with one of several 'correspondents,' who are ironic and comedic to the extreme. Larry Wilmore is the "Senior Black Correspondent" for issues relating to African Americans. And one correspondent segment ended with all the contributors sporting erections for Mitt Romney, including Samantha Bee.

Like the news, *The Daily Show* effectively employs segments, however in somewhat of a different and satirical manner. In tuning in to *The Daily Show*, one might be exposed to segments such as "InDecision 2012" or "Guantanamo BayWatch." The InDecision segment is recurring with each election season. For each regular and midterm election since the year 2000, *The Daily Show* has put on live election night coverage, often parodying the coverage techniques of the national media. For example, in the 2008 presidential election, CNN unveiled a new holographic technology for correspondents and coverage. In 2012, The Daily Show's election night coverage featured a holographic George Washington to input on election results. The "Mess O' Potamia" segment covers and critiques the United States' involvement in the Middle East. The regular segments are cleverly named and satirically and ironically used to mock modern news coverage, as well as to critique the currents events and politics discussed on *The Daily Show*.

Finally, each show ends with an interview, usually with a politician or celebrity. Some examples include the former President Bill Clinton and the campaigning John McCain, as well as celebrities like Will Farrell, and athletes like Lance Armstrong and Shaquille O'Neal. Often times the guest interviewees are promoting a book or movie, but Stewart makes sure to include jokes and humor. The show concludes with a tradition carried from 1996- a "Moment of Zen": a funny clip or story that doesn't necessarily fit in with the rest of the show that wraps up the episode.

Viewership of *The Daily Show* has steadily increased to about 2.3 million in 2012 (PoliticsUsa.com). One response to this increase in popularity is the fear that these viewers (39% of which are 18-29 years old) receive most of their news from this non-traditional source, and that these viewers are made more cynical by the mocking and satirical tone of *The Daily Show* (Pew Research Center). In particular, the show's potential to instill or heighten cynicism among its viewers is a significant area of debates among scholars; especially the possible effects of such cynicism upon political attitudes and behavior. Several studies have been done to address both points: Fox, Koloen, and Sahin examined the substantive information of *The Daily Show* versus other traditional forms of news (2007); Baumgartner and Morris studied the resulting cynicism after subjects viewed clips of *The Daily Show* or other news sources (2006). Overall, there has been increased scholarly attention to the methods and outcomes of *The Daily Show*.

There can be no doubt that *The Daily Show* is comedy, but the show's increasing popularity and perceived impact has made it a prime target of scholarly scrutiny and critical analysis in the disciplines of political science, communication, and cultural studies. However, The Daily Show is part of a larger tradition of satire in television. This history can be traced back to Vietnam and the Watergate scandal; the American people saw the credibility gap that resulted between what the government was saying and what it was actually doing. The result was a crisis in authority, where people lost faith in the politics and government of the United States, and this rebellion was reflected through satirical TV. One of the earliest examples was of *Saturday Night Live*, which mocked news coverage of such events with 'Weekend Update' and illustrated the lack of credibility in government with parodies of presidents the likes of which were never before seen. For example, Chevy Chase famously mocked the bumbling nature of Gerald Ford, an act that would never have been performed before the crisis of authority in the 1970s.

Saturday Night Live first aired in 1975 on NBC- one of the 'Big Three' broadcasting channels. Soon after, continuing through the 1980s and 1990s, cable channels took off and created more detailed niches for programming. Instead of receiving news and entertainment from one source, Americans could watch 24 hour news on CNN and watch movies on AMC. This allowed for the home of *The Daily Show*—Comedy Central—to provide a more flexible infotainment style of satirical television.

The following literature review introduces and discusses key concepts in these debates and explores the literature's primary arguments concerning the role and influence of cynicism and *The Daily Show* on American democracy today.

HOW IS CYNICISM UNDERSTOOD?

Much research has indicated that media makes viewers cynical about the government and political process (Cappella & Jamieson, 1997; de Vreese, 2005; de Vreese & Elenbaas, 2008). The same, many argue, holds true for satirical news programs. According to critics of *The Daily Show*, it instills cynicism in its regular viewers, which is detrimental to democracy (as will be discussed below). But a review of the literature shows that definitions of cynicism and its significance vary. While there have been more and more studies recently regarding *The Daily Show* and its effects, the definition of cynicism has been hazy and versatile among authors.

The definition itself is a matter of the debate. In his analysis of modern American cynicism, Robert M. Eisinger calls attention to this flaw of authors, politicians and pundits. Although cynicism is often mentioned, "those who propose either that Americans are cynical have not: (1) defined cynicism and enumerated its causes…" (2000, 55). According to the first part of Eisinger's thesis, it is very important to define cynicism and list its causes. Many authors simply dive right in to the discussion of cynicism without bothering to define it, and this is one possible source for so much disagreement among scholars. "Webster's Unabridged Dictionary defines a cynic as 'one who believes that human conduct is motivated wholly by self-interest. A person who expects nothing but the worst of human conduct and motives'" (Eisinger 2000, 55). And while there are many other definitions for cynicism, they all carry the same negativity and disdain for humanity. It is the comprehensive characteristic of the notion of cynicism that leads

to the problem of assumptions. The fundamental disagreement or assumption of the term in relation to *The Daily* Show illustrates the significance of cynicism in the debate of whether the show is good for bad for democracy. Another point of view complicates the notion of cynicism even further. Samantha Vice points out "on the one hand we condemn it as a character failing…and a trend that is undermining political and social life. On the other hand, we are often impressed by the unflinching realism and honesty of the cynic" (2011, 169). The comprehensive and ever-changing views toward cynicism have resulted in a misunderstanding among scholars who write on the subject.

Another significant segment of Eisinger's thesis studies the varying conceptions of what causes cynicism, possibly influencing the definition and perception of the word. Some argue that the distrust associated with cynicism is a result of the action of politicians, who market a brand of popular cynicism while campaigning, but never resolve the issues once in office. This cycle leads to a more cynical voting population. Another explanation for the origins of cynicism claims that it is "the give and take between the demands of the public and the actions of public officials are not only an unavoidable part of democracy, but that they constitute cynicism" (Eisinger 2000, 56; also see Goldfarb 1991). Political elites often claim to be acting for the common good, but people see, or so often expect to see, politicians acting in their own favor anyway. Finally, 'the politics of meaning' explanation purports that people use cynicism as "a protective reflex against human vulnerability to humiliation or negative response" in the cold world (Eisinger 2000, 56). He also highlights several other important points; "'those who propose either that Americans are

cynical have not:…(2)offered convincing proof that cynicism is increasing; (3) explained the degree to which cynicism corrodes representative democracy; or (4) theorized about the permanency of these corrosive effects" (Eisinger 2000, 55). These other questions significantly tie the understanding of cynicism to that of democracy.

There is a fine line of debate as to whether this ideology is good or bad for democracy. In a system of "government by the people," David Easton argues that "distrust, or political 'cynicism' confined to a minority of the electorate and a short period of time, is arguably functional for the political system, since it may promote electoral and social change" (1965, 1975). In a case such as this, democracy is growing and progressing as a result of cynical attitudes held by citizens. However, alternative arguments point out that democracy can be negatively affected by cynicism as well. The success of democracy is threatened when "a majority of the electorate distrusts the government over an extended period of time. Prolonged discontent and alienations from the political system may challenge its legitimacy and, ultimately, its very existence" (Erber and Lau 236, 1990; also see Bennett 1997). Many believe that "a lack of confidence in politicians and political institutions detrimentally affects American politics," (Eisinger 2000, 55; also see Lipset & Schneider 1987) and "few social scientists would argue that high levels of cynicism enhance political participation or improve democratic governance." In democracy, cynicism among the people is generally considered to be bad, because it is the people that give a government its legitimacy; the concept of popular sovereignty is one this country was founded upon, and may be

at risk when under fire by cynicism. But as the following section demonstrates, the picture is complicated by the fact that there are various concepts of democracy.

WHAT DOES DEMOCRACY MEAN?

In addition to understanding cynicism, another tricky but essential definition to consider for this project is that of democracy itself. What is meant by democracy? While all can agree that it is a theory or system of "government by the people," its meaning has evolved and definitions of democracy vary, even when limited within the context of the United States. Robert Dahl, a foremost democratic theorist, assesses the need to further study democracy and its various conceptions, pointing out "the twenty-five centuries during which democracy has been discussed, debated, supported, attacked, ignored, established, practiced, destroyed, and then sometimes reestablished have not, it seems, produced agreement on some of the most fundamental questions about democracy" (Dahl 1998, 3). The concept of democracy may often be taken for granted, however, so Dahl argues for the need to highlight the significance and complications that arise when examining the differences within this system of government. Building on Dahl's position, other political scientists and democratic theorists have argued for the need to consider various models of democracy in order to understand the complexities of the concept (see Held 2006; Hudson 2012; Macpherson 1977).

To demonstrate this, we can look at the work of William Hudson (2012), who concisely outlines four major models of democracy, each model distinguished by distinct goals, roles of citizens, institutions and views of human nature. He refers to these models as protective democracy, developmental democracy, pluralist democracy and participatory democracy. In the following

paragraph, each of these models are explained and, with a special focus on the roles and attitudes of citizens, cynicism is discussed and framed in a way that examines the significance of its impact.

Hudson's discussion begins with what he calls protective democracy, which can also be understood as classical liberalism: "…a model of democracy that advocates popular control of government as a means of protecting individual liberty" (Hudson 2012, 8). According to this model, government is needed in order for competitive self-interested individuals to pursue gain in a market of free choices. This model of democracy is very similar to the notion of the free-market, otherwise known as 'laissez-faire,' developed in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries by economist Adam Smith. Government's fundamental purpose, according to this conception of democracy, is to step back and allow citizens to maximize their own interests through egotistical individualism. Competitive individuals are, for the most part, self-reliant. In protective democracy, federal government is seen as a 'necessary evil' to protect individual rights and prevent the extension of one's rights as far as to infringe upon the rights of another. Therefore, this democracy can be defined by Jeremy Bentham and James Mill's utilitarian principle of the greatest good for the greatest number in the development of government institutions and policies.

Today classical liberalism has evolved into the idea of neoliberalism, the objective of which "is to halt, and if possible reverse, the trend towards 'big government and state intervention that had

characterized much of the twentieth century" (Heywood, 2007, 52). Neoliberals believe that the founding principles of democracy emphasize the rights and actions of the individual, which should in no way be encroached upon by government.

According to the protective model of democracy, it is only through voting that citizens are expected to participate. Certainly this form of political behavior could be adversely affected by cynical political attitudes, but this is not particularly problematic. According to this conception of democracy the real concern is the "excesses of democracy" feared by the Founders, who designed the Constitution to limit popular participation (for an example, see Madison's *Federalist #10*). Therefore, we can conclude that political cynicism is not a huge problem.

In developmental democracy, Hudson's second model, the primary goal is to nurture citizenship. This normative model assumes politically active and informed citizens, who "make constant decisions about political issues and candidates" (Hudson 2012, 11). Voting is an essential exercise for representative participation. By participating in democracy, citizens come to acquire "civic virtue," which helps them look beyond their own self-interests to the needs of the public good. In this sense, democracy has a moral value and purpose, as explained by John Stuart Mill and Alexis de Tocqueville.

Here, the role of *The Daily Show* and cynicism are highly significant. An individual's political and social development is an essential part of political participation. If the show does indeed instill cynicism in its viewers, and that cynicism negatively affects the individual's view of

politics and democracy, the democratic system of government is in danger of failure. With this model's view of the citizenry as impressionable and constantly developing in terms of democratic awareness and engagement, exposure to political information is important in shaping their political education and can impact the level and quality of their political participation. This model of developmental democracy would hope to see *The Daily Show* in a nurturing role—with the goal of developing better democratic citizens—rather than one that could instill cynicism and lead to a passive electorate. Interestingly, it seems that this is the model that many critics of *The Daily Show* implicitly assume. In other words, while they don't outline a specific definition of the concept of democracy, their concern with cynicism inherently suggests that "real" democracy only exists when citizens are civically-developed to be politically informed and engaged.

This notion of an active and engaged citizenry is challenged by the pluralist model of democracy, which emerged in political science and sociology scholarship in the mid-twentieth century. In the pluralist system of democracy, the emphasis of power is in groups, not the individual. Scholars who support this perspective rely on public opinion survey data, which has revealed citizens to be politically passive and apathetic (see Berelson, Lazarsfeld, and McPhee 1954). This empirically-driven perspective seeks to highlight the "gap between the democratic ideal and political reality" (Hudson 2012, 12). From this perspective, the freedom to join interest groups is central because they guarantee a diversity of views (see Truman 1952). But unlike the developmental model, expectations for individual participation are low.

Robert Dahl adds to this point, specifically defining a pluralist democracy and the problems associated with this model. He breaks down the definition into its key components. Specifically, pluralism is defined by Dahl as "the existence of a plurality of relatively autonomous (independent) organizations (subsystems) within the domain of a state."(Dahl 1998, 4-5). He concludes that because all democratic nations strive for democracy as an ideal, and because these countries operate with multiple organizations--such as interest groups or political parties, then all democratic countries are pluralist democracies (Dahl 4, 5). This claim by Dahl that all modern, democratized nations are pluralist democracies is significant because it outlines the role that citizens can have in democracy and politics. In this pluralist system of democracy, where the emphasis of power is in groups, an individual has little power, influence or significance. Therefore, individual cynicism would be little threat to this democracy with an uninterested electorate. In fact, lower turnout rates can be said to be a positive and stabilizing factor of a pluralist democracy, as long as competitive elections provide an opportunity to choose office-holders and interest groups continue to represent average citizens in policy debates.

Finally, Hudson's last model, participatory democracy, seeks to encourage active and robust participation among its citizens. Apathy, according to this view, is not human nature, but rather the result of poor institutions. Therefore, political engagement can be encouraged by "restructuring political and social institutions so that citizens could learn, through participation, the values and joys of democratic citizenship" (Hudson 2012, 15). Additionally, following on theorist Carol Pateman's (1970) argument that democracy should extend beyond the political system into the workplace, social organization, and other nongovernmental entities, this model

sees participation as an essential good. She points out that in many classical theories, the basest level of participation is voting in a protective manner, with the masses as "electoral machinery" (Pateman 1970, 14). These classic models view the perfunctory voting of the masses as their only role and only form of participation in democracy. But it is outside of this political sphere where people can learn and grow as participating individuals: "The argument in the participatory theory of democracy that the education for democracy that takes place through the participatory process in non-governmental authority structures requires, therefore, that the structures should be democratized, looks…rather more plausible" than the aforementioned classical models of democracy (Pateman, 45).

Participatory theorists have a more favorable view of the citizens of a democracy, and the participation of those citizens is significant. For although individuals can be apathetic and self-interested, "through persuasion, through self-education yielded by democratic participation itself, and through the logic of political priority…the taste for participation is whetted by participation: democracy breeds democracy" (Barber 1984, 265). Therefore, because the model of participatory democracy depends upon the faith, trust, and engagement of the people, the effects of cynical attitudes on behavior are all the more important. More importantly, even while countless polls and surveys measure the distrust and cynicism of politics in general, people "desire concrete participation and work to enlarge the scope of participation when they have experienced it" (Barber 1984, 266). The participatory model of democracy not only relies on participation from educated and enthusiastic individuals to combat cynicism, but attempts to use participation as an

active antidote for the cynical political culture. Because of the significance of this relationship, and the relationships between the individual, democratic participation in all parts of life, and participation in government, cynicism matters much more to this model and can have a measured effect.

As illustrated above, they are many contrasting conceptions of democracy, each emphasizing differing values, institutions, and conceptions of citizen participation. For the purposes of my research project, the point of drawing attention to these varying models is to emphasize that cynicism may matter to democracy more or less depending on what type of democracy is being assumed. In other words, according to some models, democracy may suffer as a result of cynicism among citizens. In some cases, cynicism may actually be beneficial to a democratic society. And in some models, cynicism may have little to no impact at all on the quality of democracy.

IS *THE DAILY SHOW* BAD FOR DEMOCRACY?

Building off the various conceptions of cynicism and democracy explored and established, scholars have entered into debates surrounding *The Daily Show*, cynicism, and democracy, in an attempt to answer the question: Is *The Daily Show* bad for democracy? One side argues that the cynicism in viewers generated by the show is detrimental to democracy. The other says that cynicism can in fact be advantageous for our democratic society.

This academic debate came to a head at the *National Communication Association* convention in 2006. Communication scholars Roderick Hart and Johanna Hartelius put Jon Stewart and *The Daily Show* on (mock) trial for damaging democracy by engaging in and spreading political cynicism. In a journal article reproducing their arguments, the authors dissect Stewart's cynicism and analyze its aspects of diatribe and chreia. They claim his attacks of public figures and institutions are an intensification of cynicism in democracy. "The diatribe is not only a critique of an imaginary adversary but an 'extemporaneous sermon' in which audiences are led to experience the totality of what is wrong headed" (Hart & Hartelius 2007, 263; also see Windt 1972, 7). Hart and Hartelius equate Stewart's nightly performances, as well as his books, with rants "mock[ing] the democratic ideal" (Hart and Hartelius 2007, 265). The authors do not like what Stewart is saying about democracy, but they also disagree with the way in which he says it. This leads to the concept of chreia, where a short statement on something is immediately followed by a pungent remark (Hart & Hartelius 2007, 266; Cutler 2005, 37). Hart and Hartelius

find his tactics appalling. They argue that Jon Stewart is an entertainer, whose shows do not provide any real argument, but still breed cynicism and ill feeling about democracy. It is a problem that Stewart is so popular, with such a large viewership; he is an influential television figure, and Hart and Hartelius lament that the influence is a cynical one. By connecting Jon Stewart with cynicism (without ever really specifically defining what that is) the authors can then level charges against *The Daily Show*:

> "Cynics place faith in observation, not participation, they see irony as the only stable source of pleasure. Cynics embrace the term limit laws because they minimize a citizen's need to stay informed. Cynics embrace third-party candidacies because television adores the null hypothesis. Cynics like talk radio because only opinions, not facts, are needed during the drive-time" (Hart and Hartelius 2007, 270).

Hart and Hartelius, as well as the research of other scholars, has indicated that the media contributes to this cynicism in the government and political process (see Cappella & Jamieson 1997; de Vreese 2005; de Vreese & Elenbaas 2008), and make these arguments in order to defend democracy from the clutches of cynicism.

In response to the compelling argument put forth by the prosecutors Hart and Hartelius, several academics stepped forward to defend *The Daily Show* and the cynicism associated with it. W. Lance Bennett concedes that Jon Stewart is a cynic, but in the cynical political world we live in that is no crime. Indeed, "cynicism seems to be part of a contemporary civic tool kit that tends to be used along with other tools, such as the daily news, to produce healthy levels of

knowledgeable engagement with the political process"(Bennett 2007, 282). Even if cynicism is a result of viewing *The Daily Show*, it can be a beneficial part of an individual's political process.

In considering cynicism and *The Daily Show*, Bennett also argues that the context of today's political atmosphere should be taken into account, because "when the prevailing tone of public life is cynical, the best defense and response may be a probing and illuminating form of cynicism"(2007, 282). So even, if Stewart is a cynic, it may not be a bad thing, but a tool necessary for the interpretation of a cynical political climate today. This reaction to the cynical political climate can be an indicator of which model of democracy applies today. So Bennett's argument might be valid in a developmental model of democracy, in which citizens may be negatively affected by a cynical political climate without a cynical antidote.

Robert Hariman agrees on this point, writing "Stewart's comic display of cynicism is valuable today because it one of the few effective antidotes to a deeply cynical political culture" (2007, 275). There is no arguing against the fact that distrust and apathy have become an integral aspect of politics in America. Therefore, these scholars argue, Jon Stewart and *The Daily Show* fight fire with fire to address the issues of a cynical political culture. Robert Hariman also argues that the unique style of *The Daily Show* is "in service of a defense of democratic deliberation" (2007, 274). Deliberation in politics and democracy has been generally defined to be "a pragmatic, inclusive form of discourse in which citizens collectively-even cooperatively- analyze a 'problem'; establish a criteria by which to evaluate public responses to it; identify multiple

options that reflect different sets of values or value-priorities held by members of the public; weigh arguments for and against each option in the light of the criteria established previously and, through an indefinite period of continuing discussion (that may or may not include voting), approach a measure of agreement that (ideally) most participants can accept as a collective 'decision'" (Briand and Hatrz-Karp 2009). In other words, citizen engagement and participation in the democratic process is what makes democracy deliberative. Many scholars argue that citizen participation, conversation and engagement should continue to be instrumental in American democracy (Gastil and Levine, 2005).

According to the authors of *Satire TV*, in general, satire is a means by which individuals can make "rational democratic choices based on information,"(Gray, Jones and Thompson, 2009, 16) helping them to see realities which have been obscured and therefore begin to analyze politics. Geoffrey Baym argues in support of this feature of *The Daily Show*, claiming that the show's purpose is to a "wider political discussion:" "…a theory of deliberative democracy as expressed on *The Daily Show* understands the political system ideally to be comprised of individuals engaged in reasoned discussion"(2005, 272).

Robert Hariman also argues that the unique style of *The Daily Show* is "in service of a defense of democratic deliberation" (2007, 274). So the outcome of *The Daily Show*, which is often labeled as cynicism, can also be the contribution to a national discussion in politics, the core of a deliberative form of democracy.

So the outcome of *The Daily Show*, which is often labeled as cynicism, can also be the positive side effect of the contribution to a national discussion in politics.

Jody Baumgartner and Jonathan S. Morris (2006) enter into the debate with an interesting take on cynicism produced by *The Daily Show*. They conducted an experiment to test their hypothesis that evaluations of presidential candidates would become more negative after watching *The Daily Show*, and cynicism toward the electoral system and the news medium would increase after exposure to *The Daily Show*. They found "the results indicate that the effect on internal efficacy is positive for *The Daily Show* and suggests that even though *The Daily Show* generates cynicism toward media and the electoral process, it simultaneously makes young viewers more confident in their own ability to understand politics" (Baumgartner and Morris, 2006, 353). Viewers of The Daily Show and similar satirical news programs may have a more negative outlook on government and politics, taken for granted here to mean cynicism. But high political efficacy—or one's belief that they can understand and influence politics—is an important factor for political involvement. If the argument against cynicism is that it leads to an apathetic and uninvolved electorate, Baumgartner and Morris suggest that viewing *The Daily Show* can still motivate and inspire people to participate in political processes.

Although the work of the study undoubtedly contributes to the debate, "one of the major flaws with the study, however, was that they never defined *cynicism*, instead inferring its presence

based on their own hazy criteria" (Day 2011, 87). Here, again, is the importance of the definition of the term. Even so, while some form of cynicism identified in this study, there were positive consequences of increased internal efficacy from this outcome as well. The evidence from Baumgartner and Morris' study illustrates that there are potential benefits associated with cynicism, namely increased understanding of politics and political issues and confidence in viewers. These conclusions fall in line with the pluralist model of democracy, in which it does not matter if a public is apathetic or cynical, as long as they participate in the election, which they are more likely to do if they have political efficacy. In this model of democracy, as in the study offered by Baumgartner and Morris, cynicism generated by *The Daily Show* does not matter. In fact, the link between cynicism and heightened views of individual self-importance can possibly lead to increased political participation.

For example, Hart and Hartelius (2007) spend a lengthy discussion of the components and uses of Jon Stewart's brand of cynicism and charge him with crimes against democracy. But because they make assumptions about the meaning and significance of cynicism, they fail to convincingly illustrate why all of his diatribe and character attacks might be bad for democracy. Hariman (2007) argues, by contrast, for all of the benefits that cynicism can bring to a democratic society, but again without really clarifying what exactly cynicism is. The fundamental disagreement or assumption of the term in relation to *The Daily* Show illustrates the significance of cynicism in the debate of whether the show is good for bad for democracy.

CONCLUSIONS

So is *The Daily Show* bad for democracy? Based on the research from the fields of political science, communications and cultural studies, I answer: No, *The Daily Show* is not bad for democracy. The main question surrounding the show is whether it generates cynicism in viewers and whether or not this cynicism is a good or bad thing for democracy. In order to answer these questions, one must first understand what is meant by conceptions of cynicism and models of democracy. The research explored above suggests that cynicism does not have to be a bad thing for democracy. Although it has traditionally been seen this way, this default assumption is not enough to prove that *The Daily Show* does have a negative impact on democracy. Indeed, those who attack Jon Stewart and his program never clearly define cynicism, but fall back on and assume this negative connotation, which weakens their arguments. On the other hand, those arguing that the cynicism generated by *The Daily Show* is not bad for democracy clearly highlight the specific reasons that cynicism can be beneficial. Recent scholarship views the cynicism created by *The Daily Show* in a positive light, as a means of creating knowledge and new ways to look at and understand politics.

The lack of an agreed upon definition of cynicism in the scholarly community reflects the changing and complex nature of cynicism today. In history, cynicism may have been detrimental, but specific factors today make it less harmful. For instance, the modern political climate is more cynical than it has ever been. Therefore, more cynical forms of analysis like *The Daily Show* can

be an effective antidote to other forms of cynicism. There are also more and more young people with cynical outlooks of news and politics. Here, *The Daily Show* can be an important bridge to a demographic that traditionally has little political understanding or participation.

The particular model of democracy one assumes is also significant in asking if *The Daily Show* is bad for democracy. Most models have unique standards and expectations for citizen involvement in the political and democratic processes. So again, the impact of cynicism depends. In the protective and pluralist models of democracy, citizens are passive and relatively unimportant, so cynicism and *The Daily Show* are little threat. But I believe in the active, educated and involved citizenry outlined by the developmental and participatory models. These models of democracy have traditionally been explored under the above mentioned negative assumptions and connotations of the concept of cynicism. However, when cynicism is framed positively, it can actually aid in the development and participation of citizens, upon which these models of democracy rely. As a result, cynicism can be considered to be beneficial to democracy today.

The very nature of *The Daily Show* is also beneficial for democracy. The show addresses political and governmental issues in a way that is more accessible to an audience that often does not pay attention to tradition news. Therefore, viewers of the show are more likely to discuss political topics, have increased political efficacy and confidence in their knowledge of politics, and ultimately participate in political and governmental systems.

This research project is significant in at least two ways. First, in terms of the existing research and existing body of knowledge, my project bridges gaps between the academic disciplines of political science, communication, and cultural studies. The comprehensive review of how these disciplines fit together, in relation to my research question, is a contribution that can provide readers with a more "big picture" understanding of the relationship between *The Daily Show*, cynicism, and democracy. Many scholars in the fields of political science, communication, and cultural studies are having similar discussions about this topic. I created a forum for discussion for these authors. However, I do call for more of a discussion and consensus of conceptions of cynicism and democracy. There is currently some confusion and disorganization. If the academic community comes together to define and discuss whether *The Daily Show* is bad for democracy, then there can be interesting and significant debate on this topic.

Additionally, I believe that this project is worth doing because it uses a political science perspective to raise questions about various conceptions of democracy, and the values that are implicit to them, that are not considered in the existing literature focused on *The Daily Show*. There is literature on cynicism and *The Daily Show*; and cynicism and democracy, but my project has taken all three and examined the relationships in a new and interesting way. This exploration is important not only because it tells us something interesting about the concept of cynicism and the show, but because it highlights the various and conflicting ways that American democracy is understood.

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