

Why Broadcast Journalism Is Flirting With Jon Stewart

The norms of comedy allow its practitioners to treat politicians with irreverence and skepticism that very serious news anchors seldom equal.

CONOR FRIEDERSDORFOCT 10 2014, 6:00 AM ET

Would network news be better if politicians were interviewed by comedians rather than broadcast journalists? That's one question raised by Gabriel Sherman's report that NBC executives wanted Jon Stewart to host *Meet the Press*, the prestigious Sunday-morning interview program. Had higher-ups at NBC pursued Jimmy Kimmel or Sacha Baron Cohen for the gig, they'd stand accused of undermining the quality of their news programming to chase ratings. But few doubt that *The Daily Show* grapples with politics and policy, often with more sophistication than the broadcast journalists it incisively mocks. For that reason, news that Stewart was considered for the gig has prompted earnest debate about the merits of the idea. Some say he's "a devastatingly effective interrogator," others that he's "congenitally unprepared for any serious policy discussion."

That fight is beside the point. Interviews on *The Daily Show* are uneven, but they're also a rushed afterthought on a daily program whose purpose is to get laughs. How would Stewart perform given a week for interview prep and a charge to inform? I'd wager he'd do better than any *Meet the Press* host. But that is a low bar. It's too early to fairly judge Chuck Todd, who has recently taken over the program, but his predecessor, David Gregory, was true to the form of the typical Sunday morning show: He was complicit in political theater, a deferential broadcaster asking easy or faux-tough questions on matters of fleeting importance. Politicians responded by regurgitating banal talking points. *Meet the Press* is the sort of show John McCain bragged about having been on more than anyone. How comfy the five-term senator is on the show! How's this for unwittingly damning with praise?

The journalistic flirtation with Stewart and the undeniable popularity of Stephen Colbert and John Oliver as information sources is due partly to their skill at injecting humor into current events. It is fun to watch them glean punch lines from the news. And levity can help anyone to broach uncomfortable subjects in an interview.

That's not what prompts the urge to turn them into journalists, though. The subtext of *Meet the Press* is that elected and appointed officials in Washington, D.C., are honorable, qualified people doing their best for America, and that as a result they are always to be treated with a degree of deference and respect. When they speak, for example, we are to presume that they aren't just lying. And their talking points are to be treated seriously even when they're utter nonsense. What about the inevitable officials who don't deserve that deference?

The subtext of *The Daily Show*, *The Colbert Report*, and *Last Week Tonight* (the best of the three) is that elected and appointed officials belong to a suspect class of people who've earned intense skepticism and are better mocked than venerated. Even if the shows go easier on Democrats than Republicans, all three are straightforward proponents of the notion that all politicians are somewhat absurd, base characters, often in over their heads, and willing to shamelessly lie and spin.

This is often the truth.

Despite this adversarial posture—this willingness to tell the audience that the absurdity they perceive is, in fact, absurd—Stewart is a relatively establishment-friendly comedian, and often abandons some of his toughness in interviews. His show's lighthearted mood would suffer if he treated pols as contemptuously face-to-face as he does in the scripted segments that air at the beginning of every episode. And he has often leaned like a crutch on the rationalization that he is a comedian, as if he otherwise couldn't defend the irreverent posture he takes toward elites. He ought to know better than that.

In a profession that didn't give him special license to take the piss out of pols, you can imagine that Stewart might be as deferential to elites as Steve Kroft. Tapping a comedian to do broadcast-news interviews might well be better than the status quo, insofar as he or she continued to conceive of himself or herself as a comedian. To the extent that he or she assimilated to the norms of broadcast journalism, where athletes who use steroids get tougher treatment than politicians who lose wars, he or she would fail as miserably as his or her predecessors. Most broadcast journalists are totally unequipped to confront bad leaders, whether they're malign, inept, or merely buffoons. The reflexive deference gets in the way.

The root of the problem is a conception of journalism that is insufficiently adversarial—a confusion that mistakes deference for fairness and epistemic humility. A tough, probing interview can be as vital and riveting as a faux-tough interview is farcical, but one cannot reliably find them on any popular news program. Asked to re-imagine *Meet the Press*, I'd retain a vapid host with good hair and very white teeth from the stable of broadcast journalists, but install him as a mere host charged with moderating a bullshit-resistant exchange: An elected or appointed official, per usual, would be paired with a rotating cast of adversarial journalists whose beat intersects with the guest. When NSA spying was the biggest news story in the nation, Glenn Greenwald or Barton Gellman would've been there posing questions. John McCain would find himself sitting across from Matt Welch. Would he come back after that?

Perhaps elected and appointed officials subject to tough, adversarial questioning would keep appearing on *Meet the Press*, or perhaps any incentive to do so would be overwhelmed by the downside of being probed by skeptical, informed interlocutors. Either way, the air-time would be better used than it is now. If Todd wants to improve the show, the most pressing task before him is to be adversarial to a degree that is seldom seen in broadcast news, and very often seen in comedy news. People would watch that—or at least stop pining for a takeover by comedians.

AP GOV THINK TANK

- I THINK...
- I LEARNED...
- I WONDER...
- I DO NOT UNDERSTAND...
- I AM CONFUSED ABOUT...
- I WANT TO KNOW MORE ABOUT...
- I WAS MOST SURPRISED TO LEARN...
- I WAS MOST IMPRESSED WITH...